



RSNO

SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL  
ORCHESTRA



# Elgar's Cello Concerto

Usher Hall, Edinburgh  
Fri 5 Jun 2026 7.30pm

Glasgow Royal Concert Hall  
Sat 6 Jun 7.30pm

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# Elgar's Cello Concerto

**Usher Hall, Edinburgh** Fri 5 Jun 2026 7.30pm

**Glasgow Royal Concert Hall** Sat 6 Jun 7.30pm

There's a good reason why Elgar's Cello Concerto is a classic: deep emotions surge beneath its haunted surface, and if anyone can uncover them it's our remarkable soloist, Kian Soltani. Today, it's just one stage on an emotional odyssey devised by our Principal Guest Conductor Patrick Hahn: a voyage that embraces the infinite longing of George Crumb and Richard Wagner, the volcanic grief of Benjamin Britten, and Scriabin's final, multicoloured starburst of pure sonic bliss. Be transported.

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**CRUMB** God-music from *Black Angels* [3']

leading without a break into

**BRITTEN** Sinfonia da Requiem Op20 [21']

**ELGAR** Cello Concerto in E Minor Op85 [26']

INTERVAL

**WAGNER** Prelude to Act I from *Tristan und Isolde* [13']

leading without a break into

**SCRIABIN** Poem of Ecstasy Op54 [22']

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**Patrick Hahn** Conductor

**Kian Soltani** Cello

**Royal Scottish National Orchestra**

The Glasgow performance will be recorded for the RSNO Archive.

Supported by the Iain and Pamela Sinclair Legacy.

If viewing these notes at the concert, please do so considerately and not during performances.

**Please silence all mobile telephones and alerts, and refrain from taking photographs, without flash, until the end of each piece.**

# In memory of Irene Heggie

1947-2026



Our Edinburgh performance is dedicated to the memory of Irene Heggie.

A well-kent face in the Usher Hall team, Irene gave over 24 years of dedicated service to the Usher Hall, rarely missing an RSNO performance. She gave everyone a warm welcome – always going out of her way to get to know RSNO staff, musicians and, most importantly, our supporters. Irene will be fondly remembered by all who knew her. We send our love and best wishes to Irene's family and friends who are here with us tonight.

# Welcome

It's a pleasure to be back with you this evening after being away on tour with Music Director Thomas Søndergård and violinist Lü Siqing. We have been in China for almost two weeks, performing in Beijing, Nanjing, Shanghai and Tianjin, building connections across the world. But it's always great to be back home performing for you, our dedicated audiences, as we head towards the end of a magnificent Season.

Tonight marks the fantastic Kian Soltani's RSNO debut, joining us for Elgar's Cello Concerto, the centrepiece in Principal Guest Conductor Patrick Hahn's one-of-a-kind programme. Patrick puts together brilliant programmes, his most recent being with the Frank Dupree Trio in November. Tonight Patrick creates a thread running through the whole concert – a unique way to approach classical music that really marks him out. It's no surprise that we're looking forward to him joining us again next week for the Season Finale!

You may have already heard the news that we have appointed Giedrė Šlekytė as our new Music Director from the beginning of the 2027:28 Season. Giedrė's appointment opens an exciting new chapter in the RSNO's history. Current Music Director Thomas Søndergård becomes our Music Director Emeritus. With Giedrė and Thomas on our Artistic Team alongside Patrick as our Principal Guest Conductor, I am extremely excited about the future!

For now, though, I hope you enjoy this evening's performance.

## Alistair Mackie

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

## Keep in touch with the RSNO

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# Royal Scottish National Orchestra



Formed in 1891, the Royal Scottish National Orchestra (RSNO) is one of Europe's leading symphony orchestras. Awarded royal patronage by Her Late Majesty The Queen in 1977, its special status in the UK's cultural life was cemented in 2007 when it was recognised as one of Scotland's five National Performing Companies, supported by the Scottish Government.

Led by Music Director Thomas Søndergård, the Orchestra performs across Scotland, including concerts in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee, Aberdeen, Perth and Inverness, and appears regularly at the Edinburgh International Festival and BBC Proms. The RSNO tours internationally, most recently visiting China and Europe. In May 2026, Giedrė Šlekytė was announced as the RSNO's Music Director Designate and will formally become Music Director from the beginning of the 2027:28 Season, with Thomas Søndergård taking on the new position of Music Director Emeritus.

