

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra
October 26 programme complementary content

So you think you know British music? Everyone loves *Jupiter* from Holst's *The Planets*, but tonight you'll hear so much more as Principal Guest Conductor Andrew Manze takes the Orchestra on a voyage to infinity and beyond. We'll join William Walton in a Spitfire over wartime London, and hear a beautiful cello concerto played by Guy Johnston.

Andrew Manze

[Andrew Manze](#) is Principal Guest Conductor of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, a role he has held since 2018. A great favourite of Liverpool Philharmonic audiences, he made his debut with the Orchestra more than a decade ago and has appeared regularly on the Hope Street stage ever since.

With boundless energy and warmth, and an extensive and scholarly knowledge of the repertoire, Manze is in great demand from some of the world's leading orchestras and ensembles. He is widely celebrated as one of the most stimulating and inspirational conductors of his generation.

He began his career as an Early Music specialist, becoming Associate Director of the Academy of Ancient Music at the age of 31. Along with a busy conducting career he also teaches, edits and writes about music and is in demand as a broadcaster. As a violinist, he has released an astonishing variety of recordings, many of them award-winning.

He is also currently Chief Conductor of the [NDR Radiophilharmonie](#).

Guy Johnston

[Guy Johnston](#) is one of the most exciting British cellists of his generation. His early successes include winning the [BBC Young Musician of the Year](#) and significant awards, notably the Shell London Symphony Orchestra Gerald Macdonald Award, Suggia Gift Award and a Young British Classical Performer Brit Award.

He has performed with many leading international orchestras including the London Philharmonic, NHK Symphony, BBC Symphony, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Orquestra Sinfonica do Estado de Sao Paulo and St Petersburg Symphony.

Recent seasons have included a BBC Prom with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, concertos with The Hallé, Philharmonia Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic, Orchestra of Opera North, and BBC Symphony. Most recently he has been the featured soloist of [Taverner's The Protecting Veil](#) for Britten's Sinfonia 2024 UK and Ireland tour, receiving critical acclaim.

A prolific recording artist often championing contemporary British composers, his recent releases include Dobrinka Tabakova's *Cello Concerto* with The Hallé, and Rebecca Dale's *Night Seasons* with the Philharmonia Orchestra. Next year will bring his latest recording, Xiaogang Ye's *My Faraway Nanjing*, made with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra.

He gave the premiere of Charlotte Bray's *Falling in the Fire* at the *BBC Proms* and Joseph Phibb's *Cello Sonata* at Wigmore Hall. The current season sees the world premiere of Phibb's *Cello Concerto* composed for Johnston and the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Emma Ruth Richards' *Until a Reservoir no longer remains* and a recording of Matthew Kaner's solo suite for cello.

Johnston was Associate Professor of Cello at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York from 2018-24, and a guest Professor of Cello at the Royal Academy of Music where he was awarded an Hon. ARAM in 2015. He plays the 1692 Antonio Stradivari cello kindly loaned to him through the Beare's International Violin Society by a generous patron.

Listen to a [conversation](#) about the cello between Guy Johnston and Sheku Kanneh-Mason.

Sopranos and Altos of the 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*, Poulenc's *Gloria*, Karl Jenkins' *Stabat Mater*, James MacMillan's *St John Passion*, Beethoven's *Mass in C*, and Britten's *War Requiem*.

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. The Choir is led by Director of Choirs Matthew Hamilton.

During the 2024/25 season, members of the Choir will also perform Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*, Mahler's *Third Symphony*, Janáček's *Glagolitic Mass* and Verdi's *Requiem*, and appear in the Spirit of Christmas concert series and the popular annual performance of Handel's *Messiah*.

William Walton

It was 1942 and the Second World War was raging across Europe and beyond. Meanwhile, at home in Blighty, 40-year-old [William Walton](#) was busy composing for films aimed at keeping morale high among the civilian population. They included Leslie Howard's *The First of the Few*, from which Walton created his orchestral *Spitfire Prelude and Fugue*, premiered in Liverpool's Philharmonic Hall on January 2, 1943, in a concert conducted by its composer. Incidentally, the all-Walton programme that evening also included *Belshazzar's Feast*, which is also part of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra's 2024/25 season.

Fast forward quarter of a century and it was perhaps no surprise then that when the filmmakers behind another airborne war film – [The Battle of Britain](#), a colour epic packed with the cream of British acting talent – needed a top quality score they turned to the now ennobled Sir William. Walton went away and created a suitably stirring [soundtrack](#). But with around a month to go until the film's premiere, producer and distributor United Artists decided to pull his music, ostensibly because at around 20 minutes, the score was too short for an LP release. Instead, veteran film composer [Ron Goodwin](#) was brought in and asked to create a new score at eye-wateringly short notice.

