

## Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra March 23 programme complementary content

Liverpool Philharmonic has become renowned for commissioning exciting new work from contemporary composers.

This concert offers audiences the chance to hear the world premiere of a brilliant new concerto by British counter-culture icon Gavin Bryars, played by the hugely talented champion of the harpsichord Mahan Esfahani.

Watch Stephen Johnson talking about the concert programme [here](#).

In addition, this companion page draws together a range of complementary content that we hope will help shine further light on the pieces, the people who composed them and the performers bringing them to life here in Hope Street.

### Mahan Esfahani interview

It was over a pint that [Mahan Esfahani](#) first broached the subject of a new harpsichord concerto to Gavin Bryars.

The Yorkshire-born composer was in the audience at a concert where Esfahani was performing, and afterwards the two repaired to the pub.

While he was apparently unimpressed with the contemporary harpsichord piece on the programme, he was keen to chat to its performer.

“He sat on a stool, he had a pint, I had a pint, and then he proceeded to eat 20 small bags of Walkers crisps. He just ate one bag after another bag after another bag,” Esfahani recalls from his home in Prague.

“And we just talked about his time with John Cage and about composing all this stuff. And then I said: ‘would you consider writing something for me?’”... Bryars agreed.

That was that, until sometime later, when Esfahani was in London en route to performing concerts in Asia and realised he had forgotten one of his scores.

He dashed to Schott Music, just off Regent Street, and was waiting for the publishing team to print him off an emergency copy when they mentioned “you should do a concerto with Gavin by the way”.

“The thing is,” he adds, “these things are often very casually decided. They generally happen because someone... I mean, another commission I have which is going on right now with a couple of American orchestras, which is not set in stone yet, happened literally because someone sat next to someone at dinner.”

Casually decided or not, it’s Liverpool audiences who will become the first to hear the result in this world premiere performance of Bryars’ new work, a formal co-commission between Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and the [Orchestre National de Lyon](#).

This is the first time Esfahani – described as ‘a boisterous advocate for the harpsichord’ – has performed at Hope Street since he enjoyed a residency in the spring of 2019.

Then, he played J C Bach’s *Concerto in E-flat* (which a *Guardian* reviewer described as “keyboard fireworks decorated with his own cadenzas”), Poulenc’s *Concert Champêtre*, and

Elena Kats-Chernin's 2017 work *Ancient Letters*, all performed on his own [specially constructed harpsichord](#) which he currently keeps in Oxford and which will return with him this time.

“That was my second time in Liverpool,” he says. “When I started out playing concertos and things, I wanted to play with regular orchestras so to speak, and I thought well, you know, the best I can do is probably be invited to a great orchestra once to play a concerto and that’s it.

“And I thought well, if I get invited back, it means I’m doing something right. If I get invited back a second time... the thing is that we’re habituating the public to the idea that harpsichord concertos in a regular concert hall are a perfectly normal thing.”

Born in Tehran in 1984 and raised in the United States, Esfahani initially played the recorder and violin and was taught piano by his father.

He was nine when he was introduced to the sound of the harpsichord in the form of a cassette recording of Carl Richter playing Bach, given to him by his uncle during a visit to Iran.

“The harpsichord spoke to me,” he explains of the effect it had on him. “It’s the instrument whose ins and outs and ups and downs I get. We have an understanding.

“And I know I can achieve what’s in my head, if you like, to feel like the platonic ideal of expression or interpretation, I can achieve that at the harpsichord. I know just what makes it tick.

“And in terms of, what does music express? Rage, happiness, sadness, humour, wit? I can express all those at the harpsichord very nicely.”

Esfahani went on to study musicology and history at Stanford University, then harpsichord in Boston with Peter Watchorn and later in Prague with the late, celebrated [Zuzana Růžicková](#).

While he’s in demand as a soloist and recitalist today, he reveals that his original ambition was to be a repetiteur: “I wanted to work in opera. The world of the theatre, that was my world, and I did work as a repetiteur in New York for a while.

“But then I wanted to deepen that, and I came and worked in Italy for a while, and I studied organ. And then one thing led to another. At that age, when you’re 20, 21, 22, you have nothing to lose so basically you just take whatever path you happen to be on.

“And you just open up ten doors, and hopefully one of them leads to something.”

The door that led to something came in London when he was invited to perform at a private event which was attended by someone from the BBC.

As a result, in 2008 he became the first harpsichordist to be made a [BBC New Generation Artist](#), while in 2011 he played the first harpsichord recital in the history of the *BBC Proms*.

Since then, has established himself as the first harpsichordist in a generation whose work spans virtually all the areas of classical music-making.

It seems not everyone was easy to convince, however.

