

# Aurora Orchestra and Benjamin Grosvenor

Cheltenham Town Hall  
Fri 3 July

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**Benjamin Grosvenor** *piano*  
**Aurora Orchestra**  
**Nicholas Collon** *conductor*

<b>Jessie Montgomery</b>	<i>Strum</i>	6'53
<b>Ludwig van Beethoven</b>	<i>Piano Concerto No. 1</i>	34'
Interval		
<b>Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart</b>	<i>Symphony No. 41, 'Jupiter' (from memory)</i>	30'

## About the Programme

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For American composer Jessie Montgomery, “music is a meeting place at which all people can converse about their unique differences and common stories”. *Strum*, Montgomery’s exuberant work for strings, certainly captures this feeling of multiplicity and communion. The piece first sprang to life as a string quintet in 2006, before Montgomery adapted the score for string orchestra in 2012. The composer notes how the work’s voicing “is often spread wide over the ensemble, giving the music an expansive quality of sound”, while the texture is constructed from “layers of rhythmic or harmonic ostinati that string together to form a bed of sound for melodies to weave in and out.” Drawing on “American folk idioms and the spirit of dance and movement”, *Strum* follows a loose narrative “that begins with fleeting nostalgia and transforms into ecstatic celebration.”

Somewhat confusingly, Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No.1 in C Major, Op.15 was not in fact the first piano concerto he composed. It was, however, the first he published. Not a great deal is known about the work’s composition, but it was likely premiered in 1795 and completed some years after the Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 19. Likely, Beethoven published this C-major concerto first simply because he liked it more and thought it would be better received. While the B-flat concerto was of a scale to be rehearsed in an apartment, this C-major concerto is a far grander affair, and was scored for the largest orchestra yet demanded for a piano concerto, with the inclusion of full woodwind plus horns, trumpets and timpani.

The brisk first movement is striking for its vigorous energy, numerous fortissimo markings and harmonic audacity. It opens to a conventional enough march-like theme but the second subject quickly demonstrates Beethoven's appetite for adventure: here, the second violins introduce the melody in the distant key of E-flat major, before winds interrupt in F-minor, with the harmony then passing through G minor before we finally land in the anticipated G major. The lyrical second movement, cast in ternary form, is not without its surprises either. Opening to an elegant piano solo, the movement is perhaps most striking for its orchestration; here, not just trumpets and drums are set aside (as would be the custom) but also flutes and oboes, leaving a lower, more sonorous ensemble of strings, horns, bassoons and clarinets. The latter instrument is then given an especially eloquent role towards the movement's close, where clarinet and piano exchange solo lines as equals.

The finale owes much to Haydn in its witty good spirits. Here, the main theme of the rondo is often compared to a 'contredanse', a lively social dance with its roots in English country dance, which became a sensation in Viennese ballrooms. This rondo theme is interwoven with contrasting episodes featuring piano passagework and woodwind fanfares. A final surprise awaits just before the movement's end, where an introspective cadenza and serene wind chorale almost halts proceedings, before the music abruptly races to a joyful conclusion.

It's very likely that Mozart never heard his Symphony No. 41 in C major, K. 551, the final symphony he wrote. Certainly he never learnt of its now popular nickname, 'Jupiter', which is thought to have been bestowed on the work in the nineteenth century by London impresario Johann Peter Salomon. The name is apt enough though, for a piece of music as spirited and triumphant as the Roman god himself. The circumstances in which Mozart composed the work were, however, far from joyful. The composer completed his last three symphonies in just nine weeks over the summer of 1788 amid a period of terrible strife in his personal life: the composer found himself contending with the death of his six-month-old daughter, caring for his sick wife while struggling with his own ill health, and beset with financial difficulties. Yet the work he produced rings with jest, pathos, technical complexity and an unabashed exuberance. It is an astonishing conclusion to his symphonic output.

The symphony's opening moves from a strident first statement by the orchestra to a more lyrical theme in just the strings. With mercurial wit, Mozart also quotes his opera buffa aria 'Un bacio di mano' ('A kiss on the hand'), composed earlier that year and slotted neatly into the end of the movement's opening section. The second movement, 'Andante Cantabile', sees Mozart venture away from the jubilant C-major of the opening in a series of yearning passages for muted strings, whose harmonies grow ever darker and more distant. The third movement presents a more conventional Minuet and Trio, before the symphony arrives at its dazzling finale.

This closing movement opens to a four-note motif derived from the Gregorian hymn 'Lucis creator' ('The Creator of Light'), also found in a number of Mozart's earlier works, including his Symphony No. 1, composed when he was just eight years old. A further four motifs are introduced and subjected to intricate contrapuntal invention, before Mozart gathers all five themes together in a dizzying double fugue, concluding his final symphony with a coda of remarkable splendour.

*Programme note by Kate Wakeling*

## Artist Biographies

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### Aurora Orchestra

Driven by the belief that orchestral music is for everyone, Aurora Orchestra has established itself as an innovative and boundary-breaking ensemble, creating musical experiences beyond the ordinary. Under its Principal Conductor Nicholas Collon, Aurora Orchestra has grown since its first concert in 2005 into an established name on the UK and international orchestral scene. Aurora is the pioneer for memorised orchestral performance: it is the first orchestra worldwide to break down physical barriers to music by removing sheet music and stands for large-scale works. Over recent years, these memorised performances have developed into cross-genre dramatic and musical explorations that reach deeper under the skin of the music, devised by Aurora's Artistic Director Jane Mitchell. Aurora has collaborated with an exceptional range of artists across different artistic disciplines.

