

Welcome to the 2026 BBC Proms



A very warm welcome to the BBC Proms at the Royal Albert Hall. This summer we are hosting over 70 Proms here in London – in this, the BBC's 99th year as custodian of the festival. In addition, many Proms take place in other venues across the UK: from

Middlesbrough Town Hall to Theatr Clwyd in Mold via Bristol Beacon, Gateshead's The Glasshouse and Sunderland's The Fire Station. And at every concert we aim to hold true to the founding vision of the Proms: namely, to bring the greatest music to the widest possible audience.

This season's international highlights include debut Proms performances from The Met Orchestra of New York and the Spanish National Orchestra, and a return for the LA Philharmonic after nearly a quarter of a century. Our own BBC ensembles bring us a typically eclectic offering: everything from large-scale performances of works by Mahler, Beethoven and Richard Strauss, to a Horrible Science Prom for families and an orchestral celebration of prog rock.

There are morning Proms for fans of brass band and organ repertoire; Late Night offerings featuring music by composers as varied as John Dowland and Paul Simon; and a vast array of premieres and debuts. And, with every Prom broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and Sounds, and 27 Proms programmes on BBC TV and iPlayer, there's a wealth of outstanding music to enjoy at your leisure. I wish you a wonderful summer of musical discovery.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink.

Sam Jackson
Controller, BBC Radio 3 and BBC Proms

Tonight at the Proms

From the spacious serenity of Vaughan Williams to a brand-new voice in British music, tonight's Prom explores over a century of English orchestral imagination.

Andrew Manze and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra frame the evening with Vaughan Williams: first the luminous, antiphonal strings of the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, then the enigmatic Ninth Symphony, the composer's haunting final statement. Between them comes the Violin Concerto by Benjamin Britten (the 50th anniversary of whose death we have been marking this year), written as Europe edged towards war and combining fierce virtuosity with an unmistakable undertow of anxiety and lament. Dutch violinist Simone Lamsma makes her Proms debut as soloist. The present day enters with the world premiere of Carmel Smickersgill's *A Brick Thrown with Love*, a BBC co-commission reflecting on resilience in the face of tragedy.

Across four strikingly individual works, pastoral beauty repeatedly meets darker experience, while tradition becomes the starting point for something searching, urgent and new.



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Please do not take photos, or record any audio or video during the performance.

Friday 4 September

7pm–c9.15pm

Vaughan Williams's 'Fantasia' and Symphony No. 9



Ralph Vaughan Williams Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis 15'

Benjamin Britten Violin Concerto 31'

INTERVAL: 20 minutes

Carmel Smickersgill A Brick Thrown with Love *BBC co-commission: world premiere* c14'

Ralph Vaughan Williams Symphony No. 9 in E minor 33'

Simone Lamsma *violin*

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra Thelma Handy *leader*

Andrew Manze *conductor*

RADIO 3 SOUNDS

This concert is broadcast live on BBC Radio 3. Listen on BBC Sounds.

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS (1872–1958)

Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis (1910, rev. 1919)

The sound of the string orchestra has often brought out the best in English composers. Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro*, Britten's *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* and Tippett's *Concerto for Double String Orchestra* and *Fantasia concertante on a Theme of Corelli* are among the high points of the British orchestral repertoire. Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* is perhaps the finest of them all. It is so well known and loved today that it's hard to imagine a time when it could have been found 'difficult' or 'modernist'. But at the first performance, in Gloucester Cathedral as part of the 1910 Three Choirs Festival, the music seems to have baffled most of its audience. The organist of the Cathedral, Herbert Brewer, described its composer (then in his late thirties) as 'a queer, mad fellow from Chelsea'. But, for the young composers Herbert Howells and Ivor Gurney, the 'Tallis' Fantasia was a revelation – a pointer to a new path, leading away from the German Romantic models followed by Elgar and his generation.

What was it about the 'Tallis' Fantasia that was so new? Granted, Vaughan Williams wasn't the first British composer to look to the music of the Elizabethan period for inspiration. But what Vaughan Williams finds in his chosen theme – Thomas Tallis's psalm tune 'Why fumeth in fight' – is more than quaint olde-worlde colouring. Tallis's tune follows the old church Phrygian mode (imagine a scale of E on the keyboard using only

the white notes), and there are strikingly abrupt major–minor contrasts. These elements are reflected again and again in the themes and harmonies of Vaughan Williams's 'Tallis' Fantasia. There is also the division of the string orchestra into three contrasting 'choirs': a string quartet, an ensemble of 10 string instruments and a larger string ensemble. Modern listeners may hear echoes of Tallis's atmospheric use of separately placed groups of singers in his great choral motet *Spem in alium* for eight five-part choirs.

But, while the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* partly evokes the music of the English Renaissance, and through it the spirit of the so-called 'Age of Faith', there is also something about it that marks it out as a product of the modern age. Tallis's theme isn't presented right away in its original form. To begin, we have five hushed chords for full strings, the first of which has a luminous, serene quality that, once heard, is hard to forget. As this vision fades, there is an echo of Vaughan Williams's cantata *Toward the Unknown Region* (1904–6), a work about the soul's final journey in death. Then Tallis's theme emerges slowly, in fragments, as though from the shadows. As the *Fantasia* builds to its magnificent climax there is a growing sense of restlessness, of impassioned searching, as though the music were striving to recapture the fleeting, ethereal vision from the very beginning. The end does bring a kind of resolution but the luminous, serene opening chord never quite returns in its original form.