He says: “I remember when I arrived as a New Generation Artist, and at the very first *Proms* press launch I’d been part of, a certain manager who will remain nameless, when he heard I played harpsichord, in a group of several programmers and managers, basically taunted me the whole evening and said: ‘who wants to hear that?’

“And then he said to the programmer of some major orchestra, ‘would you ever programme a harpsichordist?’. And the guy said no, and he said: ‘there you have it young man’.

“And I thought, OK, I’ll show him.”

Happily, there has never been that attitude when it comes to the programming in Liverpool.

“Liverpool is amazing,” Esfahani says of his experience of the city. “The first time I played in Liverpool I got in a cab and gave him the name of where I was staying, and he said: ‘oh are you playing at the Philharmonic?’ and I said yes. He said: ‘my wife and I go to the Philharmonic’.

“When I came to do the residency in Liverpool, I lived there for like a month, and I had a really nice time.”

### **Andrew Manze**

Since 2018, [Andrew Manze](#) has been Principal Guest Conductor of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and he’s a great favourite of Liverpool audiences.

He made his debut with the Orchestra more than a decade ago and has appeared regularly on the Hope Street stage ever since.

With boundless energy and warmth – and an extensive and scholarly knowledge of the repertoire – Manze is in great demand as a guest conductor from some of the world’s leading orchestras and ensembles.

He began his career as an Early Music specialist, becoming Associate Director of the Academy of Ancient Music at the age of 31. Along with a busy conducting career he also teaches, edits and writes about music and is in demand as a broadcaster.

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

### **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**

In the spring of 1778, a job-hunting [Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart](#) and his mother [Anna Maria](#) arrived in Paris from Mannheim, where he had spent the last few months dawdling and paying court to soprano [Aloysia Weber](#) – sister of his future wife Constanze, and cousin of the composer Carl Maria von Weber.

The 22-year-old from Salzburg was at that time in thrall to opera. And while his youthful dramatic works hadn’t reached a wide audience – and it was still seven years before he produced *Marriage of Figaro* – Mozart did receive a commission for some incidental ballet music from the Paris Opera during his stay.

In the meantime, he started work on what became his *Symphony No 31 in D major* – better known as his [Paris Symphony](#).

It was premiered on June 12 at the home of Count von Sickingen, ambassador to the Electorate of the Palatinate, and received its first public performance six days later at the Concert Spirituel, being declared a success for the young Austrian.

Paris was ultimately to be an unhappy memory for Mozart however. His mother, already unwell when they left Mannheim, continued to fade and on July 3, three weeks after the symphony’s premiere, she died.

**Did you know? Among Mozart’s other work in 1778 were five violin sonatas, a concerto for flute and harp, an oboe concerto and a duet sonata for violin and piano.**

Listen to the first movement from Mozart’s [Symphony No 31 in D major](#).

## Gavin Bryars

British composer [Gavin Bryars](#) was a 17-year-old schoolboy in his home town of Goole in Yorkshire when he was first introduced to the work of John Cage by a forward-thinking music master.

After studying philosophy at Sheffield University, he developed a musical reputation as a professional jazz bassist and pioneer of free improvisation, and in the late 1960s worked with Cage himself in the United States and edited the Experimental Music Catalogue.

A prolific composer in a number of genres, two of his most famous works remain [The Sinking of the Titanic](#), composed in 1969, and the elegiac 1971 composition [Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet](#), the latter of which was based around a 26-second loop of the voice of an elderly homeless man singing.

He has also written a number of works for early music performers, including the Hilliard Ensemble. In 1968, while working with Cage on the American composer's HPSCHD, he was first introduced to the harpsichord in a contemporary context.

Meanwhile, over the last 50 years Bryars has not only collaborated with many of the world's leading musicians, orchestras and creatives but has also worked with people as diverse as Vera Lynn, Dusty Springfield, Jarvis Cocker and Little and Large.

He also writes for and performs with his own [Gavin Bryars Ensemble](#).

**Did you know? Bryars' mother Miriam was an amateur cellist, and his first memory is of hearing her play.**

## Jean Sibelius

When [Johan Julius Christian Sibelius](#) was born in Hämeenlinna on December 8, 1865, it was in a Finland that was still part of the sprawling Romanov empire.

But the young 'Jean' would become inspired by the folklore he encountered at his Finnish-speaking grammar school, particularly the epic mythical poem *Kalevala* whose rhythms and themes he later used in his music – notably his 1892 choral work *Kullervo* - and which spoke to the patriotic heart of those fighting for Finnish independence.

*Kullervo* was followed in 1893 by his *Karelia Suite*, and six years later, tone poem [Finlandia](#) – a bold musical challenge to oppressive Russian censorship – became the unofficial anthem of Finland's resistance.

It was against this backdrop that in 1898, Sibelius started to plan his [First Symphony](#) – the start of a personal symphonic journey which rather than embracing the whole world as Mahler recommended, would follow the 'profound logic' that would eventually be distilled into his single movement Seventh.