Through its award-winning Creative Learning programme Aurora Classroom, Aurora regularly offers workshops and storytelling concerts for families, schools and young people, including children with special educational needs and disabilities. In 2022, Aurora launched a free pioneering online learning platform for schools, which includes teacher training and a wide range of resources to help teachers deliver music activities in the classroom, including bespoke activities for SEND settings.

### **Benjamin Grosvenor** *piano*

Acclaimed and multi-award winning British pianist Benjamin Grosvenor is renowned for his "indisputable virtuosity" and understated elegance at the keyboard and appears on the world's most prestigious stages.

During his 2025/26 season, Benjamin debuts with the Swedish Radio (Beethoven 1), performs Ravel's G major Concerto with Filharmonica della Scala, San Diego Symphony, CBSO and Orchestre Svizzera Italiana. He closes the Philharmonia Orchestra's 80th anniversary season with a UK tour of Strauss's Burleske within the Southbank Centre's 75th anniversary celebrations, before touring Beethoven's Piano Concerto no.1 with the Aurora Orchestra conducted by Nicholas Collon, including at the Cheltenham Festival. He also returns to the Concertgebouw Amsterdam for his debut performance with John Wilson's Sinfonia of London.

Recital highlights this season include Carnegie Hall, Chicago, Amsterdam, Singapore and London. He makes his debut at Berlin's Boulez Saal with Kian Soltani and at Vienna's Muzikverein and Heidelberger Frühling with his Piano Quartet featuring Hyeyoon Park, Timothy Ridout and Kian Soltani.

Previous concerto engagements have included Cleveland, Boston Symphony, NHK Symphony, Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin and Orchestre National de France. Benjamin performs with all the major UK orchestras and regularly appears at the BBC Proms, most recently with Ravel G major (2025) and Busoni (2024), and has also performed a solo recital and at the First and Last Nights.

Benjamin's recent conductor collaborations include Marin Alsop, Elim Chan, Edward Gardner, Manfred Honneck, Paavo Jarvi, Nathalie Stutzmann, Krzysztof Urbanski and Kazuki Yamada.

A celebrated recitalist, recent engagements have included Berliner Konzerthaus, Wigmore Hall, Southbank Centre, Luxembourg Philharmonie, Lucerne and at Klavierfest Ruhr, Mantaa and La Roque d'Anthéron Festivals. He was a featured artist at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris and in 2024 premiered *Hommage à Liszt* by Brett Dean - which was commissioned for him - in Lucerne, Chicago and London

**Nicholas Collon** *conductor*

British conductor Nicholas Collon is recognised for his elegant conducting style, searching musical intellect and inspirational music-making. He is Founder and Principal Conductor of Aurora Orchestra, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year, and has been Chief Conductor of the Finnish Radio Symphony since 2021 (renewed until 2030). He was Chief Conductor of the Residentie Orkest in Den Haag (latterly also Artistic Advisor) 2016-2021 and was Principal Guest of the Gürzenich Orchester from 2017-2022. Under his leadership, the Finnish Radio Symphony has toured to the BBC Proms, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, and across Germany, and has been nominated for Orchestra of the Year 2025 by Gramophone. Their expanding discography together for Ondine includes Wennäkoski (Gramophone's Best Contemporary Recording Award 2023) and Sibelius (Record of the Month in August 2025 for the 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony). Their 2025/6 season features works by Lili Boulanger, Hans Abrahamsen and Hector Berlioz, with releases this season including Strauss's Eine Alpensinfonie and Holst's The Planets.

Collon leads the Aurora Orchestra at the BBC Proms every year in their hugely popular memorised performances; in 2025, they performed Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, a production which was televised. Aurora are Resident at Kings Place and at the Southbank Centre where they continue to reinvent the traditional concert format. They tour to major European venues and festivals every season, and revived their ground-breaking *Sacre du Printemps* production in Spring 2026, with performances in Berlin, Munich, Cologne, Rotterdam, Essen, Zurich, Bern and Geneva. They have recorded for Warner, winning the Echo Klassik Award for 'Klassik Ohne Grenzen' in 2015, and latterly for Deutsche Grammophon.

In 2025/26, Collon returned to conduct the Dresden Staatskapelle (televised live on ZDF), took the Danish National to the Enescu Festival, and conducted the Atlanta Symphony, Swedish Radio and City of Birmingham symphonies. He also regularly conducts the Orchestre National de France, Frankfurt Radio Symphony, and Dresden Philharmonic, and last season debuted with the Munich Philharmonic and San Francisco Symphony orchestras.

Collon has conducted over 250 new works, including many world premieres. He is also an accomplished opera conductor, having conducted productions across the UK (including at Glyndebourne, English National Opera, Welsh National Opera, Aldeburgh Festival) and at Oper Koeln, in repertoire from Mozart to Britten. Born in London, Nicholas is a violist, pianist and organist by training, and studied as Organ Scholar at Clare College, Cambridge.