

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

June 11 programme complementary content

Settle back and enjoy an evening of passion, murder, revenge, intrigue, witchcraft, fortune telling, forbidden love and tragedy – all from the pen of one man, Giuseppe Verdi.

Liverpool favourite, John Suchet, swaps his usual Christmas duties for his first summer visit to Hope Street to host this beautiful programme which includes some of the world's greatest arias, choruses and overtures.

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.

John Suchet

John Suchet has become inextricably linked with a certain Ludwig van Beethoven – thanks in no small part not only to his bestseller, 'Beethoven: The Man Revealed', but his 52-part podcast to boot.

The broadcaster, journalist and author has actually written five classical music biographies, digging deep beneath the music to find out more about the men who composed some of the most famous and lasting melodies of the past 200 years.

So who better to host an evening of Verdi than the author of a book on the complex 19th Century Italian operatic maestro?

Viva Verdi! marks John's only visit to Liverpool this year – last December he officially hung up his Spirit of Christmas hosting hat after a decade of festive concerts in Hope Street.

It was a memorable farewell for the 78-year-old, who was allowed to take the baton and conduct the Orchestra.

"Honestly, talk about a schoolboy dream come true," he laughs. "Sandra Parr [artistic planning director] approached me about it in the October, saying 'how would you feel if you conducted the Radetzky March as an encore? If that doesn't appeal, it doesn't matter'.

"I nearly bit her hand off! It was magical. I rehearsed myself stupid for it at home with headphones on.

"Everyone thinks all you have to do is wave a stick. I now know that's not true. The old-fashioned idea is the right hand is the beat and the left is the emotion. But it's much subtler than that."

So he's very happy to leave the conducting to Domingo Hindoyan this time around, saying: "I know my role, and my role is to bring the music and the composer behind it to life for the audience. I leave the technical issue of it, the artistic details of it, entirely to Domingo."

Audiences of his *Classic FM* broadcasts and Spirit of Christmas concerts know with what enthusiasm John approaches his subjects, and Verdi is no exception.

Rather than an academic exploration of the composer's musical catalogue, he is interested in the man himself and what made him tick. Thus, the audience can expect some colourful anecdotes and stories from the mountains of research Suchet undertook for his 2017 book.

John explains: "My career was as a television journalist where you skim the surface of every story you report on. Two-and-a-half minutes is Ben Hur!"

"So, when it came to Beethoven [his first book] I just went the other way. I wanted to know what he had for breakfast every day. I wanted to know every single thing about him. When I delve into my composers, that's what I want to find out.

"And as soon as I started reading up on Verdi, probably about 15 to 20 years ago, I thought 'what a life!', and people that love *La Traviata*, people who love *Rigoletto* or *Il Trovatore*, they've got no idea about all these things that went on in his life. That brings it to life for me."

Verdi, he says, had a love-hate relationship with the music world, aggravated by censorship of his work, and kept threatening to give up composing altogether. At one point he decided to go into politics and became a senator in parliament – albeit, in his own words, a "lousy" one.

Rather than the benign, bearded figure of his famous portrait, he could be prickly and, in John's words, "bloody minded", garnering him the nickname 'the Bear of Busseto' – bestowed on him by his own wife!

Meanwhile, when he wasn't composing, Verdi once decided to take up farming.

John reveals: "He turned his home at Sant'Agata into a farm, hired a farm manager and started producing tinned pork products with his initials GV on the tin."

Tinned pork products aside, the burning question remains, what DID Giuseppe Verdi have for breakfast?

"Well, actually I can't answer that," John admits. "But I can tell you that his favourite meal was spaghetti. He also loved the red sparkling wine which is native to his area of the Po Valley, and when he went on tour to Russia, he took supplies of spaghetti and that wine with him."

With books on Beethoven, Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Verdi and the Strauss dynasty under his belt, who might be next?

"I haven't got another composer in my sights," he insists. "I swore no more books, they're such hard work."

But what if he did?

He pauses for a second: "I honestly don't think I'll ever do it, but it's such a story.

"With Beethoven, Mozart, all the great composers, you give them your heart – but one man steals your soul. He's an awful, awful man who wrote music that has never been matched before or since. And his name is...Richard Wagner!"

Domingo Hindoyan

Domingo Hindoyan was born in Caracas in 1980 to a violinist father and a lawyer mother. He started his musical career as a violinist in the ground-breaking Venezuelan music education programme, El Sistema.

He studied conducting at Haute école de musique in Geneva, where he gained his masters, and in 2012 was invited to join the Allianz International Conductor's Academy, through which he worked with the London Philharmonic and the Philharmonia Orchestra and with conductors like Esa-Pekka Salonen and Sir Andrew Davis.

He was appointed first assistant conductor to Daniel Barenboim at the Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin in 2013 and in 2019, he took up a position as principal guest conductor of the Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra.

In the same year, he made his debut with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and was appointed as successor to Vasily Petrenko in 2020, taking up this position last September.

Christina Nilsson

Christina Nilsson has established herself as a world class artist in the making.

