

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra December 1 programme complementary content

December's drawing in on Merseyside, but here at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall it's summer all over again! Mendelssohn's heart turned somersaults when he arrived in the sunshine of Italy, but today his Italian symphony is just the starting point for a whole afternoon of winter warmers. Karel Deseure conducts Ravel's dreamy Spanish fantasy, Poulenc's witty *Sinfonietta*, and Mozart's ebullient *Oboe Concerto* – with the Orchestra's very own Helena Mackie in the spotlight. It's music that practically dances for joy.

Karel Deseure

Flemish conductor [Karel Deseure](#) is an artist of natural conducting talent and authority, as those who saw him conduct at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall last year will attest.

Deseure started his musical career as a flautist, studying for a Masters at the Royal Flemish Conservatoire in Antwerp before going on to train as a conductor at the Royal Conservatory of The Hague. In 2012 he was awarded the prestigious Anton Kersjes Foundation Scholarship for conductors, and in 2014 he took masterclasses with Bernard Haitink at the Lucerne Festival. Five years ago, he was appointed professor of conducting at the Amsterdam University of the Arts.

Deseure is sought after as both a concert and opera conductor, with recent concerts and productions including Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Puccini's *Le Villi* with Opera Zuid, and Mozart and Beethoven with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

Helena Mackie

From playing in her first trial concert with the Orchestra to being offered a job on her final day at the Royal Academy of Music, to touring Japan, to succeeding Jonathan Small, it's certainly been a whirlwind couple of years for the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra's young principal oboe Helena Mackie.

Now the 25-year-old is rounding off 2024 with her first professional solo performance, playing Mozart's *Oboe Concerto* both at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall and, ahead of that, in Ulverston. "I think I'd been here about six weeks," she says recalling the day she was asked if she would be happy to step up and take on soloist duties. "So it was nice to have a year's notice. I was given enough time to adjust to the idea!"

While this may be her first time in the professional spotlight, the former Salisbury Cathedral chorister brings experience garnered through many years of music making – and of growing up in a very musical family. Her parents, both clarinetists, met at Cambridge where they were involved in the university's [musical society](#) – with Helena following in their footsteps during her own time studying music at Clare College. "My whole extended family, even if they're not professional musicians, are very musical and love music," she explains. "It was that thing of doing something we loved, and getting really good at it so you can get the enjoyment out of it as well."

Oboe wasn't actually a young Helena's first choice of instrument, however. She started learning the violin at the age of four, but a rotational issue with her left arm meant that by the time she was eight, stretching to reach the bottom string wasn't only difficult but also increasingly painful.

Making the decision to change focus, she considered the cello – but her brother had recently started playing “so that was out of the question.” “And then I originally wanted to play the clarinet,” she recalls. “But my parents went ‘absolutely not! We’re not having a third one in the house!’” Instead, Helena was steered in the direction of the oboe, following in the footsteps of her cousin, the [acclaimed British oboist and conductor Nicholas Daniel](#).

At 14 she joined the [National Youth Orchestra](#) – something which also led her to Liverpool, performing twice on the Hope Street stage, including a concert in 2014 where the orchestra played Strauss’ tone poem [Ein Helbenleben](#). “I remember really liking Liverpool as a place,” she says. “The NYO also started the Inspire programme when I was in the orchestra, and they did the first couple of residential courses in Liverpool. We stayed at the Adelphi and did two or three day half term courses here.” It was during her time in the NYO, surrounded by fellow teenagers who were passionate about music, that Helena started to think about a professional career.

But it was the Covid pandemic, which coincided with her graduation from Cambridge, which concentrated her mind. “It was the first time in my entire life where I hadn’t been doing anything musical for a period of more than about two weeks when I went on holiday,” she says. “And I think at that point I realised that I didn’t really know what to do with myself if I didn’t have it. So I thought right, well maybe I should give it a crack? And I applied to music college.”