A friend once half-jokingly described Vaughan Williams as 'The Christian Agnostic'. There is an important truth in that jest. Vaughan Williams knew there was some

Gloucester's magnificent cathedral, the venue for the first performance of Vaughan Williams's 'Tallis' Fantasia in 1910, which proved revelatory for young composers in attendance such as Herbert Howells and Ivor Gurney



T. M. O. Travel/alamy

kind of spiritual truth in age-old faith, and there are moments where the 'Tallis' Fantasia seems poised on the threshold of a similar insight. But there was also plenty of room in Vaughan Williams's mind for 20th-century doubt. Both sides find expression in his music, but never with greater power and subtlety than in the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*.

Programme note © Stephen Johnson

Stephen Johnson is the author of books on Bruckner, Wagner, Mahler and Shostakovich, and is a regular contributor to *BBC Music Magazine*. For 14 years he was a presenter of BBC Radio 3's *Discovering Music*. He now works both as a freelance writer and as a composer.

Previously at the Proms

Proms founder-conductor Henry Wood invited Vaughan Williams himself to conduct the Proms premiere of the 'Tallis' *Fantasia*, which was given in 1921 by the New Queen's Hall Orchestra. 'A beautiful work with a flavour of old modal scales,' observed *The London Daily Chronicle*, approvingly.

Vaughan Williams returned to conduct the *Fantasia* again in 1934, when (noted the newspaper *Truth*) 'a large audience received all the music with every mark of approbation'. And then, on 19 September 1958, Malcolm Sargent placed it at the beginning of that night's Prom to acknowledge the composer's Memorial Service, which had been held that day following his death on 26 August. Vaughan Williams had attended his last Prom just three weeks earlier, receiving the cheers of a packed audience for his Ninth Symphony.

Of course, many other conductors have directed the *Fantasia* at the Proms – everyone from Wood himself to Adrian Boult, John Barbirolli, Andrew Davis and (in 1974) André Previn. Tonight will be its 40th performance in these concerts, with conductors such as Donald Runnicles (2014), Vasily Petrenko (2021) and John Wilson (2022) carrying the flame into the 21st century.

© Richard Bratby

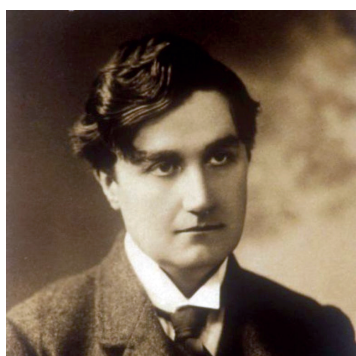
Richard Bratby is chief classical music critic of *The Spectator* and writes for *Gramophone* and *The Critic*. He has written histories of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Academy of Ancient Music and Longborough Opera.

Delve into Proms history for yourself by searching the online database of all Proms performances at bbc.co.uk/proms/archive.

“Throughout its course one is never quite sure whether one is listening to something very old or very new ... But that is just what makes this *Fantasia* so delightful to listen to; it cannot be assigned to a time or a school, but it is full of the visions which have haunted the seers of all times.”

Music critic J. A. Fuller Maitland reviewing the 1910 premiere of the 'Tallis' *Fantasia*

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS



Ralph Vaughan Williams was born in Down Ampney, Gloucestershire, the son of a clergyman and descended from the illustrious Darwin and Wedgwood families. He studied at the Royal College of Music under Hubert Parry and Charles Villiers Stanford, and

later at Trinity College, Cambridge.

His music is deeply rooted in English folk traditions. This interest is evident in works such as the first *Norfolk Rhapsody* (1905–6) and the *English Folk Song Suite* (1923), in which he used folk melodies to create a distinctly English musical voice. Although over his long career he continually reinvented himself, his style is generally characterised by modal harmonies, lush orchestration and a strong sense of lyricism and pastoralism.

One of his early major works, the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* (1910), showcases his ability to create rich, modal textures inspired by Renaissance music. It remains a cornerstone of the string orchestra repertoire, bringing together ancient and modern, and experimenting with contrasting string forces.

His nine symphonies form the backbone of his orchestral output, each reflecting different facets of his musical and philosophical outlook. *A London Symphony* (No. 2, 1911–13) captures the spirit and atmosphere of the city, while the *Pastoral Symphony* (No. 3, 1921) is a gently elegiac post-war lament, inspired in fact by the fields of France

during the First World War, although often assumed to take its cue from English pastoral scenery. His later symphonies, such as the *Sinfonia antartica* (1949–52) and the Ninth Symphony (1956–8), incorporate greater dissonance and more complex textures as he absorbed the musical developments of his younger colleagues and blended them with his own distinctive voice.

Vaughan Williams was also a master of choral and vocal music. *A Sea Symphony* (1903–9) and the powerful anti-war cantata *Dona nobis pacem* (1936), both setting words by Walt Whitman, highlight his skill in blending music with literary texts to create profound emotional narratives. His hymn tunes, including ‘For All the Saints’ and ‘Come Down, O Love Divine’, have become staples of Anglican worship.

He was influential as a dedicated folk-song collector, educator and advocate for British music, while as a teacher at the Royal College of Music he influenced a generation of composers. His work in editing *The English Hymnal* (1906) and *The Oxford Book of Carols* (1928) helped to revive and preserve English choral traditions.