Born in Ystad in southern Sweden in 1990, Nilsson later moved to Stockholm where she studied at the Lilla Akademien Musikgymnasium and the University College of Opera. She completed her masters in 2017 and went on to win the Renata Tebaldi International Voice Competition in the same year.

In 2018, the award-winning soprano made her role debut as Aida at the Royal Swedish Opera, while her other roles have included Ariadne in *Ariadne auf Naxos* in Frankfurt and Lausanne, Elsa von Brabant in *Lohengrin* at the Tiroler Festspiele in Austria and Contessa in *The Marriage of Figaro*.

Most recently, she has sung Aida in Stockholm and she will reprise the role at the Deutsch Oper Berlin in 2023.

Simone Piazzola

Award-winning Italian baritone Simone Piazzola was born in Verona and began his musical studies, aged 11, with soprano Alda Borelli Morgan. He currently studies with bass Giacomo Prestia.

Piazzola, who has been praised for his radiant baritone voice and strong stage presence, made his stage debut in 2005.

He has sung at many of the world's most prestigious opera houses and concert halls including La Fenice, Paris Opera, La Scala, Rome Opera, Vienna State Opera, Teatro Real in Madrid, and the Royal Opera House where he appeared as Giorgio Germont in *La Traviata*.

Verdi has become an important part of his career, and in addition to Germont, his extensive repertoire includes Amonasro in *Aida*, Carlo in *Ernani*, di Luna in *Il Trovatore*, Renato in *Un Ballo in Maschera*, and the title role in *Rigoletto*.

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.

In recent years, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic 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*, 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.

Giuseppe Verdi

One of the greatest composers of the 19th Century, Giuseppe Verdi was born near Busseto in northern Italy in 1813. His father was an innkeeper and owner of a small farm, and his mother a spinner.

As a child, Verdi learned the organ and spinet and sang in the church choir. At the age of eight he became the church's official organist, while the teenage Verdi composed a range of music for the church and amateur orchestra – music he would later describe as “a motley assortment of pieces”.

Turned down when he applied to study at the Milan Conservatory, he studied privately with Vincenzo Lavigna, who was an associate of La Scala.

Verdi's first success came when La Scala agreed to stage his opera *Oberto, conte di San Bonifacio* in 1839. It would become the first of more than two dozen operas he would compose over half a century, culminating in *Falstaff* which premiered, again at La Scala, in 1893.

Six of those operas feature in this concert – *Nabucco* (premiered in 1842), *La Traviata* (1853), *Il Trovatore* (1853), *Un Ballo in Maschera* (1859), *La forza del destino* (1862) and *Aida* (1871).

Did you know? Verdi commissioned a retirement home for elderly opera singers in Milan. In the last 125 years, the Casa Verdi has helped around 1,500 retired artists and musicians, as well as being the last resting place of Verdi and his second wife, Giuseppina.

About the Music

A man who dreamed of the time when his homeland would unite as one country, Giuseppe Verdi put disguised messages of hope into several of his operas. The slogan ‘Viva Verdi!’ became a nationalist rallying cry in the composer's own lifetime – the letters of his name taken to spell out ‘Vittorio Emanuele, Re D'Italia’ – (‘Vittorio Emanuele, King of Italy’) – anticipating the time when the then King of Sardinia would ascend the throne of a united Italian homeland. The so-called ‘Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves’, ‘Va Pensiero’, from his opera *Nabucco*, in which the captive Israelites dream of freedom from Babylonian captivity, soon

became an unofficial national anthem. Its popularity continues to the present day – during lockdown, choruses formed on the internet to sing out its message of hope with renewed determination. By the time Verdi came to write his opera *Aida* in 1870, Italy had been an independent kingdom for nearly a decade, but that didn't stop patriotic Italians taking the heroine's 'O patria mia' ('Oh my country') to their hearts and singing it with passion – as the saying goes, 'In Italy, everyone's an opera singer'.

But there's much more to Verdi than politics. Verdi knew that the two great themes of Italian grand opera are Love and Death, and his operas abound in both, expressed in gripping theatrical drama and strings of glorious melodies. There's no more compelling depiction of merciless Fate in action than the overture to the aptly-named *La forza del destino* ('The Force of Destiny'). In *La Traviata* ('The Fallen Woman'), a father urges his son to give up his love for the beautiful courtesan Violetta in 'Di provenza il mar' ('The sea and soil of Provence'), little realising that her sacrifice will lead to her death. After this we hear 'Di Madride noi siam mattadori' ('We're matadors from Madrid'), which shows us the game of erotic conquest in all its brutal splendour. *Il trovatore* ('The troubadour') is most famous for its red-blooded 'gypsy' music, as in wild 'Anvil Chorus'. But, challenging the popular stereotypes of his day, Verdi implies that the passions these supposedly 'lawless' people embody are in all of us, as love, jealousy and lust of revenge play out against a wintry landscape, devastated by war. Finally, though, we have brazen glory in the 'Triumphal March' from *Aida*. However harsh for some, life must go on and we must live it.