

## **Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra March 24 programme complementary content**

Few composers have ever written a piece for young people (aged five to 105) that's as fabulous, as fun and as thrillingly colourful as Britten's *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*.

Great music belongs to all ages, whether it's a playful Vaughan Williams ballet or Delius' gorgeous musical daydreams. So today we're also proud to present the latest in our hugely successful series of commissions for our terrific Youth Choirs and Orchestra, composed by Joanna Marsh and conducted by Ellie Slorach.

### **Ellie Slorach**

[Ellie Slorach](#) studied music at the University of Manchester and conducting at the Royal Northern College of Music, graduating in 2018 with a distinction. She founded [Kantos Chamber Choir](#), and has served as their director and chorus master on a wide range of recordings and performances including with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and the BBC Philharmonic on labels including Decca Classics.

In 2018, Slorach was on the Britten-Pears Young Artist Programme studying conducting with Marin Alsop, and the Women's Conductors course run by the Royal Opera House and the National Opera Studio.

Specialising in concerts for schools and young people, Slorach has worked with orchestras including the Hallé and the Orchestre Philharmonique Royal de Liège, where she was assistant conductor to Gergely Madaras in 2021-22. She is often invited to work with youth and student orchestras and choirs, having been musical director of the Hallé Youth Orchestra.

This season she has made her debut with the Royal Northern Sinfonia at The Glasshouse and with New Adventures' production of [Edward Scissorhands](#) at Sadler's Wells.

Slorach returns to Liverpool Philharmonic Hall after conducting the world premiere of Grace-Evangeline Mason's *Mahler's Letters* in May 2022, and a Youth Company Festival programme in July 2023.

### **Jennifer Johnston**

Liverpool mezzo-soprano [Jennifer Johnston](#) needs little introduction to Hope Street audiences. Recognised as one of the most important voices of her generation, she is celebrated for her performances of works by Mahler, Wagner, Britten, Beethoven, Schumann and Elgar among others. In 2021 she was awarded the Royal Philharmonic Society's [Singer Award](#) in recognition of her 'commitment and emotional force' to both performance and education.

Johnston started her career as a member of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Choir and in an interview in 2018 recalled: "I learned such a lot in those three years which really formed me later as a performer". She studied at Cambridge University and the Royal College of Music and is a former BBC New Generation artist.

In huge demand both on the opera stage and on concert platforms nationally and internationally, she enjoys a special relationship with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, with whom she recorded her first solo album [A Love Letter to Liverpool](#). She was Liverpool Philharmonic's 2019-20 Artist in Residence.

Forthcoming engagements this season include Mahler's Eighth Symphony at Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie, Verdi's *Requiem* with the RPO and Vasily Petrenko at the Royal Albert Hall, Mahler's Third Symphony with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, and *The Dream of Gerontius* at the Royal Festival Hall.

### **Liverpool Philharmonic Youth Choir**

Liverpool Philharmonic Youth Choir is Liverpool Philharmonic Youth Company's flagship choir for local young people aged 12-19. The choir performs throughout the year, not only at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, but across the region.

A mixed choir of sopranos, altos, tenors and basses, the Youth Choir regularly performs with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir, including singing in the popular annual Spirit of Christmas concerts.

Led by Artistic Director Simon Emery, the choir performs a wide variety of musical styles – everything from classical and jazz, to folk and roots music. The group regularly performs specially composed new works and collaborates with a variety of guest musicians and ensembles.

The Youth Choir was invited to sing at the closing ceremony of the London 2012 Olympics, a performance which was broadcast live to a worldwide audience of more than 900 million people. In 2008, Youth Choir performed for Queen Elizabeth II, who served as patron of Liverpool Philharmonic from 1958 until her death.

### **Liverpool Philharmonic Children's Choir**

Liverpool Philharmonic Children's Choir is Youth Company's non-auditioned mixed choir, bringing together 75 of the most enthusiastic young singers from Merseyside and beyond.

Children's Choir offers young singers in school years 5-7 the opportunity to develop choral skills through large choir rehearsals, led by choral specialist Alison White, as well as small group musicianship classes with expert choral mentors.

Children's Choir performs at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall – alongside the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra – in the annual Singalong with Santa family concerts, and as part of other special family performances. Children's Choir sings a wide variety of music, from musical theatre and movie themes to more traditional choral music and newly commissioned works.

### **Vaughan Williams**

While he was not the founder of the folksong movement, [Ralph Vaughan Williams'](#) name remains inextricably linked with it. The Folk-Song Society was founded in 1898 by a group of collectors and enthusiasts – one of its leading lights was [Lucy Broadwood](#) who was editor of the Folk-Song Journal and hugely influential in the British folk revival.

