***Short Ride in a Fast Machine***
**John Adams (1947–)**
Written: 1986
Movements: One
Duration: Four minutes

For a good part of the twentieth century, composers for orchestra often wrote in complex intellectual styles that left audiences befuddled. One of those composers remarked to a student, "Sometimes my music is so complicated, I don't even understand it!" Philip Glass became convinced that music had become "truly decadent, stagnant and uncommunicative. Composers were writing for each other and the public didn't seem to care." So, Glass helped develop one of the most successful attempts at breaking away from that tradition. The result was a style of music that is now called minimalism. In it, composers strip their compositions down to the very barest essentials, often focusing on a single rhythm, melody or harmony that only gradually changes throughout the duration of a piece. They often use elements of jazz, pop, rock or world music as the basis for their compositions. This sort of music allows a listener to focus on a minimum of detail without complexity overwhelming them. And the connection to popular forms of music makes it immediately accessible. Minimalist composers like Glass, Terry Riley and Steve Reich have huge followings of ardent fans.

John Adams started out as part of the second generation of the minimalist school. He went to Harvard, taught at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and served as new music advisor and composer-in-residence for the San Francisco Symphony. His creative output spans a wide range: works for orchestra, opera, video, film and dance, as well as electronic and instrumental music.

*Short Ride in a Fast Machine* is a riotous work; the opening tempo is marked *delirando*. A woodblock plays an insistent (Adams calls it "sadistic") rhythm while the brass play a syncopated pattern above it. The woodwinds and strings enter with other uneven and syncopated rhythms interrupted here and there by the bass drum. A middle section has a lighter texture to it, and finally a solo trumpet emerges from the mass with slower, longer notes. The piece ends with the same frenzied rhythm as the beginning. When someone asked John Adams what he had in mind with the title *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* he replied, "You know how it is when someone asks you to ride in a terrific sports car, and then you wish you hadn't?"

**Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Opus 125, "Choral"**
**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)**
Written: 1817–1823
Movements: Four
Duration: 67 minutes

We've heard it all before—or at least the famous tune from Beethoven's Symphony No. 9. How can we let it strike us afresh? Perhaps by listening to the *whole* thing—not just the famous ending. After all, the first three movements can be heard as a search for an answer that is only revealed in the last.

The symphony opens ambiguously, almost as if it is hesitant to take us on this soul-searching journey. Suddenly, an angry, loud and biting motive bursts forth from the orchestra and we are on our way. Using dramatic tunes, jagged rhythms and offbeat accents, Beethoven spins an entire movement out

of the fabric of only a few motives. Its minor character lets us know that the final word hasn't been uttered.

The main tune of the second movement appears as a fugue—a complex sort of round—played very softly by the strings. Suddenly, the whole orchestra is hammering this tune out, leading to a second melody that is more lilting and lyrical. The original tune comes back, but in a confusion of new keys. The timpani hammers its way into the scene, trying to restore order, but rhythmically it is in the wrong place. All of this disarray leads to the lighter trio section. The scherzo comes back, but not in exact repetition. Beethoven winks at us at the end by bringing back the trio again, but with the wrong rhythm.

The Adagio movement has two lovely, singing themes. Two variations of the main theme follow. This is Beethoven's most tender statement in the symphony, a needed respite on the journey.

The last movement begins in chaos. Cellos and basses, imitating an operatic baritone, demand to know what is going on. The orchestra tentatively suggests the first movement. No! Then the second. No! The third? No! Cellos and basses then suggest the answer with the famous tune. The whole orchestra joins in with a set of variations on it. The chaos of the beginning asserts itself again. This time, a real baritone puts all in proper perspective by intoning: "Oh friends, not these sounds; rather, let us attune our voices more acceptably and more joyfully." What follows is Beethoven's famous setting of Schiller's *Ode* and his final answer to the dramatic search of the first three movements: "All humanity is related—I want to give the whole world a kiss!"

**Overture to *King Lear*, Opus 4**
**Hector Berlioz (1803–1869)**
Written: 1831
Duration: 15 minutes

Like many nineteenth-century composers, Hector Berlioz had a life-long fascination with Shakespeare. His began in 1827 when he was a student in Paris. He went to see an English company's production of *Hamlet*. In the *Memoirs of Hector Berlioz* he wrote:

> Shakespeare, coming upon unawares, struck me like a thunderbolt. The lightning flash of that discovery revealed to me at a stroke the whole heaven of art, illuminating it to its remotest corners. I recognized the meaning of grandeur, beauty, dramatic truth. … I saw, I understood, I felt. … As I came out of *Hamlet*, shaken to the depths by experience … I knew that I was lost. I may add that at that time I did not know a word of English.

Along with his infatuation with Shakespeare, Berlioz developed an obsession with the actress who played Ophelia in *Hamlet*, Harriet Smithson. After she spurned his advances, he fell in love with the young pianist Marie Moke. While studying in Rome, Berlioz learned that Marie was going to marry someone else. Berlioz immediately set off for Paris, gun and disguise in hand, with the intent to murder the lovers and Marie's mother, and then kill himself. (You just can't make this stuff up!) On the way, he stopped in Genoa where he tried to end it all by jumping into the sea. After his rescue, he spent "the three happiest weeks in my life" recuperating in Nice.

That is where he started work on his *King Lear* Overture—although he had yet to see the play and had only recently read it. "I uttered a cry of admiration in the face of this work of genius; I thought I would burst from enthusiasm; I rolled around (in the grass, honestly), I rolled convulsively to appease my utter rapture." The overture isn't necessarily an encapsulation of the play, but when the King of Hanover heard it in 1854, he wrote a letter to Berlioz detailing what he *thought* he heard: "I followed every scene—the entrance of the king into the council chamber, the storm on the heath, the terrible prison scene, and the despair of Cordelia… so tender, so timorous!"