

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra May 5 and 8 programme complementary content

Good things come to those who wait – and these two concerts come to Liverpool Philharmonic Hall two years after they were first scheduled.

Audiences are in for a treat with an exciting world premiere, along with Vasily Petrenko's return to Hope Street as 'Conductor Laureate'.

In addition, this companion page draws together a range of complementary content that we hope will help shine further light on the pieces, the people who composed them and the performers bringing them to life here in Hope Street.

Grace-Evangeline Mason interview

Anyone glancing at **Grace-Evangeline Mason's** Liverpool schedule this season might think commissions are rather like buses – you wait for one and then three turn up at the same time.

But this turns out to be an optical (or perhaps aural is more accurate?) illusion caused by the Covid pandemic, which has shaken up season programmes over the past two years.

Back in February, audiences at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall heard her work *The Imagined Forest*, which had been **premiered at the Royal Albert Hall** as part of last autumn's Proms.

Now, we have the world premiere of the 28-year-old composer's *Mahler's Letters* here in Hope Street.

In July, Grace will return for her third premiere of the season, when Liverpool Philharmonic Youth and Children's Choirs present *In Her Own Valley*, a work inspired by Liverpool-born **Hannah Lightbody**, a significant figure in the Industrial Revolution.

"*Mahler's Letters* I wrote before *The Imagined Forest*, and *In Her Own Valley* I wrote before *Mahler's Letters*," Grace reveals.

Mahler's Letters was planned as part of Vasily Petrenko's final season, to run as an accompaniment to a Mahler symphony.

Good things come to those that wait, and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra's new Conductor Laureate returns for this pair of concerts which will see Mahler's mighty Fifth being paired with Schubert's *Symphony No.5* on Thursday

evening, and the world premiere of Grace's new work for voices – conducted by rising star Ellie Slorach – on Sunday afternoon.

“The original suggestion was to use texts that maybe had inspired Mahler, poets that he'd liked,” Grace explains. “But when I was going through some of the poetry and things that Mahler liked, I actually came across his own letters. I was really struck by them and the fact they're really poetic, and they just tell you so much about him.”

Grace “ended up going to loads of coffee shops and sitting there trawling through hundreds of letters: to his wife Alma, his friends, and also even his critics”, before noting some of the recurring themes and interests within them.

She distilled that into four main themes – nature, music, love and death – which became the four movements of the work, then wrote her own poetic libretto from that. Each of the four poems ends with a line in Latin or German, taken directly from Mahler's own correspondence.

This intensive research is typical of Grace's composing practice.

“I often like to spend a lot of time with an extra-musical source, whether that's literature or art, for a long period of time before music starts,” she says.

“And I like writing my own libretto and really engaging with the text so I know it inside and out. This was particularly involved should I say, in terms of a research process. But I do really like doing that.”

From there, Grace moves to the piano where she starts to note the initial shape and sections of the piece in a special manuscript book, before using Sibelius – musical notation software – to flesh out the entire piece.

It's a way of working which hasn't changed much since she first started picking out ideas and melodies on a keyboard as a teenager.

Her musical education started not at home but through the Wolverhampton Music Service, which gave her the chance to learn both piano and trombone.

At 14, she asked her parents for a piano, recalling with a laugh: “But then of course, I didn't know how to play it, so I started improvising and writing it down, and that was the beginnings of composing.

“I didn't know that being a composer was a job you could have. It was just something I enjoyed doing. It honestly has come about in the most organic fashion you can imagine.

“I'd have wild ideas of things I wanted to do, and my parents would say ‘oh, OK’. They're extremely supportive.”

One ‘wild’ idea came after Grace attended a workshop in Birmingham where another girl was wearing a hoodie with ‘JRNCM’ emblazoned on the back. 17-year-old Grace learned that this stood for Junior Royal Northern College of Music.

“I didn’t really know conservatoires existed. I went home to my parents and said: ‘I want to go to a junior conservatoire’. And my parents didn’t know what that was, and Manchester to them seemed incredibly far away.

“But then they were like, ‘oh OK’. And my dad had to take me on the train to the audition.”

From the Royal Northern, where her tutors included Emily Howard and Gary Carpenter, Grace went on to study at Oxford.