Vaughan Williams joined in 1904, the year after he collected his first song (*Bushes and Briars*), and for a decade he dedicated at least a month a year to collecting folk tunes across more than 20 counties. In all, during his career he collected around [800 songs](#). Meanwhile the separate English Folk Dance Society was founded in 1911. The two organisations would later merge, becoming the English Folk Dance and Song Society, with Vaughan Williams its first president.

He composed [Old King Cole](#) for the English Folk Dance Society's Cambridge branch and as part of the city's 1923 Festival of Music.

The story centres around an evening's entertainment the King of Colchester is giving for his daughter Helena, and the ballet is divided into nine sections. Among the many folk tunes it includes are *A Bold Young Farmer* and *The Jolly Thresherman*. It received its first performance outdoors in Nevile's Court at Trinity College (the composer's alma mater) on June 5 that year, conducted by a young [Boris Ord](#), then known as Bernhard Ord. Its composer was, apparently, still scoring the ballet for orchestra and optional chorus as late as the dress rehearsal. But the premiere passed off well and the reception was as warm as the weather.

*Old King Cole* was one of several Vaughan Williams pieces that were included in [the week-long festival](#) that June. The English Singers performed a collection of his folksong arrangements in King's College chapel, and his music also featured in a recital in Trinity College chapel. His *London Symphony* was performed by the Cambridge University Music Society alongside works by other living graduates including Charles Villiers Stanford.

Enjoy Vaughan Williams' [Old King Cole](#).

## Joanna Marsh

Award-winning British composer [Joanna Marsh](#) has been described by the *Guardian* as 'one of today's leading composers for the voice'. Marsh studied at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, where she was an organ scholar (and from 2015-20 composer in residence), and at the Royal Academy of Music. She studied composition with Richard Blackford and Judith Bingham.

Since 2007, Marsh has divided her time between the UK and Dubai. Her life in the Middle East has led to a number of unique musical opportunities including composing an orchestral work to celebrate the opening of the Burj Khalifa, and a fanfare for the late Queen's visit to Abu Dhabi.

She is also a co-founder of ChoirFest Middle East in Dubai, an annual celebration of the region's choral music scene, and founder of the Dubai Opera Festival Chorus.

In 2020 she released a solo album, *Flare*, featuring her compositions performed by the BBC Singers, BBC Symphony Orchestra, London Mozart Players and the choir of Royal Holloway, University of London.

Inspiration for her compositions often comes from seeing contemporary subjects in a historical perspective.

Listen to Joanna Marsh's 2021 work, [All Shall Be Well](#), which won an Ivor Novello Award.

## Frederick Delius

Arguably Britain's most international composer, [Frederick Delius](#) was born in Bradford (to Westphalian parents) but during his life – and career – he lived mostly in France and had much early success in Germany.

It was in France that he composed the two exquisite miniature mood pieces being performed in this concert. [On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring](#) was actually the second of the two to be composed, although over the last century it has remained the most popular. At the heart of the piece is an old Norwegian folk tune, *In Ola Valley*.

The meditative [Summer Night on the River](#) dates from 1911, when Delius and his wife Jelka were living in the French village of Grez, near Fontainebleau, where their home backed on to the river Loing. It is relatively impressionistic compared to the more conventionally melodic *First Cuckoo* miniature.

Together the works form what is titled *Two Pieces for Small Orchestra*, which was first performed in Leipzig in October 1913. Although it's been suggested the pieces were composed at the request of Peter Warlock, the score was actually dedicated to British composer and teacher Henry Balfour Gardiner. In later years, the generous Gardiner bought Delius' home in northern France, which enabled the composer to continue living there until he died in 1934.

**Did you know? In the 1880s, a young Frederick Delius spent two years as an orange planter in Florida.**

Listen to Frederick Delius' tone poem [\*On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring\*](#).

## **Benjamin Britten**

In 1945, [Benjamin Britten](#) was living at Aldeburgh and had just had great success with his second opera *Peter Grimes*, which would put the British composer on the international map. He had also been on a concert tour to Germany to give recitals to concentration camp survivors – something which would deeply affect the 32-year-old composer.

It was against this backdrop that, later that year, Britten was approached by the British Ministry of Education to compose a piece of music to use in a short film titled *Instruments of the Orchestra*. In the 1930s, the composer had regularly contributed to the GPO Film Unit, most famously for its 1935 documentary *Night Mail* alongside poet WH Auden.

Britten based [\*The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra\*](#) – to be played on film by the London Symphony Orchestra with [Malcolm Sargent](#) conducting – on the *Rondeau* second movement of Henry Purcell's *Abdelazer* Suite.

*Abdelazer* was a play by female Restoration playwright [Aphra Behn](#), which had been premiered in 1676. Purcell wrote incidental music for a revival in 1695, six years after Behn's death and only a few months before the composer's own, although the production itself proved a flop.

Meanwhile the concert premiere of *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* was held at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall on October 15 1946, with chief conductor Malcolm Sargent leading the Orchestra.

