

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra April 20 programme complementary content

Hector Berlioz poured all his unrequited longing into a symphony like nothing you've ever heard – an outrageous opium-fuelled fantasy of glittering ballrooms, guillotines and demonic revels.

Making her Liverpool conducting debut is Ariane Matiakh, who takes us to the stars with a sultry French nightscape by Charles Koechlin, before the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Choir continue our journey to the heavens in Poulenc's exuberant *Gloria*.

Ariane Matiakh

Versatility, musicality, technical provision, and above all a passionate approach, are trademark features of French conductor [Ariane Matiakh](#).

The daughter of two opera singers, Matiakh grew up in an exceptionally musical environment and learned to play the piano at an early age. Later, she studied orchestral conducting in Vienna where she also sang in the renowned Arnold Schoenberg Choir.

In 2005 she was appointed assistant conductor of the Opera National de Montpellier, and she is currently in her second season as principal conductor of the [Württembergische Philharmonie Reutlingen](#). Her wide repertoire covers numerous operas, symphonic works and ballets, from music of the Baroque period to contemporary compositions. In recent seasons she has conducted, among others, three world premieres including a *Harp Concerto* by Sally Beamish played at the BBC Proms by Catrin Finch and the BBC National Orchestra of Wales.

In recognition of her achievements in French musical life and representing French culture abroad, in 2022 Matiakh was awarded Officier de l'Ordre des Arts des Lettres.

Daniella Sicari

Australian-British soprano [Daniella Sicari](#) has been steadily building a reputation in the UK as an engaging singer with a warm and sparkling tone. She trained at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts and did her postgraduate studies at the Royal Northern College of Music under the tutelage of Mary Plazas.

Sicari is the recipient of numerous awards including the Western Australian Young People and the Arts International Award, Amanda Rookcroft Prize, The Joyce and Michael Kennedy Strauss Prize, James and Mary Glass Scholarship, John Cameron Award for Lieder, Elizabeth Harwood Prize and Robin Kay Memorial Prize.

Last February she sang Stephen Pratt's [LoveBytes](#) with Ensemble 10:10 at The Tung Auditorium.

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 Durufle *Requiem*, Britten's *War Requiem* and Handel's *Messiah*. It 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.

This season the Choir welcomes a new chorus master with Matthew Hamilton being appointed the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic's Director of Choirs.

Recent appearances on the Liverpool Philharmonic Hall stage have included Beethoven's *Mass in C* and choral pieces by Brahms. In addition to this concert, during the 2023/24 season the Choir has also performed Fauré's *Requiem* and Handel's *Messiah*, and has sung in the Spirit of Christmas concert series and last month's Classic FM Hall of Fame concert.

Charles Koechlin

Paris-born composer, teacher and critic [Charles Koechlin](#) was a man of many interests, from the music of Johann Sebastian Bach to Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, and a prolific composer.

And one of the many eclectic things that inspired him was his lifelong passion for [astronomy](#). An amateur astronomer, he had his own telescope with which he searched the skies. Koechlin, who had studied composition with both Jules Massenet and Gabriel Fauré, wrote his symphonic poem [Vers la voûte étoilée](#) (translated as 'visions of the starry firmament' or 'towards the starry vault') between 1929 and 1933, and revised it in 1939. However, it would never be publicly performed in its composer's lifetime, getting its first outing in Berlin in 1989.

The 'nocturne for orchestra' was dedicated to the memory of the French astronomer and prolific author [Camille Flammarion](#) who had written the book *Astronomie Populaire* which helped enthuse Koechlin's love of the heavens.

Did you know? One of Koechlin's best-known pieces is the Seven Stars Symphony. But this 1933 work isn't about celestial bodies – instead, each of its seven movements orbits around a different 'star' from Hollywood's silent movie era, including Douglas Fairbanks, Greta Garbo and Charlie Chaplin.