Vaughan Williams’s legacy is marked by his deep connection to English musical traditions, his innovative compositions across various genres and his influential role in British music education. His works continue to resonate for their emotional depth, lyrical beauty and unique blending of folk and classical elements, securing his place as a pivotal figure in the history of classical music.

Profile © Kate Kennedy

Kate Kennedy is Associate Director of the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing and Weinrebe Fellow in Life-Writing at Wolfson College. She has published widely on the music and literature of the First World War, is a regular broadcaster and speaker, and has written a biography of the composer Ivor Gurney (2021).

BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913–76)

Violin Concerto, Op. 15

(1938–9, rev. 1950, 1954, 1965)

- 1 **Moderato con moto** –
- 2 **Vivace – Cadenza** –
- 3 **Passacaglia: Andante lento (un poco meno mosso)**

Simone Lamsma *violin*

Britten's Violin Concerto has an unusually vivid back story, straddling two continents and two wars, and emerging out of a period of dramatic change for its composer. In November 1938 Britten wrote to his publisher Ralph Hawkes from Snape, Suffolk, with news that he had begun the concerto. He completed a draft in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in June the following year, writing to Hawkes that it was 'without question my best piece' while adding, 'It is rather serious, I'm afraid – but it's got some tunes in it!' He completed the full score in September 1939 and wrote to his former partner Wulff Scherchen from upstate New York on the 29th, a few weeks after the outbreak of war in Europe, 'I am not at all sure how long I shall be allowed to stay here ... just completed the score of my Violin Concerto & pleased with it – because it is at times like these that work is so important – that humans can think of other things than blowing each other up!' Britten remained in the USA – with his new partner Peter Pears – until April 1942, having initially only intended to stay for around six months.

The concerto was premiered in March 1940, performed by the New York Philharmonic conducted by John Barbirolli

and with the Spanish violinist Antonio Brosa as soloist (Brosa only just made it, having been briefly detained at Ellis Island as a 'doubtful visitor'). The American critics loved it, one remarking – as US reviewers often did – on Britten's youthful appearance:

Mr Britten, a tall, gangling lad of 26, came out after the performance and bowed rather shyly and awkwardly. Frankly, he didn't look like the composer of his D minor concerto. But, then you never can tell in music.

Olin Downs, in *The New York Times*, admired the work's brilliance, substance and lack of conventional 'hoopla' in the finale.

Brosa had always been the intended first performer of the concerto. He and Britten had met through Britten's former composition teacher Frank Bridge, and had performed Britten's Suite, Op. 6, for violin and piano at the International Society for Contemporary Music in Barcelona a few years earlier when Spain had been on the brink of Civil War. It seems likely that the committedly pacifist Britten had conceived the Violin Concerto in part as a lament for those who died in the conflict. Powerfully atmospheric and elegiac, it is imbued with Spanish rhythms and forms.

...

The concerto is nominally in D minor, a key to which Britten seemed irresistibly drawn during his 'American' years: both D major and minor dominate the *Sinfonia da Requiem* (1939–40), while the String Quartet no. 1 (1941) is in D major. It opens with a rhythmic figure that could be militaristic or Spanish-influenced, or a combination of the two. After some teasing chromatic slides for the orchestra, the soloist enters with one of the tunes Britten promised his publisher. This dominates the first



Queen's Hall in Langham Place – the former home of the Proms, destroyed in the Blitz on 10 May 1941: Britten's Violin Concerto received its UK premiere there only a few weeks earlier

movement, initially lyrically, then in a slower version for orchestra while the soloist strums the violin like a guitar.

A hectic, slightly Shostakovich-like scherzo follows, culminating in a lengthy cadenza (solo passage) for the soloist that brings back the rhythm of the first movement. The finale is based around a solemn Passacaglia (a form of 'ground bass' or repeating bass line Britten often deployed, and which is Spanish in origin), introducing the sombre tones of the trombones for the first time. The movement is – for the main part – dramatically dark, making full use of the powerful Passacaglia theme and building to a huge orchestral climax. The last third, however, is a remarkably sustained passage of ambiguity, with the soloist unable to settle into either the major or minor key. Even in the final bar the violin's gradually disappearing trill leaves it unclear. It is a suitable ending to a concerto born out of such uncertainty.

Programme note © Lucy Walker

Lucy Walker is a musicologist and public speaker. She has written and spoken frequently about Britten, and is Public Engagement Associate for Britten Pears Arts throughout 2026.

Previously at the Proms

It's not always the music that makes the headlines at the Proms, and although it was pure bad luck that caused the Galician-born violinist Bronisław Gimpel to break a string early in the Proms premiere of Britten's Violin Concerto in 1952, it certainly made for good copy. 'The audience gasped,' reported *The Daily News*, 'but Gimpel calmly handed his violin to Paul Beard, leader of the BBC Symphony Orchestra. For nearly a minute Gimpel stood without a violin while Paul Beard changed chin-rests before handing over his violin. Sir Malcolm Sargent kept on conducting through the break, and Gimpel came in again on exactly the right note.'

Bad omen or masterly recovery? Certainly, performances of Britten's Concerto have not been frequent at the Proms (tonight's will be the 11th) and it waited 18 years (until 1970) for a second hearing. By 1975 it was in the hands of Proms veteran Ida Haendel (John Pritchard conducted the BBC Symphony Orchestra), and Haendel returned to the piece in 1987 (again with Pritchard) and in 1994, in front of an audience that included her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh, both well-documented admirers of Britten's work. Haendel had made her Proms debut in 1937; this would be her 66th and last appearance.

