

## **Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra October 17 and 20 programme complementary content**

Let's begin at the beginning – with the sound of silence. That's how the young Gustav Mahler launched his First Symphony, and there's no more thrilling way to open the new season: this is music of breathless beauty and youthful passion, gripping drama and roof-raising joy. Chief Conductor Domingo Hindoyan sets the scene with a gorgeous gift from his native Venezuela. And there's pure loveliness from the German soprano Sarah Wegener in Richard Strauss' heart-melting *Four Last Songs*.

### **Domingo Hindoyan**

[Domingo Hindoyan](#) was born in Caracas in 1980 to a violinist father and a lawyer mother. He started his musical career as a violinist in the ground-breaking Venezuelan musical education programme El Sistema. He studied conducting at [Haute Ecole de Musique in Geneva](#), where he gained his masters, and in 2012 was invited to join the Allianz International Conductor's Academy, through which he worked with the London Philharmonic and the Philharmonia Orchestra and with conductors like Esa-Pekka Salonen and Sir Andrew Davis.

He was appointed first assistant conductor to [Daniel Barenboim](#) at the Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin in 2013 and in 2019, he took up a position as principal guest conductor of the Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra. In the same year, he made his debut with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and was appointed as the Orchestra's new Chief Conductor in 2020, taking up his position in September 2021. He has now extended his contract with the Orchestra to 2028.

### **Sarah Wegener**

Award-winning soprano [Sarah Wegener](#) approaches every role with captivating intensity and is highly regarded as a performer of both Classical and Romantic repertoire, as well as contemporary compositions. She has enthralled listeners with the warmth and richness of her voice in performances of Strauss' orchestral songs under Mariss Jansons and [Vladimir Jurowski](#), Strauss' *Four Last Songs* under Daniel Harding, Mahler's Eighth Symphony under [Vasily Petrenko](#), as well as her War and Peace programme shaped around works by Handel and Purcell.

Her 'marvellously radiant voice, as powerful as it is rich in colour' (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*) distinguishes her as a lieder singer of the highest order, as illustrated on her highly praised albums *Into the Deepest Sea* and *Zueignung*.

Wegener originally studied double bass with Ulrich Lau in Stuttgart, changing to vocal studies in 2004 with Bernhard Jaeger-Böhm and taking part in masterclasses with Dame Gwyneth Jones und Renée Morloc.

Enjoy listening to Sarah Wegener singing Richard Strauss' [Allerseelen \(All Souls Day\)](#).

### **Juan Bautista Plaza – Vigilia**

What do Hector Berlioz, Alexander Borodin and Venezuelan composer [Juan Bautista Plaza](#) have in common? The answer is they all studied medicine before turning to music. Medicine's

loss was music's gain in the case of all three, but particularly perhaps [Plaza](#), who became not only a prolific composer but also a leading figure in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Venezuelan music.

After early tuition from pianist and composer Jesus Maria Suárez, from 1920-23 Plaza studied in Rome on a scholarship, and on his return to Caracas he was made Master of Chapel at the city's cathedral. He also taught musical history and appreciation at the Caracas Superior Music School.

In 1930 Plaza was one of the founders of the Venezuelan Symphony Orchestra, taking a role in its artistic direction and even conducting on occasion. He was also a driving force behind the formation of the Venezuelan Concert Association in 1934, serving first as secretary and then president. At the age of 46, he was appointed director of culture and fine arts at Venezuela's Ministry of Education, and in 1957 he founded the Juventudes Musicales de Venezuela to help support and promote the career of young musicians.

Plaza composed more than 300 works – for orchestra, voice, piano and other instruments, chamber ensembles and many religious pieces. His symphonic poem *Vigilia* – or *Vigil* – dates from 1928, and was composed shortly after he met, and fell in love with, his future wife Nolita. Its original, lengthier, title was *Lyrical poem on the sonnet Vigilia* by [Juan Ramón Jiménez](#).

