

**Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra**  
**June 5 programme complementary content**

There's nothing the human voice can't do. In Mahler's Fourth Symphony, it paints a picture of heaven at the end of a journey through blue skies, summer storms and shining mountain peaks. Meanwhile Grace-Evangeline Mason's exciting new piece has been created especially for our soloist Sophie Bevan, a soprano with a voice of pure gold. Strauss' *Don Juan* kicks things off in truly swashbuckling style.

**Ryan Wigglesworth** *conductor*

[Ryan Wigglesworth](#), who took up his position as Chief Conductor of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra in September 2022, has established himself as one of the foremost composer-conductors of his generation. He was Principal Guest Conductor of the Hallé from 2015-18 and Composer in Residence at English National Opera. He held the Daniel R Lewis Composer Fellowship with the Cleveland Orchestra for two seasons from 2013-15 and was Composer in Residence at the Grafenegg Festival. In close partnership with the Royal Academy of Music, he founded the Knussen Chamber Orchestra which made both its Aldeburgh Festival and BBC Proms debuts in 2019.

Recent concerts include the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, Finnish Radio Symphony, DSO Berlin, Bergen Philharmonic, Swedish Radio Symphony, Tokyo, Seattle, Melbourne and Lahti Symphony, London Symphony, CBSO, London Philharmonic, Philharmonia, and BBC Symphony. He conducted the UK premiere of Kurtág's opera *Endgame* at the 2023 Proms and returned to the Proms and Aldeburgh Festival in 2024, as well as opening the 2024 Edinburgh International Festival.

Also a pianist, recent play/direct projects have included concertos by Mozart and Beethoven, and he regularly appears in recital with Mark Padmore, Lawrence Power and Sophie Bevan.

One of the leading composers of his day, his first opera [\*The Winter's Tale\*](#) premiered at the ENO in February 2017 in a production directed by Rory Kinnear and conducted by the composer. Other works include commissions for the Royal Concertgebouw and Cleveland orchestras, BBC Symphony, and song cycles for Sophie Bevan and Mark Padmore.

Recent and current projects include a song cycle for Roderick Williams, a piano concerto for Mark-André Hamelin, and *Magnificat* for soprano, chorus and orchestra, commissioned by the Bergen Philharmonic and the Hallé.

Born in Yorkshire, Wigglesworth studied at New College Oxford and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Between 2007-9 he was a lecturer at Cambridge where he was also a Fellow of Corpus Christi. In January 2019 he took up the position of Sir Richard Rodney Bennett Professor at the Royal Academy of Music.

**Sophie Bevan** *MBE soprano*

Recognised as one of the leading lyric sopranos of her generation, [Sophie Bevan](#) studied at the [Royal College of Music](#) where she was awarded the Queen Mother Rose Bowl for excellence in performance. She was the recipient of the 2010 Critics' Circle Award for Exceptional Young Talent, *The Times* Breakthrough Award at the 2012 South Bank Sky Arts Awards, Young Singer Award at the 2013 inaugural International Opera Awards, and was made an MBE for services to music in the Queen's Birthday Honours in 2019.

She performs worldwide and with conductors including Sir Antonio Pappano, Daniel Harding, Laurence Cummings, Sir Mark Elder and Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla. Recent and future highlights include *Ah! Perfido*, *The Seasons*, Knussen Whitman settings and Ryan Wigglesworth's *Augenlieder* all with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, Strauss' *Four Last Songs* with the Philharmonia, Aurora Orchestra and Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Handel's *Alexander's Feast* with The King's Consort, *St Matthew Passion* at the Royal Festival Hall, *Messiah* with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* and Handel's *Saul* at the Edinburgh Festival, as well as concerts with the London Philharmonic, Bergen Philharmonic, BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, Scottish Chamber Orchestra and the Royal Concertgebouw.

An acclaimed recitalist, she has appeared with pianists including Julius Drake, Malcolm Martineau, Ryan Wigglesworth, Christopher Glynn and Graham Johnson at venues including Aldeburgh Festival, Oxford Lieder Festival, and Wigmore Hall.