In 2013, aged 19, she won the BBC Proms Inspire Young Composers’ competition with *Convergence* – a piece for soprano, violin and cello – and in 2018, the **Royal Philharmonic Society Composition Prize**.

Between the two, in 2017, she was awarded the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic’s **Christopher Brooks Composition Prize** - now called the **Rushworth Composition Prize**. That was also the year Grace composed *Pale Fires*, a chamber piece inspired by Timon of Athens and premiered by Ensemble 10:10. For the contemporary group’s 21st birthday, she later composed the piece *Upon Weightless Wings*.

She says: “It’s just been this ongoing relationship which means a lot to me, I cherish it a lot. I think Liverpool Philharmonic is an extremely friendly orchestra. I love them a lot.”

Vasily Petrenko

Vasily Petrenko needs little introduction to Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra audiences.

The 45-year-old conductor takes to the Hope Street stage for the first time since he left Liverpool Philharmonic last summer **after 15 years’ tenure** – now returning in his new role, ‘Conductor Laureate’.

Along with these two concerts – postponed from 2020 because of the pandemic – he will also conduct two **White Nights** concerts in July, featuring works by Liadov, Shostakovich and Rimsky-Korsakov.

Petrenko is currently music director of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and chief conductor of the European Union Youth Orchestra.

Forthcoming appearances include concerts in Cardiff, Nottingham, Düsseldorf, Cologne, Stuttgart, Munich and Essen, as well as in London.

Watch Vasily Petrenko conducting the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra in the Adagietto of Mahler’s *Fifth Symphony*.

Ellie Slorach

Ellie Slorach studied music at the University of Manchester and conducting at the Royal Northern College of Music, graduating in 2018 with a distinction.

In 2015, she founded **Kantos Chamber Choir**. She has acted as director and chorus master on a wide range of their recordings and performances, including those with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and the BBC Philharmonic, on labels such as Decca Classics.

In 2018, Slorach was on the Britten-Pears Young Artist Programme, studying conducting with Marin Alsop, and the Women's Conductors Course run by the Royal Opera House and the National Opera Studio.

She is also musical director of **Radius Opera**, Chester Festival Chorus and Stafford Choral Society, and associate conductor of Manchester Chamber Choir. In 2019-20, she worked as young associate conductor with Matthew Bourne's New Adventures.

She is currently assistant conductor of the Orchestre Philharmonique Royal de Liège.

In March she acted as guest conductor in a concert with the Liverpool Philharmonic Youth Orchestra and Youth Choir.

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Choir

When the Liverpool Philharmonic Society was founded in 1840, it saw the birth not only of an orchestra but of a chorus too.

The Choir added 'Royal' to its title in 1990.

In recent years, the Choir has performed Bach's *St Matthew Passion* and *Mass in B minor*, Orff's *Carmina Burana*, Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*, Mahler's *Symphony No.2*, Rachmaninov's *Vespers*, Verdi's *Requiem*, Karl Jenkins' *Stabat Mater*, James MacMillan's *St John Passion*, the Duruflé *Requiem*, Britten's *War Requiem* and Handel's *Messiah*.

The Choir has also appeared in many of the UK's major concert venues – including the Royal Albert Hall – and has sung on a number of foreign tours.

Franz Schubert

Franz Schubert was a prolific composer who packed a vast amount of work into his 31 years.

Born in the suburbs of Vienna into a musical family, the young Franz showed early promise. In 1808, at the age of 11, he won a scholarship to the imperial court chapel choir and Stadtkonvikt boarding school, where his tutors included **Antonio Salieri**.

He composed his *Symphony No 1 in D major* when he was 16 and within three years, had completed four more alongside hundreds of songs (in October 1815 he wrote eight in one day), duets, trios, cantatas, choruses, masses, string quartets and sonatas.

In 1816, Schubert started a law degree and at the same time turned to composing his Fifth Symphony. The symphony survived, but Schubert's legal career was more short-lived.

Did you know? Schubert has been the subject of a number of big screen dramas including the 1931 German film, *Schubert's Dream of Spring* and the 1940 Hollywood historical drama, *The Great Awakening*.

Gustav Mahler

During his lifetime, **Gustav Mahler** was celebrated as a leading concert conductor. It was half a century after his death, however, before his own music became fully appreciated.

By the turn of the 20th Century, a middle-aged Mahler had reached the pinnacle of his profession as director of the Vienna Court Opera and principal conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic.

