

**Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra**  
**November 9 programme complementary content**

October 1931: William Walton takes a huge choir and a giant orchestra, adds a couple of brass bands, and blasts British music sky-high. *Belshazzar's Feast* is big, brassy, and utterly outrageous – now add the one and only Sir Bryn Terfel, and you've got a seriously impressive celebration of the human voice. Anna Meredith's *Nautilus* and Mendelssohn's gorgeous *Violin Concerto* – with international violin sensation Ning Feng returning as soloist – are the icing on the cake.

**Adam Hickox**

British conductor [Adam Hickox](#) brings to the podium an impressive and elegant fluidity of technique and mature interpretations of a wide range of repertoire which is fast building him a reputation both on the concert stage and in the opera house.

In recent seasons he has conducted the Orchestre de Paris, BBC Scottish Symphony, BBC Symphony, the Ulster Orchestra, Orquesta Sinfónica de Castilla y León, Philharmonia Orchestra, Deutsche Symphony Orchestra Berlin, BBC Philharmonic, Royal Philharmonic and Iceland Symphony Orchestra. In the opera house he has conducted *Tosca* at Opera North and a new production of *Hansel and Gretel* at the Royal Scottish Conservatoire. And in December last year, following a successful debut at Glyndebourne conducting Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore*, he was appointed [principal conductor of the Glyndebourne Sinfonia](#).

Born in 1996, Hickox studied music and composition with Robin Holloway at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, and conducting with Sian Edwards at the [Royal Academy of Music](#), graduating in 2019.

He was assistant conductor at the Rotterdam Philharmonic from 2019-22, and in 2021 he was invited to Tanglewood as one of the festival's two conducting fellows, later also taking part in the fellowship's corresponding residency with the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig.

**Sir Bryn Terfel**

Welsh bass-baritone [Sir Bryn Terfel](#) has established an extraordinary career, performing regularly on the world's most prestigious stages, including the Royal Opera House, The Metropolitan Opera in New York, Opera National de Paris, Teatro Alla Scala, and Zurich Opera. Roles for which he is most noted are Falstaff, Dulcamara, Wotan and Holländer. Recent additions to his repertoire include Reb Tevye, Boris Gudanov, Sweeney Todd and Don Pasquale.

A Grammy, Classical Brit and Gramophone Award winner, Sir Bryn was made a Commander of the British Empire (CBE) for his services to opera in 2003, was awarded the Queen's Medal for Music in 2006, and received a Knighthood for services to music in 2017. He was the last recipient of the Shakespeare Prize by the Alfred Toepfer Foundation, and in 2015 he was given the Freedom of the City of London.

Sir Bryn has performed at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall many times, most recently in March 2023 when he took the title role in a concert performance of Puccini's opera buffa [Gianni Schicchi](#) alongside singers from the European Opera Centre.

Enjoy listening to Sir Bryn Terfel singing '[If I Forget Thee](#)' from *Belshazzar's Feast*.

## **Ning Feng**

[Ning Feng](#) is recognised internationally as an artist of great lyricism, innate musicality and stunning virtuosity. He performs across the globe with major orchestras and conductors, and in recital and chamber concerts in some of the most important international series and festivals. In the 2023-24 season he was artist in residence at NCPA Beijing.

*The Washington Post* has described him as ‘a wonderful player with a creamy, easy tone and an emotional honesty’, and *Gramophone* magazine said of his recent Brahms Sonatas recording that his ‘tone is simply ravishing, even when it soars into the stratosphere’.

Born in Chengdu, China, in 1982, [Ning Feng](#) studied at the Sichuan Conservatory of Music with Weimin Hu, the Hanns Eisler School of Music (Berlin) with Antje Weithaas, and the Royal Academy of Music with Hu Kun. He was first prize winner of both the 2005 Michael Hill International Violin Competition in New Zealand, and the 2006 International Paganini Competition.

Ning Feng lives in Berlin, where he is a violin professor at the Hanns Eisler Hochschule. He is also International Chair of Violin at the [Royal Northern College of Music](#). He plays the 1710 Stradivarius violin known as Vieuxtemps Hauser.

Watch [‘an introduction’](#) to Ning Feng filmed in 2011.

## **Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Choir**

When the Liverpool Philharmonic Society was founded in 1840, it saw the birth not only of an orchestra but of a chorus too. [The Choir](#) added ‘Royal’ to its title in 1990.

In recent years, the Choir has performed Bach’s *St Matthew Passion* and *Mass in B minor*, Orff’s *Carmina Burana*, Elgar’s *The Dream of Gerontius*, Mahler’s *Symphony No.2*, Rachmaninov’s *Vespers*, Poulenc’s *Gloria*, Karl Jenkins’ *Stabat Mater*, James MacMillan’s *St John Passion*, Beethoven’s *Mass in C*, and Britten’s *War Requiem*.