Watch an excerpt from the film [\*Instruments of the Orchestra\*](#) featuring Britten's *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*.

## **About the Music**

### **Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958): *Old King Cole***

Composed: 1923

First Performed: 5 June 1923, Cambridge, cond. Boris Ord

Vaughan Williams' name isn't normally associated with ballet, but in fact he wrote two: the beautiful, truly visionary *Job* (1930), subtitled "A masque for dancing", and this much more earthy, delightfully light-hearted rendering of the story of Old King Cole, the famous 'merry old soul', calling for pipe and his bowl, a troop of dancers and, of course, his 'fiddlers three'. Before World War One, Vaughan Williams had been a serious, far-travelled collector of British folk songs, and he worked several of these into this 'folk ballet': amongst them are the 'Old King Cole' nursery song, the poignant 'Dives and Lazarus', 'Wassail Song' and the tune 'Bold Young Farmer', played by the second fiddler. *Old King Cole* was the first Vaughan Williams work that he conducted, and one of a handful he recorded. Technically he wasn't amongst the greatest as a

conductor, but he could inspire musicians to wonderful things. As he told one nervous orchestra, 'It'll be all right if you don't watch me!'

### **Benjamin Britten (1913-76): *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra***

Composed: 1945

First Performed (in public): 15 October 19, Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, cond. Malcolm Sargent.

Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* is a rare example of a piece of music commissioned for 'educational' purposes that has been a roaring success ever since its first performance. The only real comparison is Prokofiev's wonderful *Peter and the Wolf*, and Britten's triumph is all the more striking because there's no colourful folk tale behind the music. Originally composed for an official educational film about the instruments of the orchestra, the piece fills the brief exactly. Britten took a then little known theme from Henry Purcell's *Abdelazer* theatre music, and he wove a brilliant, colourful set of variations, in which each section of the orchestra is introduced in turn (together in the first section, then as individuals): first the woodwinds, then the strings, the brass, then the percussion. Finally, in a thrilling fugue, the whole orchestra is reassembled, to the point where Purcell's tune (now in the major key) returns in triumph.

### **Frederick Delius (1862-1934): *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring and Summer Night on the River***

Composed: 1912 (Cuckoo), 1911 (Summer Night)

First Performed (together): 23 October 1913, Leipzig, Gewandhaus Orchestra, cond. Arthur Nikisch

It's one of the cruellest ironies of fate that Delius should still be routinely dismissed as hopelessly, parochially English. Though he was born in Bradford, his parents were German, and he was fluent in both languages from childhood. Before World War One he was much more successful in Germany than in Britain, and these two pieces, for many inextricably associated with nostalgic dreams of English rural life, were both very successful at their Leipzig premiere. No one then seems to have detected a foreign accent in the cuckoo's call. It was the war that changed everything, just as it did for Elgar, who'd also been a big success in Germany. Both of these pieces use a small orchestra, but the subtle range of colour and mood Delius is able to create borders on the miraculous. But for many there's also a sense of sadness, a feeling of loss mixed in with the beauty. In a very short time, this sumptuous idyll would be horribly shattered.

### **Joanna Marsh (b. 1970): *A Plastic Theatre* (Liverpool Philharmonic commission in consortium with Trondheim Symphony Orchestra & Opera, and youth choirs from Denmark, Peru, Australia and USA)**

Act I: Slow and dignified

Act II: Risoluto

Act III: Grazioso

Act IV: With a leisurely gait

Act V: Stately

Composed: 2024

World Premiere

There are two possible ways of reading the word 'plastic'. It can be that material we all once found so useful and which is now wreaking havoc in the natural world. But it can also mean 'adaptable', 'fluid', 'malleable'. What attracted Joanna Marsch most about the five Katie Schlaag

poems she sets here – apart, of course, from their vibrant language – was the way she explores both possibilities: one alarming (our destructive potential), the other affirming (the amazing adaptability of nature, and of our own minds – so-called ‘brain plasticity’), but without either preachiness or exaggerated ‘positivity’.

In keeping with her theatrical conception, *A Plastic Theatre* is divided into five distinct ‘acts’. The first plays with the idea of plastic objects as ‘abandoned’ – hazardous, but also strangely poignant. In Act II it becomes an emblem of our own dreams, longings and greed, in music which both pushes forward restlessly yet seems trapped in its own endlessly repeating cycle. A disturbing pathos emerges in Act III, in which plastic seems almost human, while human beings lose themselves ever more in the synthetic. In Act IV, Schlaag’s parody academic verbosity is balanced by Marsh’s music which, in her own words, ‘has the tone of a child’s bed-time story’. Finally, Act V explores the increasingly confused states of our relationship with nature. The ending is exciting but ambiguous: does the final ‘plunge into the rushing current’ hold out the possibility of adventure, discovery? Or is it much more ominous?