© Richard Bratby

MORE BRITTEN AT THE PROMS

SUNDAY 6 SEPTEMBER, 11am

Les illuminations; Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge

SUNDAY 6 SEPTEMBER, 7.30pm

The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra

SATURDAY 12 SEPTEMBER, 7.15pm

The National Anthem (arr. Britten)

For full Proms listings, and to book tickets, visit bbc.co.uk/proms.

BENJAMIN BRITTEN



Shortly after Britten died, his friend and fellow composer Michael Tippett wrote that he was ‘the most purely musical person I have ever met ... music sprang out of his fingers when he played the piano, as it did out of his mind when he composed.’ This tribute

captured Britten’s extraordinary facility: the seemingly effortless way he composed and his utterly instinctive musicianship. He was not only a prolific composer but an international recitalist, recording artist and co-founder and administrator of the Aldeburgh Festival.

It seems that a ‘purely musical’ life was the only option for Britten. He never considered another career, yet he was aided in his endeavours by a series of supportive and influential collaborators. Born in Lowestoft in 1913, ‘Benjie’, as he was sometimes known, began playing the piano and composing from the age of 5. At 14, with hundreds of compositions already under his belt, he was taken under the wing of Frank Bridge, who reined in the quantity and encouraged quality and discipline. He also opened Britten’s eyes to the life and demands of a professional musician.

Another key figure in Britten’s development was W. H. Auden, whom he encountered while serving an apprenticeship as ‘house composer’ for the General Post Office Film Unit. The two men collaborated intensively, but Auden was supplanted by the most significant person in Britten’s personal and professional life: the tenor Peter

Pears. From 1940 onwards, Pears became the principal inspiration behind Britten’s music, and the main reason for the vast number of vocal works in his catalogue.

Britten lived with Pears in Suffolk for over 30 years, necessarily discreetly for the most part, as homosexual relationships were illegal until 1967. Pears took the lead role in *Peter Grimes* (1945), Britten’s first major opera, which was a huge public success and initiated a remarkable run of some 15 stage works, most of which are regularly performed to this day. Many of these operas dramatise troubling emotional or physical conflicts; the music can be dark and unsettling. It can also be ravishingly beautiful. Britten’s chamber works often find him in a more soul-searching mood, while his orchestral pieces seem to release a more uninhibited side, from the wholesome exuberance of *The Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra* (1945) to the edgy muscularity of the *Cello Symphony* (1963).

In his later years, Britten was frail and prematurely aged after heart surgery, yet his creative spirit experienced a final, extraordinary surge. In the two years before his death he composed some of his most personal and profound works, including the *String Quartet No. 3*, with its callbacks to his last opera *Death in Venice*, and the viscerally powerful cantata *Phaedra*. He was created a life peer in 1976 and died, a few months later, in Pears’s arms.

Profile © Lucy Walker

INTERVAL: 20 MINUTES

Now playing on BBC Radio 3 ...

Author and broadcaster Kate Kennedy talks to Radio 3’s Ian Skelly about the life, values and complexities of Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Available on BBC Sounds



PROMS Q&A

Simone Lamsma violin

Britten's Violin Concerto has been a very important piece for you. What is your relationship with it?

This is a concerto that has become not just an important part of my repertoire but an important part of myself. Playing this music live and experiencing its immense power was a huge revelation to me from the moment I first experienced it live on stage with an orchestra, aged 18. It's music that leaves an imprint on the soul.

You won the 2004 Britten International Violin Competition with a performance of this piece. How significant was that?

That year was also the first time I discovered this concerto, and the impact it made on me was life-changing. I'd been grabbed in a similar way by Britten's String Quartet No. 3, which I played when I was 14. The emotional depth and meaning it brings is exceptional. I knew from the first time I played this concerto in public that it was a piece I wanted to share with as many people as possible.

In the past it seems to have been somewhat overlooked. Why do you think that is?

When I first started playing the piece, it wasn't played often at all. I honestly couldn't say why, as I feel it speaks very directly. But now I'm truly happy that violinists have taken it on, and that it's reaching more and more people. For me, it's perhaps the greatest violin concerto of the 20th century.

How would you describe its challenges for the soloist?

I think the piece's biggest challenge – but also its biggest asset – is its intensity of emotion. This is music that requires enormous focus and a certain state of mind and heart to communicate. It's very draining to play, physically and emotionally, and Britten really stretches your limits. But that makes for a truly rewarding experience.



Many listeners point to its perhaps inconclusive ending as its most emotionally intense point – would you agree?

You can't separate the immensely powerful ending from all that has gone before it. The power comes from the enormous build-up from the beginning to the end. When the piece reaches its conclusion, and in the silence afterwards, there's a sense of total devastation – but for me there's still always a slight glimmer of hope that comes through. The silence at the end is shattering and heartbreaking, but it's also the highlight of the whole piece, and a moment I treasure every time we reach it.

Has your perspective on the concerto changed over the years?

Overall, my perspective hasn't changed. But what has changed, of course, is my own life experience. It's inevitable – and, I think, wonderful and human – that you bring this into your playing on stage. Britten's Violin Concerto has been a companion to me throughout my life, and playing it has given me many unforgettable human and musical memories.

Interview by David Kettle

CARMEL SMICKERSGILL (born 1996)

A Brick Thrown with Love (2026)

BBC co-commission: world premiere

- 1 The Why
- 2 Construction, Compassion, Community, Consequence
- 3 The Voice that Says 'DO IT'

A Brick Thrown with Love explores the contrast between intention and action. In this case, the act is a socially disruptive one: a brick being thrown.