But while *Symphony No 1 in E minor* might be seen as perhaps the most expansively Romantic of his symphonies, it still comes with darker, more desolate, hues and unexpected dimensions.

Enjoy Sibelius' [Symphony No 31 in E minor](#).

## About the Music

### **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-91): Symphony No 31 in D major, 'Paris', K297/300a**

1. Allegro assai
2. Andantino
3. Allegro

Composed 1778

First Performed: 12 June 1778, at the home of Count von Sickingen, Paris (private premiere); 18 June 1778, Concert Spirituel, Paris (public premiere)

Mozart composed his Symphony No 31 during a strenuous but ultimately unsuccessful job-hunting visit to Paris. At this stage, he was still inextricably stuck in the employment of the Archbishop of Salzburg, Hieronymus von Colloredo, a personage who liked to see himself as a 'man of the Enlightenment', but whose attitude to his hugely talented court composer was far from enlightened. Tipped off by his father that the Parisians like 'noisy' symphonies, Mozart employed an unusually large orchestra for the time, including the still new clarinets, and he made the music as vigorous and animated as he could, especially in the two outer movements. The Symphony picked up some encouraging reviews, and audiences seem on the whole to have been pleased. Not everyone was happy with the original Andantino slow movement, so Mozart, at his usual phenomenal speed, substituted an Andante. The replacement movement is the one most commonly played, but tonight, we'll hear the original version – see what you think...

### **Gavin Bryars (b. 1943): Harpsichord Concerto (world-premiere: co-commission with Orchestre National de Lyon)**

The English composer Gavin Bryars has never swum with any prevailing cultural tide. Long before so-called 'minimalism' was becoming fashionable, he was moving away from the complexities of much modern classical music and trying to achieve as much as possible with small forces and economical musical material. His *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet*, a hypnotic tape-loop of a homeless man singing with sparing string quartet accompaniment, rose steadily to cult classic status since it appeared in 1971. Jazz and pop music have influenced him, but what emerges never sounds derivative. The Harpsichord Concerto was written for the brilliant, refreshingly open-minded harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani. Bryars listened to Esfahani's recordings of Bach, which even some eminent harpsichord-agnostics have found unusually persuasive. When writing the concerto, he decided to adopt the attitude of a baroque composer and give no indications of ornamentation, so that Esfahani could decorate, even improvise freely, as outrageously or subtly as he saw fit – just as, today, a jazz performer might. It promises to be an unusual, vital, exciting and very 'live' experience.

### **Jean Sibelius (1865-1957): Symphony No 1 in E minor, op 39**

1. Andante ma non troppo - Allegro energico
2. Andante (ma non troppo lento)
3. Scherzo: Allegro - Lento (ma non troppo) - Tempo I
4. Finale (Quasi una Fantasia): Andante - Allegro molto

When Sibelius wrote his First Symphony in 1899, he was still saturated in Romanticism, and especially the fervid Romanticism of Tchaikovsky. "There is much in that man that I recognise in myself", he wrote to his wife, Aino. Sibelius' decision to end the Symphony tragically almost

certainly marks the impact of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* Symphony (1893), which concludes in deathly gloom.

But it's still unmistakably Sibelius, powerfully suggestive of the vast spaces, elemental weather and magical play of light in his native Finland. The opening is like nothing else in the 19th century symphonic repertoire: above a sustained drum-roll, a solo clarinet begins a long, mournful melody, which seems to lose itself in dreams, until violins enter tremolando and a new theme strives energetically forward, eventually reaching a grim, strikingly abrupt conclusion. A languishing Tchaikovskian tune opens the second movement, but Sibelius soon shows his own hand: in the bare, eerie woodwind writing, and in the surging string figures that accompany the final climax. At last the Tchaikovsky tune returns, in mid-phrase, and with it brings an uneasy peace.

Peace is blown away by the Scherzo: throbbing plucked string chords and a sharply rhythmic motif for timpani inaugurate an elemental dance. Contrast comes with the slower and quieter, almost hymn-like, Trio section, but this doesn't last long; soon the elemental dance begins again, this time building to a brusque conclusion.

Sibelius marks his *Finale Quasi una Fantasia* ('Almost like a fantasy'), inviting comparison with Tchaikovsky's 'Fantasy Overture' *Romeo and Juliet*, and perhaps still more of the 'Symphonic Fantasy' *Francesca da Rimini*. The ardent opening theme for strings is in fact the clarinet melody that began the first movement. After this, the music seems carried forward on a flood of ideas. Eventually a long, impassioned melody leads to a forceful, brass-dominated climax, but the symphony ends with two steely plucked string chords – an unmistakably tragic conclusion.