In opera, recent and future engagements include Ilia in *Idomeneo*, Sophie in *Der Rosenkavalier*, Susanna in *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Festen* at the Royal Opera House, Ellen Orford in *Peter Grimes* for the Teatro dell'Opera in Rome, Témaire in *Castor and Pollux* and one of the lead sopranos in *The Seven Deaths of Maria Callas* for ENO, Freia in *Das Rheingold* at Teatro Real, and Governess in *The Turn of the Screw* for Garsington Opera. She made her debut at Glyndebourne Festival Opera as Michal in *Saul* and at the Salzburg Festival and Metropolitan Opera as Beatriz in Thomas Adès' *The Exterminating Angel*.

### **Strauss *Don Juan***

The legend of the Spanish libertine and insatiable womaniser Don Juan has been an inspiration for artists, musicians and writers over several hundred years. In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, Restoration playwright and Poet Laureate [Thomas Shadwell](#) wrote *The Libertine* for the stage. A century later, Mozart captured Don Juan's exploits in *Don Giovanni*, while in the 1820s Byron immortalised him in epic verse. Sibelius turned to the Don for inspiration at the climax of his Second Symphony. And in 1948, [Errol Flynn](#) brought both swash and buckle to the Hollywood film *Adventures of Don Juan*.

In 1888, a young Richard Strauss sat down to write two tone poems. One, which wasn't completed until 1891, was *Macbeth*. And the second was based on a play titled *Don Juans Ende* which itself was based on an earlier, unfinished retelling of the legend by the Austrian poet Nikolaus Lenau.

Strauss' own personal life (he'd just fallen in love with the soprano Pauline de Ahna after a passionate affair with a married woman) may have also had some bearing on his choice of work, while shortly before he began composing it [he had also conducted](#) a performance of *Don Giovanni* in Munich. While the work opens with a bang, and has enough swagger to satisfy a Hollywood director, Lenau's *Don Juan* is less a skirt-chasing scoundrel and more a romantic dreamer looking for real love.

Strauss conducted the premiere in Weimar in 1889 where he was the kapellmeister, and while this vivid crowd-pleaser was wildly popular with some, and would become recognised as one of his masterpieces, not everyone was so enamoured. The influential Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick was particularly sniffy, describing it as 'a [flailing tonal orgy](#)'. Still, its composer returned to it throughout his long career.

Listen to an excerpt of [Don Juan](#) played by the Berlin Philharmoniker under Gustavo Dudamel.

## **Grace-Evangeline Mason** *The Hart* (world premiere)

The white stag has a place in mythology as a messenger or a bringer of change. But it appears other, rather less mythical members of the deer family are not so much a portent and more of a pain – for **Grace-Evangeline Mason's** other half at least. “I’ve just moved to the countryside, and we have deer who come into the garden,” she reveals. “It annoys my partner because they tend to eat all the flowers!” However, it turns out that, ruminants ravaging the roses aside, deer are the composer’s favourite animals. And she’s putting their mythical cousin centre stage in *The Hart*, a new song cycle for soprano and orchestra receiving its premiere in this concert.

The commission came in the wake of the premiere of Grace’s acclaimed tone poem *[The Imagined Forest](#)* by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra at the BBC Proms in 2021. “The starting point for *The Hart* was the themes of Liverpool Philharmonic’s recent concert programming,” she explains. “Two years ago, it was folktales, and last year it was love. And I find those themes a natural point for me to work with anyway.”

Immersing herself in folktales and folklore, she became aware of the recurring appearance of a rare and elusive white stag figure which was seen as an unworldly messenger or a sign of hope or danger. “And so I thought I’d try and recreate, a retelling basically, one of these folktales through setting different texts in the song cycle,” she says. “The piece should have a very loose narrative. Obviously, it’s quite an impressionistic version of the narrative, but that’s the overarching idea.”

*The Hart* is composed with poems by the late American lyric poet Sara Teasdale and Oscar Wilde forming movements which are linked by new text written by the composer herself. It opens with what she describes as “an atmospheric, pensive sound world” as a setting for Teasdale’s poem *Late October*, although the movement is titled *If I Had Gone Before* after a line in the poem. The second movement – *And Suddenly, I Am in the Woods Again* – is based on Grace’s own verse, and *Out of the Mid-wood’s Twilight* is based on Oscar Wilde’s whimsical poem *In The Forest*.

There is always a narrative underpinning Grace’s work but usually the text on which it is set remains in the background of an orchestral piece. Here in the song cycle it is given its moment in the spotlight. “I’ve always loved writing for voice and orchestra, for me it’s a sort of dream instrumentation,” Grace says. One of her earliest works was *Convergence* – a piece for soprano, violin and cello which won the then 19-year-old the BBC Proms Inspire Young Composers’ competition.