The piece is in three movements, each approaching the act from a different perspective. The opening movement, 'The Why', follows the journey of an idea – playful, naive, harmless – before gradually transforming into a warped and sinister version of itself. Ideas and ideologies can take on lives of their own. With enough momentum they can spiral into something far removed from their



A brick thrown during an anti-fascist demonstration in Dover, 30 January 2016; in the second movement of Carmel Smickersgil's new BBC commission the image of a brick thrown in anger is transformed into 'a symbol of collective effort and rebuilding'

Penelope Barritt/Alamy

origins. Individual instruments interact with the idea either with curiosity and playfulness or with malicious intent – distorting it, amplifying its most destructive elements and eventually manipulating the whole ensemble.

The middle movement, ‘Construction, Compassion, Community, Consequence’, takes the perspective of a community in the immediate aftermath of the violent act. It begins in hushed self-reflection before musical strands are drawn out and woven into regimented structures, like geometric scaffolding holding the feelings of the community together. With every iteration these structures become bigger, stronger, more optimistic. Once this totemic structure has been built, the community’s emotions pour out of it in a hot burst of elation, grief, love, exhaustion and a deep sense of care for each other. The titular brick is transformed from a weapon into a building material – a symbol of empathy, collective effort and rebuilding.

The final movement, ‘The Voice that Says “DO IT”’, takes the perspective of the person about to throw the brick. It’s unpredictable, adrenaline-laced and bubbling with chaotic enthusiasm. Among the colour and vigour of this movement are intimate, surreal moments of human fragility and playful nihilism.

Live music is inherently communal. I explore collective feelings in my music because, in live performances, the audience does more than encounter the subject – it participates in it. As the audience considers how communities form, fracture and rebuild, it briefly becomes a community of its own.

Programme note © Carmel Smickersgill

“Something I always think about is, what do you need to say, why do you need to say that now – and why do *you* need to say it? What is it you’re trying to express? They’re questions I maybe don’t start with, but at some point in every piece, I’ll give a good bit of thought to.”

Carmel Smickersgill

CARMEL SMICKERSGILL



Composers of previous generations might have divided their musical practices along genre, market or functional lines. With Carmel Smickersgill, there is little sense of creative centre and periphery, where one side of music-making is prioritised over another.

She carries her interested, curious personality through her work as a solo artist, composer of orchestral and chamber music, theatre musician and band member. A key mentor in this pursuit has been Anna Meredith, a composer who commands a similar – and similarly wide – range of projects.

Smickersgill has a strong attachment to the North of England. Born in Leeds, she studied with Gary Carpenter at Manchester's Royal Northern College of Music and settled in the city afterwards. To understand her music is also to understand that city, a place of strong artistic community navigating a seemingly unstoppable flow of change.

Notable pieces for the concert hall thread together some of these themes and places. *Birthday Card for a Stranger* for Manchester Camerata (on a text from regular theatre collaborator Sam Ward) does as the title says, slaloming between philosophical, existential and hopeful thoughts. *Actions Speak Louder*, for the same ensemble, was written while thinking about how non-violent protest movements snowball, grow and morph. Both works blend acoustic and electronic sound, a fundamental in Smickersgill's art.

There are other through lines. Her music is often concerned with the precipice of obsession. Through two EPs – *We Get What We Get & We Don't Get Upset* (2022) and *Unsolicited Advice* (2025) – Smickersgill follows the journey of obsession as it transitions from coping mechanism into something more destructive. The sound is rarely gloomy, though; she is clearly having a lot of fun with and in her work. That approachability is often an inroad to more complex feelings and messages.

Smickersgill's music is often spry and fleet-footed, though its rhythmic energy is rarely hemmed in by loops or repetitions. She's spoken before about finding a sound to complement a narrative-driven theatrical world that's easily crank-handled into the future. You feel this forward-spinning energy in her music, always shedding skin and slithering forwards, darting around and switching direction.

The Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra has been a key supporter of Smickersgill's work. In 2018 she won the orchestra's Rushworth Composition Prize and a year later she wrote *Charcoal* for its contemporary music group Ensemble 10/10. She collaborates again with the Philharmonic in tonight's world-premiere performance of *A Brick Thrown with Love*.

Profile © Hugh Morris

Based in London, Hugh Morris is a editor at *VAN* magazine and contributes to *The New York Times*.

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Symphony No. 9 in
E minor (1956–7, rev. 1958)

- 1 **Moderato maestoso**
- 2 **Andante sostenuto**
- 3 **Scherzo: Allegro pesante**
- 4 **Andante tranquillo**

The first performance of Vaughan Williams's Ninth Symphony took place at the Royal Festival Hall on 2 April 1958, with Malcolm Sargent conducting the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. When the veteran composer took his seat in the Royal Box, the entire audience rose to applaud. But the press notices next day were generally muted; there was little awareness that the new work offered something much more than its composer simply repeating himself. The passage of time has made it easier to perceive the impressive musical reach of this symphony, in which Vaughan Williams summed up his lifelong commitment to the genre. He had his own take, too, on the lukewarm critical response: 'I don't think they can quite forgive me for being able still to do it at my age.'