It has also appeared in many of the UK’s major concert venues, including the Royal Albert Hall, and has sung on a number of foreign tours. The Choir is led by Director of Choirs Matthew Hamilton.

Last month the sopranos and altos sang in Holst’s *The Planets*, while during the 2024/25 season members of the Choir will also perform Mahler’s Third Symphony, Janáček’s *Glagolitic Mass* and Verdi’s *Requiem*, and appear in the Spirit of Christmas concert series and the popular annual performance of Handel’s *Messiah*.

## **Anna Meredith – Nautilus**

[Anna Meredith](#) has been described as “one of the most exciting compositional catalysts of our time” and “the most confident and assured voice in British contemporary music.” Her sound is frequently described as “uncategorisable” and “genre-defying” and straddles the worlds of contemporary classical, art pop, film and TV soundtracks, electronica, and experimental rock. Meredith’s music has been performed everywhere from the Hollywood Bowl to the BBC Proms to flashmob body-percussive performances at M6 Services.

The Scottish-raised composer, producer and performer gained a first-class degree in Music at the University of York and went on to gain a master's from the Royal Academy of Music where in 2003, aged 24, she was made the Constant and Kit Lambert junior fellow.

Her work *froms* was written for the Last Night of the Proms in 2008, and in 2010 Meredith won the Paul Hamlyn Foundation Award for composers. She has been composer in residence with the Scottish Symphony Orchestra and RPS/PRS composer in the house with Sinfonia Viva. She was made an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours in 2019.

[\*Nautilus\*](#) was originally composed in 2011 and appeared on her debut studio album *Varmints*, released in 2016. It also features on the soundtrack to the Netflix series [\*Living With Yourself\*](#) starring Paul Rudd. Meredith explains: "*Nautilus* was written as a sort of call to arms (for myself!) and was one of the first tracks I wrote when I started to work in electronics alongside my acoustic or orchestral writing. The shift was my way to reclaim some of the power over my writing, making albums where I would be in complete control. It's a lovely full circle for this piece to now be rearranged back to an orchestral form."

The orchestral version was commissioned by the Lahti Symphony Orchestra and premiered at the Sibelius Hall in Lahti, Finland, in September 2021.

Listen to a recording of Anna Meredith's [\*Nautilus\*](#).

### **Felix Mendelssohn – *Violin Concerto***

For almost two centuries it's been one of the mainstays of the classical violin repertoire. Yet [\*Felix Mendelssohn's\*](#) famous Second Violin Concerto was only delivered to the world after a protracted birth. Mendelssohn first mentioned the idea of a concerto to his childhood chum (and Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestra concertmaster) [\*Ferdinand David\*](#), in the summer of 1838 and already had the opening bars of the E minor theme running through his head. But despite that, it was not until 1844 that he finally finished the manuscript.

In the intervening six years, Mendelssohn was persuaded, somewhat reluctantly, to spend time in Berlin where the new Kaiser Friedrich Wilhelm IV was keen to advance the city's cultural credentials. Mendelssohn also founded the prestigious Leipzig Conservatory and – in the summer of 1844 – made his eighth visit to [\*Britain\*](#) where he conducted concerts in London.

However, during these absences he kept up a correspondence with David which informed his completed concerto, with the violinist offering his own ideas for the extended cadenza in its opening movement.

David finally premiered the work in Leipzig in March 1845, although its composer was unwell and could not conduct the performance. It was an overnight success.

**Did you know? Both Felix Mendelssohn and violinist Ferdinand David were born, a year apart, in the same house in Hamburg's Großen Michaelisstraße.**

Watch a performance of Mendelssohn's [\*Violin Concerto\*](#).

### **Sir William Walton – *Belshazzar's Feast***

It's a behemoth of a work – in addition to its double chorus and semi-chorus there is a full orchestra with expansive percussion section, organ and no fewer than two brass bands thrown in for good measure. Yet [\*Sir William Walton's Belshazzar's Feast\*](#) could have been a very

different beast if its composer had adhered to an initial request (from the BBC) for a work with soloist, small chorus and chamber-sized orchestra suitable for radio broadcast.

Walton liked the idea, but as he worked on it, the piece expanded exponentially to the much-loved and much-performed cantata we know today.

The text was selected from the Old Testament (mainly the Book of Daniel) and arranged by Osbert Sitwell. This wasn't the first collaboration between Walton and the Sitwells. In 1922, the 20-year-old composer had set Edith Sitwell's experimental poetry to music in what became *[Façade: An Entertainment](#)* – in which the future Dame recited her verse through a megaphone from behind a decorated screen and over instrumental accompaniment performed by a sextet. And in fact, Walton even lived with the siblings – including their younger brother Sacheverell, who had been his contemporary at Oxford – for several years, occupying the attic of their Chelsea home.