Listen to Juan Bautista Plaza's symphonic poem [Vigilia](#).

### **Richard Strauss – *Four Last Songs***

During his long and successful career, [Richard Strauss](#) was to compose some 200 songs, and they formed an important part of the German's catalogue. In fact, the precociously talented young Strauss had begun composing at the tender age of six – his first piece being a *Weihnachtslied*, meaning Christmas song or carol – and by the time he was 20 he had more than 40 lieder to his name along with dozens of other pieces.

His songs divide roughly into three periods: up to the early 1880s when he discovered Wagner; from there until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (when he had a bust up with his publisher); and from 1918 to his death. While the majority were for voice and piano, he also composed or arranged many others with an orchestral accompaniment.

[Four Last Songs](#) date from 1948 and are in fact just that (if you don't count the delicate *Malven*). The 84-year-old composer was inspired by reading *Im Abendrot* (In the Evening Glow), a verse by 19<sup>th</sup> Century poet and novelist Joseph von Eichendorff which, set to music, became the last of his subsequent *Four Last Songs*.

Strauss never lived to hear his gloriously radiant and lyrical song cycle for soprano and orchestra premiered. That moment came eight months after his death when, on May 22 1950, Strauss' preferred soloist – the Norwegian Wagnerian soprano [Kirsten Flagstad](#) – sang with the Philharmonia Orchestra at the Royal Albert Hall. The concert was broadcast live on *BBC Radio* and recorded for posterity.

Listen to that recording of Richard Strauss' [Four Last Songs](#).

### **Gustav Mahler – *Symphony No.1 in D major***

[Gustav Mahler's](#) musical abilities first revealed themselves when he was still a young child. By the age of 15, he had left the family home in Jihlava, north west of Brno in the Czech Republic, to study at the Vienna Conservatory.

Predominantly a pianist-turned-conductor, the 27-year-old Mahler was working as second conductor at the Leipzig City Theatre when, in January 1888, he started on what would become

his **First Symphony**. While the symphony in D major was a new work, Mahler incorporated themes from his song cycle *Songs of a Wayfarer* which he had composed in 1885.

Meanwhile the symphony's informal title *Titan* comes from a novel written by Mahler's favourite author, Johann Paul Friedrich Richter under the pseudonym **Jean Paul**, although the work was not actually inspired by the book.

Mahler conducted the **premiere in Budapest** in November 1889, but what was at that time described as a symphonic poem (in its original five movement version) was met with incomprehension by some listeners, and its composer made extensive revisions before it was given a second outing, in Hamburg four years later. And in fact, Mahler kept revising the score until it was published in 1899.

**Did you know? Mahler conducted more performances of the First Symphony than any of his other works.**

Watch the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra perform an excerpt from the **second movement** of Mahler's First Symphony in 2010.

## About the Music

### **Juan Bautista Plaza (1898-1955): Vigilia**

Composed: 1928

First Performed: 4 October 1948, Caracas, Teatro Municipal, Venezuela Symphony Orchestra, cond. Juan Bautista Plaza

The Venezuelan composer Juan Bautista Plaza originally studied medicine, but the pull of music – and particularly religious music – was too strong. After studying in Rome, he was awarded the title of Professor of Sacred Music and was appointed as Master of Chapel at Caracas Cathedral. Interest in sacred subjects was balanced by a love for the uncultivated but vibrant folk music of his native land, and he soon became a leading light in his country's process of musical self-discovery. Subtitled 'Symphonic poem after a sonnet by Juan Ramón Jiménez', *Vigilia* is a gorgeous, deeply touching example of a devotional work without words. But is that devotion religious, or more earthly? Echoes of chant and folk hymns can be made out, but the tone is highly personal. As one Venezuelan writer puts it, '*Vigilia* is possibly Plaza's symphonic work that best expresses mixed or contradictory feelings related to love.'