The Ninth searches deeper into the musical world announced in 1948 in the Sixth Symphony (also in E minor) – an idiom whose spare, pared-down, Shostakovich-like manner operates at an opposite pole from the composer's supposedly trademark 'pastoralism'. The Ninth Symphony's brooding sonorities suggest an orchestral counterpart to black-and-white photography rather than the comforting world of full colour. And there is unusual instrumentation to match. Besides

standard triple woodwind, timpani, percussion, strings and an intricate harp part requiring two instruments, the brass section is augmented by three saxophones and a flugelhorn – a keyed bugle much loved for its plangent tone in the brass-band world (the instrument has a central presence in the 1996 film *Brassed Off*). In her biography of her husband, Ursula Vaughan Williams told how, during a holiday in the German and Austrian Alps in 1957:

We went on the Königsee in a silent electric boat. In mid-lake the pilot stopped, unpacked a flügelhorn and played a halting phrase, which the mountain echo sent back, beautifully improved – 'A good sound,' Ralph said. 'I shall put it into the symphony.'

The deployment of the three saxophones is perhaps even more remarkable: they seem to preside over the music's darkly unfolding sound-world like the Three Fates of Greek mythology.

The symphony also has a connection with one of Vaughan Williams's favourite novels, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. He had been considering a 'Salisbury Symphony' in the years preceding the Ninth, whose draft sketches are annotated with references to the novel – 'Wessex Prelude' above the first movement, 'Stonehenge' in the second and the heading 'Wessex Scherzo' for the third. One theme in the finale is marked 'Steeple Tune', another, 'Introibo ad altare Dei' ('I shall go unto the altar of God'). Vaughan Williams wrote to his biographer Michael Kennedy: 'It is quite true that this [second] movement started off with a programme, but it got lost on the journey ... and the music must be left to speak for itself – whatever that may mean.' The second movement's beautiful central theme for strings is marked 'Tess'. Might there have been, at some point in the composer's life, an imagined but unwritten *Tess of the*



"He jumped up from his seat, and went quickly towards the desire of his eyes"

An illustration based on a scene from Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*:
Vaughan Williams was also a fan of the book and in sketches for the Ninth Symphony
made specific references to places and characters that feature in the novel

d'Urbervilles opera? It seems unlikely that the idea would not have crossed Vaughan Williams's mind.

The symphony's first movement opens with the single note E, out of which emerges a sombre main theme on trombones, tuba and low woodwind; this occurred to the composer, he said, 'after playing some of the organ part of the opening of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*' (again in E minor). The three saxophones present a baleful, motto-like sequence in triads; then the principal clarinet and its colleagues introduce a new idea, relating to the trombone theme's opening while taking it in a different direction. After much turbulent development comes a varied reprise, with the clarinet idea taken up by a solo violin, and a first flugelhorn solo. A coda of ominous calm refers back to the movement's opening.

The flugelhorn begins the second movement unaccompanied, recalling a motif from Vaughan Williams's orchestral work *The Solent* of 1903 that had reappeared in *A Sea Symphony* several years later; this time it has a pendant (recalling the first movement's trombone theme) that gives it a different, chromatic twist. Instantly confronting this is a harsh, drum-like idea for the rest of the orchestra, suggesting implacable menace. Eventually the 'Tess' idea appears, introduced by the strings and passionately extended; a sequence of bell-strokes brings back the drum-like theme, now even more insistent; and the flugelhorn wistfully concludes the movement.

Next comes the Scherzo, revisiting the satirical territory of *Job* and the Sixth Symphony with its pattering snare drum and prominent saxophones. There is a powerful sense of the music nihilistically chasing its own tail before it suddenly seems to evaporate, leaving the snare drum rhythm to peter out by itself.

A quiet theme on the first violins launches the finale – again suggesting the opening of the first movement's trombone theme, and again extending it differently. The imposing design that unfolds has the feel of a large-scale passacaglia (variation) sequence, with additional ideas including a lilting figure first heard on the solo horn; yet another variant of the first-movement trombone theme, now on the low strings; and a smoothly flowing line introduced by the violas. All this culminates in a peroration of great power for the full orchestra – and a remarkable ending, with the orchestra's E major chord dissonantly overlaid by the three saxophones, of which Ursula Vaughan Williams wrote: 'I thought, well, that is the end of Ralph's life and I can see a turning point. It is leading out into another place.'

Programme note © Malcolm Hayes

Malcolm Hayes is a composer, writer and broadcaster who contributes regularly to *BBC Music Magazine* and edited *The Selected Letters of William Walton*.

Previously at the Proms

According to his wife Ursula, Ralph Vaughan Williams was particularly keen to hear Malcolm Sargent conduct the Proms premiere of his Ninth Symphony, on 5 August 1958. The critic Neville Cardus was present, and at the end he watched as the 86-year-old composer 'walked down a high stairway, bent precariously on his stick, as he made his way to the platform to acknowledge the tumultuous applause – applause led by young people standing in the arena. It was a very moving sight: and somehow it epitomised all that we had just been hearing from the symphony.' It would be the composer's last public appearance on the national stage. He died in his sleep three weeks later, on 26 August.

The symphony lived on at the Proms, with repeat performances in 1959 and 1960, before lying dormant until 1999 (when it was conducted by Leonard Slatkin). Fittingly, the Symphony formed part of a commemorative all-Vaughan Williams Prom in 2008 on the 50th anniversary of the composer's death in (Andrew Davis conducted), and in 2017 John Wilson and the BBC Scottish Symphony paired it with *The Planets* by Vaughan Williams's lifelong friend Holst.