All roads seem to have slowly led back to Liverpool, where Helena auditioned and was later taken on trial, starting in January last year and playing in several concerts over a six-month period while completing her studies at the Royal Academy. It was on her [final day at college](#) that she received the offer of a permanent position with the Orchestra, dividing the section leader role with Jonathan Small and then taking on the full position on his retirement this summer.

“Alex Swift [Liverpool Philharmonic’s Deputy Orchestra Manager, who formally offered her the job] said ‘do you want to have a think about it?’ And I went, yes, can I?! Not that I was ever going to say no, but I think I just needed 24 hours to process everything and think, ‘oh gosh, life is going to change very suddenly now’.” Sharing the role for 12 months with Jonathan Small was, she adds, “a slightly unusual situation, but I found it helpful. Because I’d not had the experience of working consistently with a professional orchestra before, it was really helpful to have time off between the time I was working to practise, maybe have a lesson, work out what my reeds were doing. That’s an ongoing process!”

One thing that she found particularly easy from her earliest trials in Liverpool, was fitting into the Philharmonic ‘family’. Helena explains: “I’d heard from a few people that Liverpool was a really friendly orchestra and I’ve known Drake, our cor anglais player, for a long time - we were at the Royal Academy together - and he said they’re really lovely. I couldn’t ask for a nicer group of people to work with. And that’s not just me saying it because I work here.” She describes the Orchestra as being “like an 80-person comfort blanket”.

This December concert – with a performance at Ulverston’s Coronation Hall two days beforehand as part of the Orchestra’s Barrow residency – will see that ‘comfort blanket’ behind, rather than around, her. But playing with, in her words, “a group of people I know and respect immensely on a professional level as well”, is something she’s particularly looking forward to, along with plenty of support from family and friends in the Hall. As for the [Mozart piece itself](#), Helena is relishing approaching it as something that isn’t being actively judged – the concerto is a commonly used audition piece, with all the stresses and extra pressure that can bring. “It’s been nice learning it as a piece of music rather than being restricted by thinking ‘oh, maybe I shouldn’t make this musical choice in case it’s too out there for what’s required for an audition’,” she says. “It’s learning it with the possibilities rather than the baggage. And there are all sorts of musical choices to be made.”

Felix Mendelssohn - *Italian Symphony*

The year after his first visit to Britain in 1829, which included some inclement – if inspiring – travels around Scotland, [Felix Mendelssohn](#) was off again, this time heading south to tour Italy. The 21-year-old was in search of a sunny climate and stunning art. Mendelssohn headed over the Alps and spent 10 months traversing the country, starting in Venice in October 1830 and making his way south to Rome. And while he was reputedly less impressed by the music he heard than the sights he saw as he travelled, he was evidently inspired enough by his surroundings to start formulating [a new symphony](#) in his head – one he would go on to describe as ‘the jolliest piece I have so far written’.

Mendelssohn liked visiting Britain (he came here ten times in all during his short life). It was the Philharmonic Society of London which commissioned what became the *Italian Symphony*, and it was in London that it received its premiere in March 1833 shortly after Mendelssohn finally completed the manuscript and with the composer himself conducting.

Listen to the final movement from Mendelssohn’s [‘Italian’ Symphony](#).

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – *Oboe Concerto in C major*

While a 21-year-old Mozart may have been fed up and champing at the bit to quit Salzburg in the spring of 1777, there was still work to be done. And that included a new concerto for the young Italian [Guisepppe Ferlendis](#) who had just been appointed oboist in the orchestra of the Prince-Archbishop in Salzburg (reportedly with a higher annual salary than the court composer!).

Within a few months Mozart had finally quit the Prince-Archbishop’s court, and while travelling with his mother in search of new and more lucrative employment, he ended up in Mannheim where [Friedrich Ramm](#), principal oboist for the Elector of Bavaria, had huge success with the work. Mozart went on to write several additional works for Ramm (or with him in mind), while he also reworked the oboe concerto to turn it into his *Flute Concerto in D major*.

The *Oboe Concerto* was thought lost for more than a century until it was rediscovered in the archives at Salzburg University in 1920.

Enjoy the second movement of Mozart’s [Oboe Concerto in C major](#).