No one thought to inform Walton of the change, or indeed ask him to write additional music. But when Laurence Olivier, playing Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, found out what was happening, he threatened to have his name removed from the credits unless Walton's music was used. A hasty compromise was reached, and Walton's *Battle in the Air* sequence was reinstated.

Listen to Sir William Walton's [original score](#) for the 1969 film *The Battle of Britain*.

Arthur Bliss

If you ask most people with at least a passing knowledge of classical music to name some British composers, the chances are relatively few would mention [Arthur Bliss](#). Yet Bliss was one of the leading British composers of the 20th Century, his career spanning more than five decades and his works earning him a knighthood. In 1953 he was appointed [Master of the Queen's Music](#). He was also appointed a Knight of the Royal Victorian Order and a Companion of Honour, and in 1963 received the Royal Philharmonic Society's Gold Medal.

Born in Surrey in 1891 to an American father and English mother, Bliss studied at Cambridge and the Royal College of Music, where a contemporary was Liverpool-raised Eugene Goossens.

The *Cello Concerto* dates from the final few years of his life. After composing only fitfully during the mid-1960s, at the close of the decade his creativity returned and, from 1969 until his death in 1975, six major distinctive works appeared – including the *Cello Concerto* which was completed in March 1970.

It had been requested by the great Russian cellist Rostropovich to whom it was dedicated '[with admiration and gratitude](#)'. It was given its premiere during the Aldeburgh Festival on June 24 1970, Rostropovich performing with the English Chamber Orchestra and Benjamin Britten conducting.

Enjoy Sir Arthur Bliss' [Cello Concerto](#).

Did you know? Arthur Bliss wrote the music for *Conquest of the Air*, a 1936 docudrama about the history of aviation directed by Zoltan Korda, produced by Alexander Korda and starring Laurence Olivier.

Gustav Holst

[Gustav Holst](#) became interested in astrology and horoscopes while he was on a [walking holiday in Spain in 1913](#), accompanied by fellow composer Arnold Bax and Bax's author brother Clifford. Holst had long been fascinated by what were deemed at that time unconventional ideas and beliefs. This son of a Cheltenham church organist was a vegetarian and a socialist.

[The Planets Suite](#), composed in the opening years of the First World War, may refer to the known planets of our solar system – but the work is astrological rather than astronomical, with its composer ascribing each planet (save from Earth which does not feature) a distinct personality. Holst himself explained: "Whatever clue may lie hidden in each movement should be sought in the astrological significance of the planet to which it refers, and not in the mythological tradition connected with the names."

While a small, under-rehearsed performance before specially invited guests took place shortly before the end of the war, most early performances of *The Planets* were fragmentary, much to its composer's frustration. It took until November 1920 for the work to be played in full in a London Symphony Orchestra concert.

And, in fact, it was still mostly being presented piecemeal by the time its Liverpool premiere came on January 10, 1922, when Sir Henry Wood conducted Mars, Jupiter and Saturn as part of a wider programme. Three, five or seven movements or not, *The Planets* proved to be hugely popular and, in the *Liverpool Daily Post's* words, “a symbolic reminder that Holst, too, is one of our morning stars in music.”

It catapulted its composer, then in his late 40s, into the public spotlight where he drew praise from perhaps Britain's foremost music writer and musicologist of the day. “His is one of the subtlest and most original minds of our time,” wrote Everton-born [Ernest Newman](#), music critic at the *Sunday Times* for nearly 40 years. “It begins working at a musical problem where most other minds would leave off. Whatever his theme – jollity, reflection, mysticism, philosophy – he quietly sifts out all the ordinary composer would have to say about it and pitches it into the waste paper basket; then he begins.”

Listen to '[Jupiter: Bringer of Jollity](#)' from Holst's *The Planets* complete with score.

About the Music

William Walton (1902-83): *Battle in the Air* (from the film *Battle of Britain*)

Composed: 1969

First Performed: (studio recording), cond. Walton, 1969

Composing for films can be a gruelling business. In 1969, William Walton opened his paper to discover that his music for the World War II epic film *Battle of Britain* had been unceremoniously ditched. The reason eventually given was that Walton's score was too short, but it never seemed to occur to the film company to ask him for more. Instead, another composer, Ron Goodwin, had been contracted. Laurence Olivier, who'd been delighted by Walton's scores for his *Hamlet* and *Henry V*, was incensed, and demanded that his name be removed from the credits for *Battle of Britain* unless Walton's music was reinstated. In the end, just the music Walton wrote for the 'Battle in the Air' sequence was restored – not an out-and-out victory, but a gesture at least. Walton's ghost can have the last laugh though. 'Battle in the Air' makes an exciting, vividly suggestive short tone poem in its own right and, ironically, it seems to be valued higher today than the film it was once deemed unworthy to support.

