

BBC NOW Celebrate 80 Years of Cheltenham Music Festival

BBC National Orchestra of Wales
Gergely Madaras *conductor*

Cheltenham Town Hall
Saturday 12 July

Benjamin Britten	Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes (premiered at Cheltenham 1945)
Malcolm Arnold	Symphony No. 5 (Cheltenham commission, premiered at Cheltenham 1961)
Interval	
Anna Sempke	Fanfare for Cheltenham (world premiere, Cheltenham 2025 commission)
Edward Elgar	Enigma Variations

About the Programme

Benjamin Britten Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes

Currents and undercurrents make up the *Sea Interludes*, a suite of orchestral scene changes from Britten's first opera *Peter Grimes*. These currents are simultaneously natural - the ever-changing patterns of the ever-present sea - and psychological, shot through with the fear, rage, and social oppression of the opera's title character. Based on George Crabbe's poem 'The Borough' and set in Aldeburgh in Suffolk, *Peter Grimes* is the tale of an outcast fisherman hounded to his eventual death by the local townspeople, who suspect him of the murder of two young apprentices. (In the opera Grimes is innocent, but drowns himself anyway). The *Interludes* serve not only as functional intermissions in this narrative but also as self-contained musical dramas in their own right, and they were performed as a standalone suite at Cheltenham just one week after the opera's premiere in 1945.

The suite opens with *Dawn*, a premonition of both daytime and death. Its sound world comprises three distinct elements: a mournful high melody in the strings and flutes hovers over an energetic arpeggio figure, undercut by a dark brass chorale. This is followed by *Sunday Morning*, which opens with overlapping thirds in the horns. The bright, angular melodies of this interlude conjure sea-spume and wheeling birds, forming a dazzling background to the darker human world portended by sonorous church bells. *Moonlight*, which in the opera occurs between a tragedy and its discovery, depicts an uneasy calm, with gently dissonant string pulsations unfolding beneath sharp percussive interjections. Finally the sinister undercurrents of the preceding movements are loosed by the *Storm*. This episode thrusts into the open all the bubbling tensions within Grimes and his relationship with the townspeople; amidst the storm's fury, the strings softly play a tune to which the fisherman pariah has just sung the words, "What harbour shelters peace, away from tidal waves, away from storms? What harbour can embrace terrors and tragedies?" It is to this same tune that Grimes eventually scuttles his own boat.

Malcolm Arnold Symphony No. 5, Op. 74

Malcolm Arnold was for many years a distinct and original voice in British musical life. The scope of his output is extremely wide, encompassing traditional forms (including nine symphonies) alongside numerous film and television scores, aided by his natural gifts as a tunesmith.

The *Symphony No. 5* is an excellent example of Arnold's style - eclectic yet broadly tonal. Commissioned for the 1961 Cheltenham Festival, it displays a wide range of influences: the irony of later Stravinsky, the sentiment (or sentimentality) of Mahler, and some of Bartók's dry pugnaciousness. It is also a work written out of loss, with the composer paying musical tribute to four of his friends who died young. Each of these has their own moment in the first movement, which forms a kaleidoscopic journey arising out of a single five-note theme. The second movement is a lyrical Adagio, employing increasingly rich harmony and orchestration to expand upon two themes - the first Mahlerian with blue tinges, the second cinematic and swelling. The third movement references material from the first, forming a riotous scherzo and trio which alternates between sophisticated jazz and pure fury. The final movement is again a collage of competing elements, with a fife and drum march being periodically thwarted by violent interruptions, before a dramatic return of the second movement's first theme. This too is eventually undermined, and the symphony ends in empty melancholy.

Anna Semple SoundingsDancesEchoes - A Fanfare for Cheltenham (world première, Cheltenham commission)

Anna Semple writes:

"The main idea for 'SoundingsDancesEchoes' came from a preexisting interest I've had in the fleeting and fragmented. Music changes the way we experience time, and I've always liked the idea that there's some colossal musicking happening at all times and we occasionally tune in for a bit, catch a glimpse of something which continues without us once we tune out. The five-note repeated motif came from a fragment of birdsong I heard whilst walking through Southeast London - there's maybe something of the colours of city life in there too..."

Edward Elgar Enigma Variations

The *Enigma Variations* are social music: their genesis lies not in abstract schemas but living people. Arising out of a lilting theme, improvised after a long day's teaching, they form a set of personal dedications by Elgar to his wife and friends. Each of the fourteen variations is initialled, and their character is flavoured directly by each friend's idiosyncrasies and shared memories. Completed in 1899, the work cemented Elgar's place as an internationally important composer, and remains a much-loved part of the English orchestral repertoire.