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This Week at the Proms ...

Hannah French

Radio 3 presenters offer their personal insights and highlights



Week 8: Saving the best for last

It seems mere moments ago that the Proms season stretched out for weeks, but now we're at the final few, and have we saved the best till last? That was certainly the very essence of Bach's Mass in B minor, completed the year before his death, which lands in these closing concerts (10 September). Through it a wise, old, almost blind composer recrafts the treasured cantatas of his youth into a sacred magnum opus. I can't wait to hear how **Arcangelo** and director **Jonathan Cohen** rekindle the fire and power of Bach's monumental testament of faith.

Founder-conductor Henry Wood's ideals of the Proms being a cross-generational meeting place and a platform for living collaborations seem to infuse the concluding days of this season. 'I alone hold the key to this wild parade,' says Arthur Rimbaud in Britten's setting from *Les illuminations*, and it's as if Britten hands this key to the inimitable **John Wilson** and the **Sinfonia of London** (6 September) to unlock a rich chapter of British music, with Frank Bridge, Lennox Berkeley and Imogen Holst all taking up the tale.

There was no such thing as BBC Young Musician in Wood's day, but he launched the careers of so many legendary artists. He would surely be delighted that, a decade on from their 2016 final, **Jess Gillam**, **Ben Goldscheider** and **Sheku Kanneh-Mason** reunite for a specially commissioned Triple Concerto by former BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artist Gwilym Simcock (6 September). Will they do the same in half a century's time?

I'm spellbound by the notion of **Martha Argerich** appearing (5 September) almost 60 years to the day since she first held Prommers enthralled. Her ever-youthful twinkle will no doubt remind us of that electric young talent from 1966 as she plays Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 2 with the **Munich Philharmonic** and **Lahav Shani**, who then conclude the night with my favourite Brahms symphony, No. 4. Do I love it because Brahms harks back to Bach so often? Probably. Robert Schumann did too in his Second Symphony, so a night with the **Freiburg Baroque Orchestra** and **Sir Simon Rattle** is underlined multiple times in my Proms Guide (7 September).

The final concerts are a fitting farewell for another year. I'm sure I won't be alone in feeling a deeper poignancy as **Natalya Romaniw** sings Strauss's *Four Last Songs* (9 September) following the death this year of Dame Felicity Lott, one of the work's fine interpreters. And then there's the **Last Night of the Proms** (12 September): you know you're in for a grand party when **Nicky Spence** and **Yuja Wang** are handing out the invites! But, for me, the previous evening's concert sums up the spirit of this final week of the season. Student players and professionals from Europe's best ensembles sit side by side in the **Mahler Academy Orchestra**, putting their multigenerational minds to recreating the sounds of Mahler's orchestra for his visionary Symphony No. 9 (11 September).

Hannah French joined Radio 3 in 2016. She presents 'Breakfast' on Saturdays (6.30am) and 'The Early Music Show' (Sundays, 5pm).

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Andrew Manze *conductor*

After reading Classics at Cambridge University, Andrew Manze studied the violin and rapidly became a specialist in historical performance practice. He later turned to conducting: he was Chief Conductor of the NDR Radio Philharmonic, Hanover, from 2014 to 2023 and

has been Principal Guest Conductor of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra since 2018. In 2024 he was appointed Principal Guest Conductor of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

Conducting engagements over the past season include returns to the Leipzig Gewandhaus, Munich Philharmonic, Minnesota, Finnish Radio Symphony and Netherlands Radio Philharmonic orchestras, following debuts with the Montreal and Toronto Symphony orchestras and Philharmonia Orchestra. He took the WDR Symphony Orchestra on a major tour with violinist Isabelle Faust, including performances at the Vienna Musikverein and the Isarphilharmonie in Munich.

Andrew Manze's time in Hanover saw him lead the orchestra on tours to China in 2016 and 2019, and to Japan in 2022. They made a series of recordings together focusing on music by Mozart and Mendelssohn. He has also recorded Vaughan Williams's symphonies with the RLPO. He was Principal Conductor and Artistic Director of the Helsingborg Symphony Orchestra, 2006–14, and made a number of recordings with the orchestra including Beethoven's Symphony No. 3 and a Brahms symphony cycle. He was also Principal Guest Conductor of the Norwegian Radio Symphony Orchestra, 2008–11, and held the title of Associate Guest Conductor of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra for four seasons.



Simone Lamsma *violin*

PROMS DEBUT ARTIST

Dutch violinist Simone Lamsma studied at the Yehudi Menuhin School and the Royal Academy of Music.

Over the past season she has made debuts with the

Singapore Symphony Orchestra under Hannu Lintu, Seattle Symphony under Sunny Xia and Orchestra della Svizzera Italiana under Pierre Bleuse, and returned to the Montreal Symphony Orchestra under Rafael Payare, Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra under Jaap van Zweden, Rotterdam Philharmonic under Tarmo Peltokoski, Sydney Symphony under Simone Young, RAI Symphony Orchestra under Alpesh Chauhan, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra under Jonathon Heyward, Antwerp Symphony Orchestra at the Enescu Festival under Emmanuel Tjeknavorian, BBC Philharmonic under John Storgårds and Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra under Domingo Hindoyan. She has given recitals with pianist Jonathan Fournel at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Wigmore Hall and Heidelberg Spring Festival. Last year she premiered works by Joey Roukens at the Tivoli Vredenburg Utrecht and by Thomas Agerfeldt Olesen with the Danish National Symphony and Vancouver Symphony orchestras.