Maurice Ravel – *Pavane for a Dead Princess*

Despite its title, [Maurice Ravel’s](#) *Pavane pour une infante defunte* was not actually for, or about, a dead princess at all. In fact, it appears the French composer chose the title mostly for its sound when spoken aloud, and the emphasis – rather than being on deceased royalty – should be on the word pavane, a stately 16th Century court dance which could have been danced by a young princess as captured on canvas by someone like Diego Velázquez.

Ravel was a long-time acquaintance of the colourful cultural patroness [Princess Edmond de Polignac](#) and for many years he attended her musical salons in Paris. The princess, who was a decade older than Ravel, took her title from her second husband, an amateur composer. But she

had actually been born Winnaretta Singer in New York, and as the daughter of sewing machine magnate Isaac Singer (the 20th of his 24 children!) she was also an heiress who, when she came of age, inherited \$1million - more than \$33m in today's money.

It was de Polignac who commissioned Ravel to compose the pavane, which became very popular. Originally for solo piano, in 1910 Ravel scored the work for orchestra and that version received its first public performance the following year in Manchester, conducted by Sir Henry Wood. Meanwhile its composer [recorded the piano version](#) himself in 1922.

Watch a performance of Ravel's [*Pavane for a Dead Princess*](#).

Did you know? During his only visit to the United States, in 1928, Ravel was introduced to George Gershwin and the two composers immediately hit it off, visiting the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem several times to enjoy live jazz.

Francis Poulenc - *Sinfonietta*

In early 1947 the *BBC* was looking at ways to celebrate the first anniversary of its [Third Programme](#) – launched on the airwaves in September 1946 and dedicated to cultural and more 'highbrow' output than its sister stations, the Home Service and Light Programme. One of the people the corporation turned to to mark the occasion was 48-year-old [Francis Poulenc](#), who was commissioned to write a new work for broadcast.

The composer and pianist had been warmly received by British audiences from early on in his career. And in January 1945 he had travelled to London where, among other appearances, he was joined by fellow composer Benjamin Britten to play his *Double Piano Concerto* at the Royal Albert Hall.

Two years later, when the *BBC* came calling, Poulenc responded with what became his zesty and spirited [Sinfonietta](#) which was given its premiere by the Philharmonia Orchestra in London in October 1948 in a concert conducted by fellow Frenchman Roger Désormière.

As for the Third Programme, in 1967 it was rebranded as *BBC Radio 3*.

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

About the Music

Felix Mendelssohn: Symphony No 4 in A, Italian

1. Allegro vivace
2. Andante con moto
3. Con moto moderato
4. Salterello: Presto

Composed: 1833

First Performed: 13 May 1833, London, Argyll Rooms, Regent Street, Philharmonic Society, cond. Mendelssohn

In November 1832, Mendelssohn received a commission from the London Philharmonic Society to compose 'a symphony, an overture and a vocal piece' for a fee of one hundred guineas – quite a reasonable sum in those days. He had already begun work on a symphony (soon to become known as the 'Italian') but it was causing him a lot of trouble, and he had expressed serious misgivings about it - rather surprising, since the 'Italian' Symphony has remained one of Mendelssohn's most enduringly popular and acclaimed pieces. It's so full of vitality and freshness that you imagine it writing itself – a sign of how well Mendelssohn's artistry conceals the pains it cost him.

Mendelssohn had undertaken a tour of Italy in 1830-1, taking in Venice, Milan, Rome and Naples. He enjoyed the landscapes, but the architectural glories of classical antiquity bored him: 'the sea lay between the islands, and the rocks, covered with vegetation, bent over it then just as they do now. These are the antiquities that interest me and are much more suggestive than crumbling masonry.' He was impressed by the funeral ceremonies for the recently deceased Pope Pius VIII, but the solemn Gregorian chant left him cold. But the dancing exuberance of the symphony's first movement readily conjures up images of sunlit carnival celebrations, and the remarkable Andante – a shadowy processional with hymn-like figures floating above a continuous bass tread – surely echoes those atmospheric Papal funeral rites. The sun returns in the elegant, minuet-like third movement, then the title of the finale, 'Salterello', invokes the wild, 'leaping' Italian folk-dance, like the better known 'tarantella'. Unusually it remains in the dark minor key throughout – though a more joyous use of the minor mode is hard to imagine.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-91): Oboe Concerto in C major, K 314

1. Allegro aperto
2. Adagio non troppo
3. Rondo: Allegretto

Composed: 1777

First Performed: ?1777, Guiseppe Ferlendis (oboe)?