Arthur Bliss: *Concerto for Cello and Orchestra*

Allegro deciso

Larghetto

Allegro

During the mid-1960s Bliss composed fitfully, only writing small-scale occasional music: seemingly, the significant part of his composing career had concluded. However, at the end of that decade his creative urge was rekindled, and from 1969 until his death, there was a late harvest when six major distinctive works appeared including the Cello Concerto, which was completed in March 1970. It had been requested by the great Russian cellist, Mstislav Rostropovich, to whom it was dedicated 'with admiration and gratitude'. The cellist's suggestion enabled Bliss to fulfil a long-standing ambition: 'I have always wanted to write some music for solo cello and orchestra; ever since as a young man I played through the classic repertoire for the instrument with my cellist brother, Howard.'

When the concerto was given its premiere, at the Maltings, Snape, on 24 June 1970, during the Aldeburgh Festival, by its dedicatee, with the English Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Benjamin Britten, it was designated 'Concertino', since Bliss felt that he had composed a 'light-hearted work'. However, Britten pronounced it a major piece, and begged Bliss to alter the title to 'Concerto', to which he agreed. The concerto is scored for an orchestra of Classical proportions, with the addition of harp and celesta.

The principal idea of the first movement, played by the soloist at the opening, is a robust theme characterised by wide, leaping intervals. It is ripe for expansion into a variety of guises in this predominantly vigorous movement. Also significant is a tiny descending four-note pattern heard on the woodwind in the opening two bars. An expansive cadenza prefaces the climax of the movement which ends reflectively with these two thematic strands combined.

With its frequent lilting triplet rhythms, the slow movement has the charm of a wistful lullaby. It is a series of ruminations growing from the soloist's theme which contains elements related to both ideas of the preceding movement. The gentle climax, exquisitely scored for brass, harp and celesta, is a magical moment, like sunlight bursting from clouds.

A rhythmic figure on timpani heralds the high-spirited finale with the soloist's athletic theme in 6/8 time. Throughout there's little respite for the soloist, who dominates a sequence of moods and a variety of swiftly changing time-signatures. A *Sostenuto* passage brings contrast with an extended lyrical melody tinged with both sadness and nobility, which is followed by a section of tenser music leading to the sole dissonant climax of the work. The movement, and the whole concerto, culminates with the return of the opening movement blazoned out by the orchestra, before a quick-dash coda to the conclusion. Bliss aptly summed up the concerto as a whole by explaining that 'there are no problems for the listener – only the soloist!'

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Gustav Holst (1874-1934): *The Planets*

1. Mars, the Bringer of War
2. Venus, the Bringer of Peace
3. Mercury, the Winged Messenger
4. Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity
5. Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age
6. Uranus, the Magician
7. Neptune, the Mystic

Composed: 1914-17

First Performed: 29 September 1918, London, Queen's Hall, cond. Adrian Boult

It was astrology – 'my private vice', as he called it – that first set Holst's mind working in terms of an orchestral suite based on the then-known planets. 'It grew in my mind slowly', Holst recalled, 'like a baby in a mother's womb'. Composing *The Planets* was slowed down considerably by his demanding duties as a teacher and by worsening neuritis in his right arm. But something had clearly gripped him beyond the symbolism of the horoscope. A mystic from early youth, Holst studied Hindu, Buddhist and Christian Gnostic scriptures. It all confirmed for him that 'everything in this world ... is just one big miracle. Or rather, the universe itself is one.' When *The Planets* was first heard, a few voices were raised against Holst's audacious musical innovations, but most recognised that something hugely significant, and not just for British music, had been born.

The Planets begins with a massive bombshell. Mars is one of the most terrifying portrayals of modern industrialised warfare in music. Mars is a march, but the orchestral colouring is harsh and brutally powerful, while the rhythm is five beats to a bar – what human or animal being marches in five-time? Venus then offers maximum contrast – here peace, not love, as in ancient Roman mythology, though there are suggestions of erotic longing in the unusually romantic middle section. Mercury is a scurrying, nimble symphonic scherzo – truly ‘mercurial’ – with more than a hint of English folksong in its climatic middle section. Jupiter embodies the adjective ‘Jovial’. In the words of Holst’s astrological table, it stands for ‘abundance of life and vitality’, and it’s packed with good tunes, including one which became popular as the nationalist hymn ‘I Vow to Thee, My Country’ – to the embarrassment of its passionately socialist creator.

But then things turn darker. Saturn (Holst’s favourite), with its desolate slow funeral march and grindingly dissonant climax, eventually finds its way to an ethereal close. Serenity is then shattered by the sinister, sometimes brutal humour of Uranus, until the magician himself vanishes eerily. Finally, we have the other-worldly, weirdly beautiful detachment of Neptune, ending with a marvellous fade-out for wordless chorus, as the mystic bids farewell to this troubled world.