When she considered what voice type should tell the story in *The Hart*, she was immediately drawn to the soprano’s range, and Sophie Bevan was suggested. “I thought she’d be a good person to tell the story,” Grace says. “I listened to a lot of recordings of her to try and get her voice in my mind while writing it. I also talked with her about her voice and her preferences, as well as the points in her range that she thinks are most suitable for different things. I didn’t start writing it until I’d had those conversations. But after that she left me to it, which is good because it gives me time to think about it before showing it to her as well. I find it difficult to show people works in progress. I think the way it worked out has been great.”

*The Hart* is the latest of several commissions which have come from Liverpool Philharmonic, with the relationship with the Orchestra dating back eight years to when Grace won the Christopher Brooks Competition Prize (now the Rushworth Composition Prize). The same year she composed *Pale Fires*, a chamber piece inspired by Timon of Athens and premiered by Ensemble 10:10, following it with *[Upon Weightless Wings](#)* for the contemporary music group’s 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

Along with *The Imagined Forest*, her other Liverpool commissions have included Mahler’s *Letters* for the Choir and *In Her Own Valley*, inspired by Liverpool-born *[Hannah Lightbody](#)* (a

significant figure in the Industrial Revolution), which was premiered by Liverpool Philharmonic Youth and Children's Choirs. "The Phil has played an extremely beneficial role in my career, it's shaped who I am musically as well in really large ways," Grace says. "I'm very, very happy to work with them again on this piece. I really, really love Liverpool, it's so friendly and I like just being there. And I think a lot of people feel that way." Constantly meeting and working with new people, she adds, can make it difficult to "easily cultivate long-term partnerships. But with Liverpool I feel they've given me the chance to have that relationship and so it's one of the best, if not the best, musical partnerships that I've had so far."

Meanwhile *The Hart* comes in the middle of a busy and prolific time for the composer. Works like *The Imagined Forest* are receiving increasing numbers of performances at home and abroad (there's a Danish premiere in October), and new commissions include an as-yet untitled work for Jonathan Heyward and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra which is due to be premiered next March.

Watch a vlog from [behind-the-scenes](#) of the premiere of Grace-Evangeline Mason's *The Imagined Forest*.

### **Mahler *Symphony No.4***

In the 1960s the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra was the first English orchestra to perform the Mahler cycle, under the baton of principal conductor Sir Charles Groves. When, in 1964, the Orchestra played the Eighth Symphony at the Proms, it was met with a 15-minute ovation. The Orchestra returned to [Mahler](#) in earnest in 2011, with Vasily Petrenko, once again performing the entire cycle of symphonies. And the Austrian composer's symphonic repertoire has become a firm fixture – and firm favourite – on programmes since.

In the summer of 1899, the 38-year-old Mahler embarked on not one but two holidays. The first was to Laussa, west of Vienna and south of Linz, with his younger sister Justine and close friend and confidant, the violist [Natalie Bauer-Lechner](#). And then on July 1, from there the trio – joined by Justine's husband Arnold Josef Rose – travelled on to [Villa Kerry](#), perched high above the lakeside spa town of Altaussee, for a month's stay.

It was at Altaussee that Mahler celebrated his 39<sup>th</sup> birthday and also that he embarked on a burst of creativity – composing a Wunderhorn-Lied and the first two movements of what became his [Fourth Symphony](#), along with sketching the variations of the Adagio third. With work as a conductor in Vienna taking up most of his time, it wasn't until his summer holiday in 1900 – this time taken at Maiernigg – that he completed the full six-movement score.

Although Strauss had expressed an interest in taking the baton, the symphony was given its first performance in Munich on November 25, 1901, with its own composer conducting.

Watch the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra play Mahler's [Symphony No.4](#).

**Did you know? Mahler first met his future wife Alma Schindler in 1901. But two years before that she had also been in Altaussee at the same time as the composer and had declined to be introduced because – she later explained – she loved and admired Mahler as an artist and didn't want to lose her illusions of him by meeting.**

## About the Music

### **Richard Strauss (1864-1949): Don Juan ('Tone Poem after Nicolaus Lenau'), op 20**

Composed: 1888

First Performed: 11 November 1889, Weimar, Court Theatre, Weimar Opera Orchestra cond. Strauss

'The orchestra huffed and puffed but did its job famously. One of the horn players sat there out of breath, sweat pouring from his brow, asking "Good God, in what way have we sinned that you should have sent us this scourge!" We laughed till we cried!'