Meanwhile the much expanded *Belshazzar's Feast* was heard for the first time in Leeds Town Hall on October 8, 1931, as part of the city's music festival, with Malcolm Sargent conducting the London Symphony Orchestra, *[Leeds Festival Chorus](#)* and baritone *[Dennis Noble](#)*. It was described as the 'sensation of the festival' and one report described how "there was a wonderful scene at the close where the composer was called forward and cheered to the echo."

**Did you know? During rehearsals for the premiere of *Belshazzar's Feast*, the festival chorus basses sang too long a note on the word 'drink'. To which Malcolm Sargent instantly called out, waggishly: "Not so long over the drink, gentlemen. Time, please!"**

Listen to Walton's *[Belshazzar's Feast](#)*.

## About the Music

### **Anna Meredith (b.1978): *Nautilus***

Composed: 2011 – arranged for orchestra by Jack Ross, 2021

First Performed (orchestral version): 16 September 2021, Lahti, Sibelius Hall, Lahti Symphony Orchestra cond. Dalia Stasevska

*Nautilus* was originally conceived for electronics, as part of Anna Meredith's hit electro-acoustic album *Varmints*. Meredith describes it as 'a sort of call to arms (for myself!)', and it has that quality right from the fanfare-like beginning. She came up with the idea for the piece while stomping along a beach in Scotland and listening to the sound of her steps – you can hear something like that in the heavy bass brass theme soon after the start – and imagining different kinds of tread moving at the same time. The nautilus of the title is an ocean mollusc, which has come to symbolise nature's power of growth and renewal, its beautiful spiral-like shell patterns reminding us of natural order amongst seeming chaos. It's a perfect image for this short but exhilarating, thunderously affirmative piece.

### **Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847): Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64**

1. Allegro molto appassionato -
2. Andante -
3. Allegretto non troppo - Allegro molto vivace

Composed: 1838-44

First Performed: 13 March 1845, Gewandhaus Leipzig, Ferdinand David (violin), cond. Mendelssohn

Sometimes Mendelssohn composed at lightning speed, at other times it was more a case of hard labour. The famous E minor Violin Concerto took him six years, during which he fired off letter after letter to his friend the violinist Ferdinand David, imploring his advice. Even David's help and reassurance wasn't enough: soon Mendelssohn had drawn in another leading composer, the Dane Niels Gade. 'Please don't laugh at me too much! I'm truly ashamed of myself, but I can't help it. I'm just groping around here.'

From the music alone, you would never guess that Mendelssohn had suffered such agonies in composing it. The famous opening is not only very beautiful and superbly conceived for the violin, it imperiously scorns concerto tradition, abandoning the usual lengthy orchestral introduction and having the soloist sweep straight in with its long, soaring melody. The dramatic first movement passes without a break into the slow movement, which begins with another glorious long melody, and the sense of continuously unfolding instrumental song is sustained right through to the end. Immediately the violin starts again with a wistful new idea, in a slightly faster tempo. Is this the finale, or some kind of intermezzo? Then the finale proper races into action, with a display of technical fireworks leading to a joyous, thrilling conclusion.

### **William Walton (1902-83): *Belshazzar's Feast***

Composed: 1929-1931

First Performed: 8 October 1931, Leeds Festival, London Symphony Orchestra & Leeds Festival Chorus, Dennis Noble (baritone), cond. Malcolm Sargent

Composing was never easy for William Walton, and he laboured long and hard on *Belshazzar's Feast*. The idea of producing a modern oratorio on the sensational Biblical story of the Babylonian King Belshazzar came early on, but the choral and the orchestral forces (quite small at first) just kept growing and growing. The final icing on this increasingly spectacular musical cake was the addition of the two offstage sets of brass instruments. They were on hand anyway for a performance of Berlioz's vast *Requiem*; so, according to legend, festival director Thomas Beecham told Walton, 'As you'll never hear the thing again, my boy, why not throw in a couple of brass bands?' Beecham was gloriously wrong. *Belshazzar's Feast* was a huge success, and it was soon a firm concert favourite, despite (or perhaps partly because of) the Anglican Church Synod's stern disapproval - the irony of forbidding church performances of a work based entirely on Biblical verses doesn't seem to have occurred to those worthy gentlemen!

While the text of *Belshazzar's Feast* is entirely kosher, so to speak, the story represents the Old Testament at its most opulent and savage – no hint of Christian forgiveness or forbearance here. The captive Israelites are enslaved in Babylon. We hear their agonised lament, then their rage, expressed in one of the Bible's most notorious verses, 'Happy shall he be that taketh thy children and dasheth them against a stone'. Unmoved by all this, King Belshazzar arranges a monstrous feast, or perhaps orgy is a better word, during which the Jewish sacred vessels are brought out and profaned. Then Belshazzar sees a ghostly hand, writing mysterious words on the wall: translated, these read, 'Thou are weighed in the balance and found wanting.' The chorus tells us with graphic simplicity what happens next. Belshazzar is slain, then Babylon, one of the most splendid cities in world history, collapses, greeted by a chorus of elemental rejoicing.