The RSNO has a worldwide reputation for the quality of its recordings, receiving a 2020 Gramophone Classical Music Award for Chopin's Piano Concertos (soloist: Benjamin Grosvenor), conducted by Elim Chan, two Diapason d'Or awards (Denève/Roussel 2007; Denève/Debussy 2012) and eight GRAMMY Award nominations. In recent years, the RSNO has cultivated an international reputation for world-class film, television and videogame soundtrack recording.

The Orchestra has recorded for BAFTA-winning series *Silo* (Apple TV) and worked with the likes of GRAMMY Award-winning composer Lorne Balfe on *Life on Our Planet* (Netflix). Other notable titles include *Nuremberg* (Sony Pictures), *Now You See Me: Now You Don't* (Lionsgate), *Horizon: An American Saga* (Warner Bros) and *Star Wars Outlaws* (Ubisoft). The Orchestra records at its bespoke in-house facility in Glasgow. In 2026, the RSNO was the first professional symphony orchestra to be awarded the Royal Philharmonic Society's Ensemble Award since 2014. The award recognises musical ensembles for outstanding quality and scope of performances and work.

The RSNO believes that music can enrich lives and aims to inspire, educate and entertain people throughout Scotland and beyond with its performances, recordings and engagement programmes. Supporting schools, families, young professionals and wider communities, the RSNO delivers high-quality initiatives for all ages and abilities. The RSNO's engagement offering includes its singing strand, encompassing a Buggy Choir and Chorus Academy in both Dundee and Glasgow and a lunchtime Workplace Choir, which complements the well-established and highly respected RSNO Youth Choruses and RSNO Chorus. The community choruses are designed with the benefits of group singing for health and wellbeing at their core and are open to all.

# On Stage

## FIRST VIOLIN

Maya Iwabuchi  
LEADER  
Shlomy Dobrinsky  
ASSOCIATE LEADER  
Patrick Curlett  
ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL  
Helena Rose  
Susannah Lowdon  
Caroline Parry  
Alan Manson  
Veronica Marziano  
Lorna Rough  
Liam Lynch  
Ursula Heidecker Allen  
Elizabeth Bamping  
Joana Rodrigues  
Sophie Sild

## SECOND VIOLIN

Emma Oldfield  
GUEST PRINCIPAL  
Jacqueline Speirs  
Marion Wilson  
Sophie Lang  
Colin McKee  
Robin Wilson  
Anne Bünemann  
Emily Nennering  
Paul Medd  
Joe Hodson  
Fiona Stephen  
Seona Glen

## VIOLA

Tom Dunn  
PRINCIPAL  
Felix Tanner  
Asher Zaccardelli  
Lisa Rourke  
Beth Woodford  
Claire Dunn  
Katherine Wren  
Francesca Hunt  
Marsailidh Groat  
David McCreadie

## CELLO

Pei-Jee Ng  
PRINCIPAL  
Betsy Taylor  
Kennedy Leitch  
Yuuki Bouterey-Ishido  
Rachael Lee  
Sarah Digger  
Gunda Baranauskaitė  
Robert Anderson

## DOUBLE BASS

Seb Pennar  
GUEST PRINCIPAL  
Michael Rae  
Alexandre Cruz dos Santos  
Moray Jones  
Olaya Garcia Alvarez  
Paul Speirs

## FLUTE

Katherine Bryan  
PRINCIPAL  
Oliver Roberts  
Adam Richardson  
Jack Welch  
PRINCIPAL PICCOLO

## OBOE

Adrian Wilson  
PRINCIPAL  
Peter Dykes  
Fraser Kelman  
Henry Clay  
PRINCIPAL COR ANGLAIS

## CLARINET

Timothy Orpen  
PRINCIPAL  
William Knight  
Leo Kerr  
Duncan Swindells  
PRINCIPAL BASS CLARINET

## SAXOPHONE

Lewis Banks  
ALTO

## BASSOON

David Hubbard  
PRINCIPAL  
Jamie Louise White  
Emma Simpson  
Paolo Dutto  
PRINCIPAL CONTRABASSOON

## HORN

Amadea Dazeley-Gaist  
PRINCIPAL  
Alison Murray  
Andrew McLean  
David McClenaghan  
Martin Murphy  
Andrew Saunders  
Diana Seach