Watch Ariane Matiakh conduct Charles Koechlin's [Vers la voûte étoilée](#).

Francis Poulenc

It was his mother, an amateur pianist, who was the first musical influence on [Francis Poulenc](#) – teaching the young Parisien to play the instrument. He started studying formally when he was 16, with pianist Ricardo Vines, and in 1921 he started composition lessons...with Charles Koechlin. It was said to be through Koechlin that he developed an interest in choral music.

Meanwhile in the wake of the First World War, the young Poulenc met a group of like-minded French (and one Swiss) composers and together they became known as [Les Six](#). Although they all had different influence and interests, in general their musical outlook was a reaction against the style of composers like Wagner, Debussy and Ravel.

While [Poulenc](#) could and did create music which was light-hearted and witty, he was also greatly affected by the death, in a car accident in 1936, of his friend and fellow composer [Pierre-Octave Ferroud](#) and it's been said that led him to rediscover his Catholic faith.

His *Gloria*, scored for soprano solo, chorus and large orchestra, was commissioned in 1959 by the Koussevitzky Foundation and was premiered by the Boston Symphony Orchestra in January 1961, with its composer in attendance. And like Poulenc himself, there are elements of both the reverent and irreverent in the work – part of which, he admitted, was informed by the memory of a group of [Benedictine monks](#) enjoying a game of football.

Listen to Poulenc's [Gloria](#).

Hector Berlioz

When the great Shakespearean actor and theatrical impresario [Charles Kemble](#) presented a production of *Hamlet* at Paris' Théâtre de l'Odéon in 1827, the audience included a 24-year-old [Louis-Hector Berlioz](#).

But it wasn't Kemble's performance as the Dane that captured the young Frenchman's attention so much as the doomed Ophelia. Berlioz became besotted with [Harriet Smithson](#), a 27-year-old Anglo-Irish stage actress who also performed as Juliet in [Romeo and Juliet](#) the same summer, and followed it with Desdemona to Kemble's Othello.

The composer's was a grand – and until 1832, unrequited – passion (or perhaps obsession is a better description) which was ultimately channelled into his [Symphonie Fantastique](#), which charts the progress of a torrid love affair through five turbulent movements. It was given its first performance at the Paris Conservatoire in December 1830. [Berlioz](#) had, apparently, wanted to have 220 players in the orchestra but settled for 130.

As for Berlioz and Smithson? They finally married in 1833, and had a son, Louis, the following year. But it wasn't a happy union and within a decade they had separated.

Enjoy [Dream of a Witches' Sabbath](#) from Berlioz's *Symphony Fantastique*.

About the Music

Charles Koechlin (1867-1950): *Vers la voûte étoilée* (Visions of the starry firmament)

Composed: 1922-33 (revised 1939)

First Performed: 1989

Although Charles Koechlin was as dazzling a master of the orchestra as his countryman Hector Berlioz, he was as introverted and calmly modest as Berlioz was extrovert and volatile. For all the justified pride he took in his own remarkable music, he made little effort to promote it, which is one of the reasons why this voluptuously beautiful short tone poem was never heard in his lifetime – and it's not even clear when, or where the first performance took place! Amongst his various obsessions (including Hollywood film stars, Kipling's *Jungle Book*, radical socialism and 3D photography) was astronomy, and *Vers la voûte étoilée* is an expression of his fascination with what was already a rapidly expanding science. *Vers la voûte étoilée* is dedicated to the memory of the pioneering French astronomer Charles Flammarion, but it isn't a 'scientific' piece, more a rapt contemplation of the beauty of the starry heavens. Think of Vincent van Gogh's visionary painting *The Starry Night* and you're already half-way there.