The variations, like people, vary widely in character. There is the skittishness of Variation II, emulating a pianist friend's warmup routine; there is the raucousness of Variation XI, depicting the successful recovery of an organist's bulldog upon falling into a river; and there is of course the moving elegy of Variation IX, whose title 'Nimrod' is a coded reference to August Jaeger, Elgar's editor at Novello. (Nimrod is the name of an ancient 'Jaeger' - 'hunter' in German.) The penultimate variation has no initials, but probably refers to either Lady Mary Lygon or Helen Weaver, each of whom were bound for distant lands when the piece was written; their journey is shown musically by a quotation from Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*. The final variation, the longest of the fourteen, is dedicated to Elgar himself. It quotes two previous variations, both dedicated to particularly influential people - his wife Alice (Var. I) and Jaeger (Var. IX). The whole set is tied together not only by the outline of the initial theme but also by the Enigma from which the work takes its name: a hidden theme, hinted at by Elgar numerous times after completion. This mysterious unifying element has been thoroughly investigated, but despite a wide range of theories, no definitive candidate or solution has been found. It is perhaps the combination of this unknowable core with Elgar's deep personal devotion that has given this music such lasting appeal.

Programme notes written by Will Fox (winner of RPS Young Classical Writers Prize 2025)

Artist Biographies

BBC National Orchestra of Wales

For over 90 years, the BBC National Orchestra of Wales (BBC NOW), the only professional symphony orchestra in Wales, has played an integral part in the cultural landscape of the country, occupying a distinctive role as both a

broadcast and national orchestra, and serving as an ambassador of Welsh culture, regularly performing music created in Wales and championing Welsh composers and artists.

Part of BBC Cymru Wales and supported by the Arts Council of Wales, BBC NOW performs a busy schedule of live concerts and broadcasts, working with acclaimed conductors and soloists from across the world, including their Principal Conductor, the award-winning Ryan Bancroft.

The orchestra is committed to working in partnership with community groups and charities and takes music out of the concert hall and into settings such as schools and hospitals to enable others to experience and be empowered by music. It undertakes workshops, concerts and side-by-side performances to inspire and encourage the next generation of performers, composers and arts leaders, and welcomes thousands of young people and community members annually through its outreach and education projects.

BBC NOW performs annually at the BBC Proms and biennially at the BBC Cardiff Singer of the World competition, and its concerts can be heard regularly across the BBC: on Radio 3, Radio Wales and Radio Cymru. On screen, music performed by BBC NOW can be heard widely across the BBC and other global channels, including the soundtrack and theme tune for Doctor Who, Planet Earth III, Prehistoric Planet, The Pact and Children in Need.

Gergely Madaras *conductor*

Gergely Madaras is Music Director of the Orchestre Philharmonique Royal de Liège since 2019. Together, they have performed across Belgium and toured to Europe and South America, having been regularly featured on Mezzo and Medici.tv and have been building an extensive discography ranging from César Franck through Liszt and Dohnányi for Alpha, BIS, Fuga Libera and Palazzetto Bru Zane labels. Gergely was previously Music Director of the Orchestre Dijon Bourgogne and Chief Conductor of the Savaria Symphony Orchestra.

As a guest conductor, Gergely's recent highlights include engagements with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, Budapest Festival Orchestra, NHK Symphony Tokyo, Philharmonia, Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, BBC Symphony and Philharmonic, Oslo Philharmonic, Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo, Hallé, Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse, Orchestra della Svizzera Italiana, Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della RAI, Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra and Sao Paulo State Symphony.

The 2024-25 season sees Gergely return to the WDR Sinfonieorchester, NHK Symphony Orchestra, Oslo Philharmonic, BBC Symphony and BBC NOW, Hamburger Symphoniker, Orchestre de Chambre de Paris, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, Hungarian Radio and the Norwegian Radio Orchestras; furthermore he makes debuts with the Gürzenich Orchestra Cologne, Netherlands Radio Philharmonic, George Enescu Philharmonic, Zagreb Philharmonic and the Romanian National Radio Symphony.

Whilst grounded in the core classical and romantic repertoire, Gergely maintains a close relationship with new music. He has collaborated with composers George Benjamin, Péter Eötvös, György Kurtág, Tristan Murail, Luca Francesconi, Philippe Boesmans and Pierre Boulez, for whom he served as assistant conductor at the Lucerne Festival Academy between 2011-2013.

Gergely has appeared as a regular guest at the Lucerne, Gstaad, Milano Musica, Bucharest Enescu, Festival d'Automne à Paris, Murten Classics, Septembre Musical Montreux, MiTo Settembre Musica, Budapest Spring and the Tokyo Stradivarius music festivals and made highly praised recordings with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, WDR Sinfonieorchester, Bamberger Symphoniker and City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra.

Born in Budapest in 1984, Gergely first began studying folk music with the last generation of authentic Hungarian gypsy and peasant musicians at the age of five. He went on to study classical flute, violin and composition, graduating from the flute faculty of the Liszt Academy in Budapest, as well as the conducting faculty of the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna, where he studied with Mark Stringer.