For years it was known that Mozart had written an oboe concerto, for the Italian composer and oboist Guiseppe Ferlendis, who Mozart knew during his early years at the court of Salzburg. But the manuscript was lost, and it was never printed. We have the Austrian musicologist Bernhard Paumgartner to thank for its rediscovery, when he found a set of parts in the Salzburg archives and was able to reconstruct a score from them. The music was known though – in a sense, as Mozart had rearranged the concerto for flute to fulfil a commission for a concerto for the Dutch flautist Ferdinand Dejean. But in adapting it for the flute, Mozart made extensive changes to suit the solo part to the new instrument. So the discovery of the original was warmly welcomed, especially by oboists, who aren't exactly spoilt for great concertos.

Mozart would have been greatly relieved. The arrangement for Dejean was made under pressure, after Mozart had already written three flute quartets and another flute concerto, and he was beginning to take against the instrument: 'You know that I become quite powerless whenever I am obliged to write for an instrument which I cannot bear', he wrote to his father. It must have been the mood of a moment, because Mozart continued to write beautifully for the flute right through his career. But the oboe version is more appealing, bringing out the instrument's biting wit and its more piercing lyricism. Best of all is the finale, full of chuckling wit one moment,

springing sly surprises the next. It was quite a hit in Mozart's lifetime. It's good to have it back.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937): Pavane pour une infante défunte

Composed: 1899 (solo piano version)

First Performed: 5 April 1902, Paris, Ravel (piano). Orchestral version published 1910

The full title of Ravel's famous Pavane translates as 'Pavane for a dead princess' – a pavane being a popular slow dance at the old Imperial Spanish court. Ravel insisted later that he'd only used the title because he liked its tongue-twisting sound. But this intensely private composer was rather fond of making self-distancing remarks, and whatever he may have said in public, there is a strange, haunting sadness behind the elegant, exquisite mask in this music. It could easily be an elegy, though Ravel warned against taking it too slowly: 'It's the princess that's dead, not the pavane.'

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963): Sinfonietta

1. Allegro con fuoco
2. Molto vivace
3. Andante cantabile
4. Très vite e très gai

Composed: 1947

First Performed: 24 October 1948, London, Philharmonia Orchestra, cond. Roger Désormière

Ask Francis Poulenc if he'd ever thought of writing a symphony and he'd probably have responded with a mischievous titter. The heroics and soul-bearing of Beethoven and Mahler were definitely not for him, and if he ever invoked the classical or romantic 'Grand Manner' it was invariably to send it up, however affectionately as in the glorious mock-baroque Organ Concerto. But there is one work that does approach symphonic form, however obliquely, the Sinfonietta. Imagine Haydn, the charming wit and brilliant prankster of the Classical Era, had been reborn in the Twentieth Century, that the popular music he encountered was in the Parisian night clubs and music halls, and imagine him striking up a friendship with those master ironists Igor Stravinsky and Sergei Prokofiev. Then imagine pouring all of that into something in the spirit of one of his lighter, more playful symphonies – the result would probably be a lot like Poulenc's Sinfonietta.

It isn't all impish humour though. There's atmospheric magic, especially in the rapid second movement. And, like his countryman Ravel, Poulenc could sometimes allow the mask to slip a bit, revealing a more melancholic side – there are hints of that in the Andante cantabile. But the finale is the most Haydnish of all – full of surprises, expectations set up only to have the rug twitched out from under the feet the next moment. Pure joy is a relatively rare commodity in twentieth century music, especially in the years after the Second World War, when the Sinfonietta was written, but it's here in elegant Gallic spadefuls.