

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra in Barrow January 15 programme note

Geysir – Iceland’s most famous erupting volcanic spring – is truly a force of nature. And you could say the same for Liverpool Philharmonic’s Artist in Residence, composer and clarinettist Mark Simpson. Today, he leads an all-star wind ensemble in a programme that features an unstoppable blast of supercharged musical energy and ends with the single greatest piece ever written for wind ensemble.

Mark Simpson

In 2006, the 17-year-old [Mark Simpson](#) won BBC Young Musician of the Year with a superb clarinet performance, then went on to take the BBC Proms/Guardian Young Composer of the Year accolade. Still, he remains the only person to do ‘the double’.

In the past two decades, the Liverpool-born composer and clarinettist has gone on to forge successful parallel careers, establishing himself as a major figure in the contemporary music world. As a clarinettist, he appears in venues worldwide both as a concert soloist and chamber musician. He made his Wigmore Hall debut at 17, and in 2019 he performed the world premiere of his own [Clarinet Concerto](#) in Manchester. Simpson also enjoys a busy and high-profile composing career, writing music for stage, orchestra, voices and chamber forces.

His tone poem *A mirror-fragment* was composed for the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra in 2008, and in 2011, the Orchestra’s contemporary music group (Ensemble 10:10) gave the world premiere of his work [Straw Dogs](#). The following year [sparks](#) – described as an ‘orchestral firecracker’ – was premiered at the Last Night of the Proms at the Royal Albert Hall. In 2016, Simpson was presented with a South Bank Sky Arts Award for Classical Music for his oratorio *The Immortal*, a ‘blazingly original’ piece informed by Victorian occultism. In the same year, his opera *Pleasure* was staged at the Liverpool Playhouse.

A former member of Liverpool Philharmonic Youth Orchestra, Simpson went on to study at the Royal Northern College of Music, and from there gained a first in music at Oxford before studying composition at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

Wind Soloists of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

The award-winning [Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra](#) is the UK’s oldest continuing professional symphony orchestra. The origins of the Orchestra’s concert series date back to the formation of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic by a group of Liverpool music lovers in 1840.

The Orchestra is central to Liverpool’s cultural offering, being the largest music organisation and one of the largest artistic organisations in the city. It gives more than 100 concerts each season in its home, Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, as well as concerts in venues across the region. Liverpool Philharmonic proudly supports new music and has premiered and commissioned more than 300 works in the last 20 years.

Mark Simpson *Geysir*

Liverpool composer Mark Simpson’s *Geysir* (the Icelandic word for geyser) dates from 2013 and was conceived as a partner to Mozart’s *Serenade No.10 in B flat* – better known as the *Gran Partita*. A commission from the Britten Sinfonia, [the work](#) for 12 wind instruments and double bass was premiered in Cambridge in February 2014 with Simpson conducting. Initially, the

composer considered dividing the wind instruments into two symmetrical sextets with the double bass at the centre. But after abandoning that idea, he concentrated instead on magnifying two specific parts of Mozart's original – what he describes as the work's 'glorious' opening chord, and later the 'bubbling' clarinets which appear in its sixth movement.

The volcanic title is expressed in different ways through the music. For example, listen out for sudden outbursts from pairs of clarinets and oboes within a mournful melody played by French and basset horns, bassoons and double bass, while Simpson crafts the image of shifting tectonic plates through a series of uneven rhythms. It all comes to a bubbling, boiling climax as an oboe erupts from the top of a long musical rise before the piece subsides once again.

Did you know? A member of the clarinet family, the basset horn originated in Germany in the 1760s and was originally curved in shape. Mozart often used the basset horn in his works, including *The Magic Flute* and *Requiem*.

Simon Holt *Amistad No.2 for basset clarinet and bassoon*

Simon Holt creates music that speaks with extraordinary power – soundscapes that are innately dramatic and impulsive. Over the years, his output has been incredibly diverse, writing chamber music and concertos, as well as songs, opera and piano music. He was Composer in Association for the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, was celebrated as a featured composer at the 2018 Aldeburgh Festival and is currently Professor of Composition at the Royal College of Music.