That's Richard Strauss, reporting gleefully on rehearsals for his new tone poem, *Don Juan*. His delight was justified. The premiere was a huge success – the kind of thing of which most young composers can only dream. Suddenly critics and musicians were talking about the twenty-five-year-old Richard Strauss as the most important German composer since Wagner.

It's easy to sum up the message of *Don Juan* as an expression of a young man's testosterone-fuelled ardour – a young man whose tempestuous love affairs were beginning to cause his parents some concern. But Strauss had a more serious point in mind. The key to this is found in the three extracts from the poem 'Don Juan', by Nicolaus Lenau (1802-50), Strauss chose to head the score. The first tells of 'the enchanted circle, the immeasurable horizon of countless charming, beautiful women', whom Don Juan conquers in a 'storm of pleasure' – Strauss captures this brilliantly. The next extract however shows that Don Juan's relentless pursuits mask an inner anxiety: 'I fly from weariness and waning of joy'. Finally comes the moment when the 'beautiful storm' dies out: 'And suddenly the world to me is empty, deranged, nothing – the oil is burnt out, and the hearth is cold and dark'. Somehow, Strauss' music makes us feel that this is the only possible outcome. The adventures may be thrilling, but the eerily desolate ending – that's the real truth.

### **Grace-Evangeline Mason (b. 1994) The Hart, for soprano and orchestra (world premiere)**

Composed: 2025

Like Gustav Mahler, Grace-Evangeline Mason finds a rich vein of inspiration in nature and folklore. The theme of these songs is the ancient, mysterious image of the white hart, a beautiful but elusive presence in folk legends all over Europe. It often seems to be some kind of messenger from another world – but what kind of message does it bring? Hope, perhaps, but at the same time there is something poignantly fragile about it. Could it be too innocent, too pure for our strife-torn world?

Mason has brought together poems by Oscar Wilde, the American poet Sara Teasdale and herself. The unifying theme is that of a wanderer, with no sense of direction, recalling an encounter with the white hart. Can she find it in the forest once again? There is one more glimpse, after which the birds 'ease their hearts of joy for miles around' as the sun sets, and the singer, hope rekindled, joins with them.

### **Gustav Mahler (1860-1911): Symphony No 4**

1. Bedächtig. Nicht eilen [Deliberate. Don't hurry]
2. In gemächlicher Bewegung. Ohne Hast [At a leisurely pace. Without haste]
3. Ruhig [Restful]
4. Sehr behaglich [Very cosy]

Composed: 1899-1900

First Performed: 25 November 1901, Munich, cond. Mahler

Mahler's Fourth – it's easy to come away with the impression that this is his sunniest, least complicated and most accessible symphony. The fact that it's also his shortest certainly helped it gain popularity in the years following Mahler's death, and the relative smallness of the orchestra made it much more enticing for cash-conscious concert-planners. But for Mahler himself there were deep emotional complexities in this music. At the beginning, he said, he saw it as a kind of 'humoresque' – a light-hearted, whimsical diversion. But then, to his surprise, it had turned into something quite different, 'just as in a dream one imagines oneself wandering through the flower-scented garden of Elysium and it suddenly changes into a nightmare, and we find ourselves in a Hades full of terrors'.

This may seem a bit startling, even to people who know the symphony. So much of this music seems to evoke idyllic images of childhood: the sleigh-bells and Mozartian play-elegance of the opening, the flutes' evocation of children's pipes later on, then finally the portrayal, led by a soprano soloist, of a child's idea of Heaven that, with daring originality, rounds off the whole symphony.

But there are shadows here, not least in the eerie second movement, where a solo violin, tuned up a tone (to sound more 'highly strung'), leads us on a kind of trance-like dance journey through haunted territory. Mahler revealed that he was thinking of a sinister, death-like violinist from German folk legend: Freund Hain ('Friend Harry'). The slow movement too is complex in mood, apparently serene and happy, but undercut by elegiac sadness, and a moment of genuine anguish. As for that 'Heavenly' song in the finale, here are troubling images here too – the evocation of 'the butcher Herod', the pitiful animal cries as those innocents are led to the slaughter. At the end, as the child falls asleep, is this sweetly peaceful, or is the harp's low bell-like tolling faintly sinister? As always with Mahler, there are no easy answers.