## TRUMPET

Christopher Hart  
PRINCIPAL  
Brian McGinley  
Jason Lewis  
Robert Baxter  
Andrew Connell-Smith

## TROMBONE

Dávur Juul Magnussen  
PRINCIPAL  
Cillian Ó Ceallacháin  
Alastair Sinclair  
PRINCIPAL BASS TROMBONE

## TUBA

John Whitener  
PRINCIPAL

## TIMPANI

Lou Goodwin  
GUEST PRINCIPAL

## PERCUSSION

Simon Lowdon  
PRINCIPAL  
Stuart Semple  
Colin Hyson  
Peter Murch  
Scott Vassie

## HARP

Pippa Tunnell  
Sharron Griffiths

## PIANO

Lynda Cochrane

## ORGAN

Imogen Morgan

# Patrick Hahn

## Conductor



Patrick Hahn is one of the most sought after and exciting conductors of his generation. He is General Music Director of the Sinfonieorchester und Oper Wuppertal, and Principal Guest Conductor of the Münchner Rundfunkorchester and RSNO. In his last season as General Music Director in Wuppertal, Patrick presents Wagner's Ring cycle in concert across the season with an internationally renowned cast featuring Catherine Foster, Benjamin Bruns, Michael Kupfer-Radecky and Karen Cargill.

As a guest conductor in the 2025/26 season, Patrick makes his first appearances at the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig with Sol Gabetta, Staatskapelle Dresden, WDR Sinfonieorchester Köln with Ilya Gringolts and Staatsphilharmonie Nürnberg with Timothy Ridout. Return visits include the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin with Fazıl Say on a five-concert tour of China. Opera highlights include his debut at Deutsche Oper Berlin with Johann Strauss' *Die Fledermaus*, Richard Strauss' *Intermezzo* at the Semperoper Dresden, and Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* at the Bayerische Staatsoper.

Previous seasons' highlights include his first appearances at the hr-Sinfonieorchester Frankfurt, Brussels Philharmonic with Patricia Kopatchinskaja and Anastasia Kobekina, Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della RAI with Truls Mørk, and the Staatsoper Hamburg for Wagner's *Parsifal*. Successful return visits include the Wiener Symphoniker in Vienna and on tour, and the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich.

CD releases this season include an all-Gottfried von Einem album with the RSNO on Linn Records, and Ethel Smyth's opera *Der Wald* with the Sinfonieorchester Wuppertal on the CPO label, marking the first time it has been recorded in its original German language.

Aside from his work in classical music, Patrick accompanies himself on the piano singing cabaret songs by the Austrian satirist and composer Georg Kreisler. As a jazz pianist, he received awards from the Chicago Jazz Festival, and the Outstanding Soloist Award from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse as the best jazz pianist of the 37th Annual Jazz Festival.

# RSNO

SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL  
ORCHESTRA

Recommended by  
CLASSIC *f*M

## Season Finale

# Ode to Joy

**EDINBURGH**

FRI 12 JUN: 7.30pm

**GLASGOW**

SAT 13 JUN: 7.30pm

**Mendelssohn** The Hebrides Overture  
*Fingal's Cave*

**Sir James MacMillan** Three Scottish Songs

**Beethoven** Symphony No9 Choral

**Patrick Hahn** Conductor

**Eleanor Dennis** Soprano

**Karen Cargill** Mezzo-soprano

**Joshua Ellicott** Tenor

**Andrew Hamilton** Bass

**RSNO Chorus**

**Stephen Doughty** Director, RSNO Chorus

**Paul Whittaker** BSL Performer

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**George Crumb** (1929-2022)

# God-music from *Black Angels*

## **FIRST PERFORMANCE**

Black Angels: University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, October 1970

**DURATION** God-music: 3 minutes

The American composer George Crumb was fascinated with musical texture and timbre, which led him to push the capabilities of instruments and players to their limits. His music is connected to classical traditions but moves beyond them – returning to fundamentals of sound that some have linked to ancient traditions.

Crumb listened to the world around him and brought that world into the concert hall. In 1970, the Vietnam War was at its height. In February of that year, Crumb finished *Black Angels*, a score for amplified string quartet, crystal glasses and two tam-tam gongs subtitled 'Thirteen images from a dark land'. It would become his most famous and most-performed work.