Born in Bolton, he grew up playing the organ and piano before studying composition at the Royal Northern College of Music. After graduating in 1982, he worked on music for the London Sinfonietta, going on to receive commissions and collaboration requests from ensembles across the world. He has written several orchestral pieces – for the BBC Philharmonic, BBC Symphony Orchestra and the Berliner Philharmoniker to name a few – and seen his work performed at the BBC Proms. Holt has worked with Mark Simpson on a number of projects, and *Amistad* is indeed dedicated to the clarinet player.

Amistad, which takes its title from the Spanish word for friendship, is a set of three pieces originally written for two flutes. Each piece relates to a syllable in the word a-mi-stad, with the second movement beginning on the note E (-mi-). Later, Holt returned to the work, this time arranging each piece for a different combination of instruments. *Amistad No.2* became a piece for basset clarinet and bassoon.

Gary Carpenter *Pantomime for 13 Winds*

Born in London but based in Merseyside for many years, composer Gary Carpenter studied composition at the Royal College of Music. He has since enjoyed a prolific career across a range of musical genres.

Alongside his classical compositions for orchestras and ensembles, he has also worked as a musical director/orchestrator in film (notably on the 1973 cult classic *The Wicker Man* and also *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*), as well as writing six operas, musicals (including *Goodnight Mr Tom* and *The Streets of London*), ballets and a radio music-drama *The One Alone* with Iris Murdoch. He received a 2006 British Composer Award for his *Azaleas* for harp trio. Carpenter's work has been played by many of the world's leading orchestras, and he has enjoyed a particularly long and fruitful association with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, for whom he was a Composer in Residence in 2018-19. He currently holds a Professorship at the [Royal Northern College of Music](#).

Although this piece is called *Pantomime for 13 Winds*, that's something of a misnomer as – like Mozart's *Gran Partita* – Carpenter actually scored the work for 12 wind instruments and double bass. A different scoring, dubbed the 'Prague' version, replaces the double bass with contra-bassoon. Carpenter explains of the piece: "Much of the material of *Pantomime* is derived from the music I wrote for the Unicorn Children's Theatre 1994/95 Christmas musical play *Aladdin*... This little divertimento, like the original show, attempts to invoke the shadowy and half-forgotten world of smoky music halls, Vaudeville, Burlesque and their later, often televisual, incarnations."

The work opens with a jaunty *Prologue* evoking the hustle and bustle of a mythical Far Eastern marketplace. Its second movement is a *Cavatina and Polka*, with the former sung by Aladdin as he sits trapped in a cave, and which dissolves into a dance as the pantomime's hero discovers a (magic) lamp. The work concludes with a hypnotic *Dream Calypso*, and a final *Farewell* as Aladdin, corrupted by the power the lamp affords him, rejects his love the Princess.

Enjoy the ['Prague' version](#) of Gary Carpenter's *Pantomime for 13 Winds*.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart *Gran Partita*

Its formal title is *Serenade No.10 for winds in B-flat major* – but Mozart's masterpiece is better known by its nickname the *Gran Partita*, which translates as 'big wind symphony'. [Mozart](#) is believed to have composed his grand work in 1781, which was a pivotal year for the young Austrian. He finally left the court of the Archbishop of Salzburg after a real breakdown in their employer-employee relationship and, weathering his father Leopold's displeasure, he went freelance and headed for the bright lights of Vienna where he quickly gained a reputation as a keyboard genius. It was also where, the following year, he married Constanze Weber. It's been suggested by some that the *Gran Partita* may have been composed to mark their nuptials.

Whatever its origin story, the *Gran Partita* has become recognised as one of Mozart's most exquisite, emotional and elegant works. It is formed of seven movements and among the 13 instruments it is scored for, is a 'wind octet' featuring pairs of clarinets, oboes, bassoons and horns – a popular combination of the day.

The *Gran Partita* was immortalised in the 1984 film *Amadeus*, with Antonio Salieri's first encounter with Mozart being at a performance of the piece. F Murray Abraham, as the tortured composer and conductor, waxes lyrical about its [angelic beauty](#) describing how "it seemed to me that I was hearing the voice of God."

Listen to Mozart's [Gran Partita](#).