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963): *Gloria*

1. Gloria in excelsis Deo (Glory to God in the highest)
2. Laudamus te (We praise you)
3. Domine Deus, Rex caelestis (Lord God, King of Heaven)

4. Domine Fili unigenite (Lord, only born son)
5. Domine Deus, Agnus Dei (Lord God, Lamb of God)
6. Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris (Who sits at the Father's right hand)

Composed: 1969

First Performed: 21 January 1961, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Chorus Pro Musica, Adele Anderson (soprano), cond. Charles Munch

'The naughty boy of French music' – that's how many saw Francis Poulenc in his own lifetime: an inspired prankster, a gleeful scandalmonger, embodiment of that hard-to-translate French word 'chic'. But there were depths too, and secret pain. Flamboyant in public, privately he struggled to come to terms with his own homosexuality. Then, in 1936, the death of a friend in a horrifying car accident sent him to Rocamadour, an ancient French place of pilgrimage, looking for consolation and answers. Soon afterwards he composed the chastely beautiful *Litanies à la Vierge Noir* (Litanies of the Black Madonna), first in a series of religious works in which Poulenc explores the 'peasant devotion' that moved him so deeply.

Did Poulenc ever fully reconcile his inner contradictions? Perhaps not, but out of that tension came some wonderful music, including the grandest, and at the same time most joyous of his religious works, the *Gloria*. There are echoes of another master-subversive, Igor Stravinsky (who also became intensely religious in midlife), but there's more pure affection and *joie de vivre* here, and the old naughtiness hasn't gone completely – Poulenc said that the jaunty 'Laudamus te' was inspired by seeing a group of Benedictine monks playing football. But after that comes the exquisite, soprano-led 'Domine Deus', in which there's something of that pure, heartfelt piety Poulenc saw at Rocamadour. And the ending – delicious harmonies on hushed chorus and soaring soprano rising heavenward like gentle clouds of incense, then resting in serene benediction – is one of the most touchingly open-hearted things this once-notorious ironist ever created.

Hector Berlioz (1803-69): *Symphonie fantastique*

1. Rêveries - Passions (Reveries – Passions)
2. Un Bal (A Ball)
3. Scène aux Champs (Scene in the Country)
4. Marche au Supplice (March to the Scaffold)
5. Songe d'une Nuit du Sabbat (Dream of a Witches Sabbath)

Composed: 1830

First Performed: 5 December 1830, Paris Conservatoire, cond. François Habeneck

If there's one classical composer who deserves to be called 'larger than life', it's Hector Berlioz. Prone to tempestuous mood-swings, a bold (some would say reckless) innovator, his life and work mirror each other so closely that it's often hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. Many composers have fallen passionately, hopelessly in love; some have attempted to work through their feelings in music. But how many would invite the object of their desire to a public performance of a huge, ambitious symphony in which the agonies and ecstasies of that love are publicly, even graphically displayed?

But that's exactly what the twenty-six-year-old Berlioz did in his wild and brilliant *Symphonie fantastique*. Three years before he wrote it, he'd seen the Irish actress Harriet Smithson playing Shakespeare and fallen cataclysmically in love, both with the playwright and with Harriet, the Bard's beautiful advocate. Understandably, she backed off when he started making wild declarations of love, so instead Berlioz threw his passion into one of the most vivid pieces of musical storytelling ever composed. Berlioz's programme note describes it as the evocation of an 'opium dream', in which we hear the rejected lover's longings and despair, his subsequent feelings of loneliness and rejection, and how everything finally turns nasty. He dreams that he

has killed his beloved and is led to the scaffold for her murder, after which she returns, horrifically, in a grotesque 'Witches Sabbath', where she gloats over the apparently still conscious body of her former lover. Hardly a guaranteed way to a girl's heart, you might think, but it worked. Ten months after the *Symphonie's* second performance, in 1832, at which Smithson was guest, Berlioz and his ideal love were married. It would be lovely to say that they lived happily ever after, but (not too surprisingly perhaps) the marriage was a disaster. Fortunately, the Symphony wasn't. Rapturously received at its premiere, it has been thrilling audiences ever since.