Simone Lamsma's recordings include Shostakovich's Violin Concerto No. 1 and Gubaidulina's *In tempus praesens* with the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic, a recital of works by Janáček, Mendelssohn and Schumann with pianist Robert Kulek, music by Bach and Arvo Pärt with the Amsterdam Sinfonietta and late works by Rautavaara with the Malmö Symphony Orchestra under Robert Treviño. She plays the 1703 'Aurora ex-Foulis' Stradivarius.

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

Now in its 185th season, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra is the UK’s oldest continuing professional symphony orchestra. Performing more than 100 concerts every season from its home, Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, the orchestra is committed to enhancing and transforming lives through music.

The RLPO is a cornerstone of Liverpool’s cultural life and a global ambassador for the city through an extensive touring schedule over the years throughout the UK, Asia, Europe and the USA. Under Chief Conductor Domingo Hindoyan the orchestra has worked with world-class soloists at home and on tour, and released eight recordings.

The orchestra reaches millions worldwide through broadcasts and streaming, and has over 13 million listeners on online streaming services across 180 countries. It is one of the most active orchestras in the UK in supporting new music, with more than 300 new works premiered and commissioned over the past 20 years. Alongside many works by Liverpool-born and north-west-based composers including Mark Simpson, the orchestra has given world-premiere performances of major works by composers such as Eleanor Alberga, Dani Howard, Sir Karl Jenkins, Grace-Evangeline Mason and Roberto Sierra. In 2024 the orchestra won the *Gramophone* Orchestral Award for its recording of Vaughan Williams’s *Job* under Principal Guest Conductor Andrew Manze – the RLPO’s third *Gramophone* Award.

Increasing access to music-making for young people, NHS patients and early-career musicians, the orchestra plays a central role in wide-reaching learning and community engagement programmes, which support over 100,000 people each year.

Chief Conductor

Domingo
Hindoyan

Conductor Laureate

Vasily Petrenko

Principal Guest Conductor

Andrew Manze

Director of Choirs and Singing

Matthew Hamilton

First Violins

Thelma Handy
leader
Adi Brett
associate leader
Mihkel Kerem
assistant leader
Peter Liang
Martin
Richardson*
Concettina Del Vecchio
Stephan Mayer*
Ruth McNamara
Susanna Poole
Elizabeth
Lamberton
Emily Mowbray
Qian Wu
Evan Lawrence
Helen Boardman
Jody Smith
Nathan Fenwick

Second Violins

Kate Richardson*†
Sophie McQueen
Sophie Coles
Kate Marsden
James Justin
Evans*
David Rimbault
Olga Smolen
James Pattinson
Frances Evans
Chu Yu (Joe) Yang
Pak Ho Hong
Dewi Tudor-Jones
Celia Goodwin
Laura Concar

Violas

Alex Mitchell †
Gwendolyn
Cawdron
Sarah Hill
Nadia Debono
David Ruby*
Fiona Stunden*
Rachel Jones
Ian Fair
Amy Hark
Daniel Sanxis
Jayne Coyle
Emily Davies

Cellos

Karen
Stephenson †
Hilary Browning*
Ian Bracken*
Gethyn Jones*
Ruth Owens
Alexander Holladay
Mark Lindley
Anna Crawford
Georgina Aasgaard
Lucy Hoile

Double Basses

Marcel Becker †
Nathan Knight
Ashley Frampton*
Nigel Dufty*
Anthony Williams
Filipe Dandalo
Richard Lewis
Sian Rowley

Flutes

Cormac Henry †
Helen Wilson

Piccolo

Fiona Sweeney

Oboes

Helena Mackie †
Catrin Ruth
Davies*

Cor Anglais

Drake Gritton

Clarinets

Miquel Ramos
Salvadó †
Isaac Prince

Bass Clarinet

Lewis Graham

Alto Saxophones

Carl Raven
Anthony Brown

**Tenor
Saxophone**

Gilly Blair

Bassoons

Greg Crowley ‡
Rebekah Abramski

Contrabassoon

Gareth Twigg

Horns

Timothy Jackson †
Simon Griffiths
Stephen Nicholls
Timothy Nicholson
Daniel Hibbert

Trumpets

Jonathan Holland ‡
Hannah Mackenzie
Tom Fountain

Flugelhorn

Tom Fountain

Trombones

Simon Cowen †
Simon Powell

Bass Trombone

Simon Chappell

Tuba

Robin Haggart*

Timpani

Neil Hitt †

Percussion

Matthew Brett †
Josephine Frieze
Scott Lumsdaine
Ben Gray

Harp

Elizabeth McNulty †
Eira Lynn Jones

Celesta

Ian Buckle

* 25 years' service

† Section Leader

‡ Guest Section
Leader

*The list of players
was correct at
the time of going
to press*

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Officer**

Vanessa Reed

**Chief Operating
Officer**

Peter Garden

**Chief Finance
Officer**

Stephan Heaton

**Head of Orchestra
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Carys Williams

**Orchestra
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Manager**

Alexandra Swift

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Orchestra
Manager**

Emily Burton

**Orchestra Stage
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Manager**

Julian Munro

**Stage and
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**Artistic Planning
Director, Orchestra
and Ensembles**

Sandra Parr*

**Head of
Operations and
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Sian Waller

Concert Manager

Jess Steels-
Chambers

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Choral Manager

Louise Madden

**Head of
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