He also had four symphonies and a host of cantatas, orchestral songs and songs with piano to his name – much of his composing being completed during summer holidays from his 'day job'.

His **Fifth Symphony** was composed during 1901-2, much of it at his grand summer retreat at Maiernigg in Carinthia.

As well as marking an important point in his composing career, it also coincided with an important time in his personal life. In November 1901, the 41-year-old Mahler met the beautiful 22-year-old Alma Schindler. Within a month they were secretly engaged, and married the following March.

Did you know? The famous Adagietto from Mahler's Fifth Symphony was played by Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic at the funeral of Bobby Kennedy in May 1968.

About the Music

Franz Schubert (1797-1828): Symphony No 5 in B flat major, D 485

Composed: 1816

First public performance: Josefstadt Theatre, Vienna, 1847

Today, Schubert's Fifth Symphony is a concert favourite, but in his own time it made barely a ripple. Schubert wrote it at age 19, for a local amateur orchestra, but we don't even know if they played it. Then, in 1823, a conductor wrote to Schubert asking if he had anything available for orchestra. Staggeringly, Schubert turned him down, stating that he'd nothing to offer that wasn't 'mediocre'. Mediocre? The Fifth Symphony may be modest, but it's a little gem. At the time he wrote it, Schubert had temporarily fallen out of love with Beethoven and had rediscovered Mozart: 'Immortal Mozart!' he wrote, 'what countless impressions of a brighter, better life have you stamped upon our souls!' The Fifth Symphony is clearly a tribute to Mozart. It echoes the graceful intimacy of the older master's instrumental writing, specifically invoking the minuet of Mozart's Fortieth Symphony in its own third movement, but it never sounds derivative. In acknowledging Mozart, Schubert has moved a step closer to becoming himself.

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911): Symphony No 5

Composed: 1901-2

First Performance: Cologne, Gürzenich Orchestra, cond. Mahler, 18 October, 1904

Mahler's Fifth is the first of his symphonies to appear without any explanation as to its possible deeper meanings: there's no title, no programme note and no sung texts. But this is clearly a symphony with a story to tell. Fortunately for us, Mahler does provide several helpful clues. Even if he hadn't called the first movement 'Funeral March', it is brazenly obvious that Death is portrayed here, first in magnificent ghastly pomp, then in wintry lamentation. The second movement is clearly a life-and-death struggle, culminating in a radiant hymn-tune – is faith the answer? But affirmation collapses pathetically. Apparent defeat is followed by a manic waltz, all wild escapism, except for those moments when dark memories peer out from behind the curtain. Then comes the famous Adagietto, an exquisite love song without words, leading to a joyously determined Finale, at whose height the hymn-tune returns, now in triumph.

As so often with Mahler, there's a personal side to this. In 1901, just before beginning the Fifth Symphony, Mahler had survived a near-fatal haemorrhage – no wonder death has such a strong presence. Mounting anti-Semitism in Vienna had soured his feelings about his adopted home city, hence perhaps the violence of the waltz-parody in the Scherzo. But he'd also met his future wife, Alma Schindler, who is clearly the beloved hymned so poignantly in the Adagietto. The final triumph of the hymn-tune may be inspired by her too: if divine love can't help us face death, then perhaps human love can. But this is a symphony, not a novel. These are only prompts. The real adventure begins, as Mahler realised, when we discover meanings for ourselves.

Grace-Evangeline Mason (b. 1994): *Mahler's Letters*

World Premiere

Composed: 2020

Apart from some early programme notes (which he later renounced), Mahler published nothing about his own music. But his letters to friends and colleagues, and particularly to his wife Alma, are full of revelations about his thinking – on music and on life in general. For this four-movement choral piece, Grace-Evangeline Mason has had the brilliant idea of creating poems from these letters on the four themes that preoccupied Mahler, and setting them to music. Each movement is addressed to a fictional 'Dear You', who could be Mahler's ideal muse, but could also be the listener. Nature, love, death (and religion), and of course music, have a direct bearing on the 'story' behind Mahler's Fifth Symphony, but they are also some of the most basic, abiding themes in poetry and song, and not surprisingly they have set Mason's imagination working in a highly personal way. *Mahler's Letters* has plenty to tell lovers of Mahler's music, but ultimately it's a world in itself.