### **Richard Strauss (1864-1949): Four Last Songs**

1. Frühling (Spring)
2. September
3. Beim Schlafengehen (Going to Sleep)
4. Im Abendrot (At Dusk)

Composed: 1948

First Performed: 22 May 1950, Royal Albert Hall, London, Kirsten Flagstad (soprano), Philharmonia Orchestra, cond. Wilhelm Furtwängler

For anyone who believes in 'progress' in music, Strauss' *Four Last Songs* is a breath-taking anachronism. And yet this glorious 'untimely' outpouring of very late Romanticism survives while the work of most of Strauss' modernist detractors is long forgotten. The explanation lies partly in Strauss' melodic fertility, gorgeous harmony and orchestration and superb writing for the soprano voice – the distillation of a lifetime's experience in the opera house. But even more it is the humanity of the message that makes people turn again and again to this music. Here is a

sharply focussed sense of joy in life and shared love, intensified by awareness of the closeness of death.

We begin – naturally enough – with Spring (*Frühling*): renewal, but as felt by an older man. *September* brings images of autumnal decay after summer's ripeness, and ends with a touching solo farewell for the horn – Strauss' father's instrument. In *Beim Schlafengehen*, the image of the soul floating free in the 'magic circle of the night' is captured in a rapturous duet for soprano and solo violin – the newly liberated soul's wordless voice. The ending of a long-shared life is then evoked in *Im Abendrot*. Strauss' long marriage to the formidable Pauline had not been stress-free, but his comment to Mahler that 'she's what I need' was evidently sincere. As the soprano finally asks 'is this perhaps death?', there's a note of doubt. But then two piccolos recall the poem's pair of trilling larks – an image that surely needs no explanation.

### **Gustav Mahler (1860-1911): Symphony No 1 in D major**

1. Langsam. Schleppend [Slow. Dragging] - Immer sehr gemächlich [Always at a very leisurely pace]
2. Kräftig bewegt, doch nicht zu schnell [With strong movement, but not too fast] - Trio: Recht gemächlich [Quite leisurely] - Tempo primo
3. Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen [Solemn and measured, without dragging]
4. Stürmisch bewegt [Stormy]

Composed: 1887-8, revised 1893-8

First Performed: 20 November 1889, Vidagó Concert Hall, Budapest, cond. Mahler

When Mahler's First Symphony was first performed it had a title, 'Titan', from a novel by the once hugely popular German Romantic writer Jean Paul. The 'Titan' represents the true genius, a 'Heaven-Stormer', an obsessive, recklessly passionate idealist – rather like Mahler himself, one might say. For the premiere, Mahler provided an explanatory note, telling how the symphony progressed from 'the awakening of nature at early dawn', through youthful happiness and love, to the sardonic gloom of the funeral march, and then to the turbulent, ultimately exultant finale, subtitled 'From Inferno to Paradise'. At the same time, Mahler told his friends, there was the memory of a love affair that had ended, painfully, at about the time he began work on the symphony.

But Mahler soon began to lose faith in programme notes. 'I would like it stressed that the symphony is greater than the love affair it is based on', he wrote. 'The real affair became the reason for, but by no means the true meaning of, the work'. Fortunately for us, the First Symphony is full of musical pointers to possible meanings beyond the notes. And if one doesn't want to spend time 'interpreting' the music rather than just enjoying the music, the First Symphony is a gloriously colourful, fascinating and stirring sound tapestry in its own right. A long slow dawn, full of mysterious distant sounds, leads to a comfortably strolling Allegro, ending joyously, despite ominous shadows along the way. Bracing rustic dance music dominates the second movement, then comes a weird and wonderful funeral march based on the song *Frère Jacques*, interrupted by bursts of raucous Klezmer music. But death isn't the end of the story. The 'stormy' finale erupts into the scene and for a while sweeps all before it. But there is hope in the form of an ardent love theme (strings) and massed horns calling out a theme that sounds a lot like 'And He shall reign' from Handel's *Messiah*. The symphony ends in jubilation. Mahler's hero has survived - like the composer himself - to live, and love, another day.