*Black Angels* is many things. One is a protest against war, which Crumb clarified by inscribing the words 'in a time of war' in the score in Latin (*in tempore belli*, a label used famously by Joseph Haydn). It is also a voyage of the soul, a meditation on life and death, and an exploration of the religious strife of the modern world, in which the first violin represents the music of the devil and the cello is the voice of God.

Many of the work's meanings are hidden within its copious riddles and number games which orbit around the prime numbers 7 and 13 – both in musical detail (note values, patterns and pitches) but also in the structure of each movement.

Crumb, however, warned listeners not to attach too much importance to the work's complex numerology. 'Music might be defined as a system of proportions in the service of a spiritual impulse,' he once said. More tangible are the score's references to two known tunes: the plainchant theme *Dies Irae* and the slow movement melody from Franz Schubert's own String Quartet in D Minor D810, *Death and the Maiden*.

*Black Angels* has 13 movements and is divided into three parts: Departure, Absence and Return. The excerpt heard tonight, God-music, opens the third section, Return. It is designated as an *aria accompagnata* (accompanied song), in which a solo cello 'sings' over the sound of glasses played by running wet fingers around their rims. For these performances, the original string quartet parts are played by percussionists. The movement is conceived as a moment of calm between the strife and restlessness that characterise the music surrounding it.

© Andrew Mellor

Please note: Britten's *Sinfonia da Requiem* follows Crumb's God-music from *Black Angels* without a break.

**Benjamin Britten** (1913-1976)

# Sinfonia da Requiem

Op20



**FIRST PERFORMANCE**

New York, 29 March 1941

**DURATION** 21 minutes

**1. Lacrymosa**

**2. Dies Irae**

**3. Requiem aeternam**

While the intended audience of Britten's *Sinfonia da Requiem* may have been disgruntled, this emotionally charged work has endured as one of his most powerful early masterpieces. In 1939, Britten was approached by the British Council to write a piece of 'festivity' for an unspecified major power. It turned out to be part of a wider commission from the Japanese government to mark the 2,600th anniversary of the founding of the Japanese Empire. Britten was commissioned along with the French composer Jacques Ibert, Richard Strauss (who was pressured into participation by Joseph Goebbels of the Nazi government) and several other Japanese composers.

Britten agreed, on the proviso that he wouldn't be expected to write a jingoistic work. After a delay in receiving the contract, Britten had just

six weeks to write the piece. Realising that the *Sinfonia* was all he could reasonably complete in time, he notified the Japanese consul of its nature and the Latin titles he planned to use. He assumed this information had been passed on, submitted the work and heard nothing more from the Japanese contingent for six months.

Dedicated to Britten's parents, the piece also reflects Britten's deep opposition to the looming war. He was a pacifist, later applying to be a conscientious objector. He had recently moved to the US with his partner Peter Pears to escape the outbreak of war. At the point of writing, Japan was invading mainland China but had not yet formally entered the Second World War or allied with Nazi Germany.

In autumn, Britten learned that the Japanese government had rejected the piece for its sombre character and use of Catholic references. The *Sinfonia* eventually received its Japanese premiere in 1956, having already been performed in the US, where an early Boston Symphony performance helped lead to the commission of Britten's opera *Peter Grimes*.

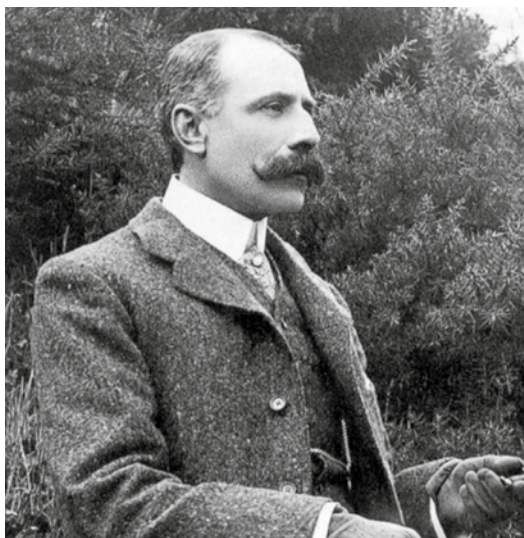
This is a pivotal piece in Britten's output: his largest orchestral work for the concert hall and his first major orchestral work without a soloist. The three movements, played attacca (without a break), mirror the emotional arc of a Requiem Mass, from lamentation to fury and ending with a fragile peace. *Lacrymosa* opens with an explosion of timpani and brass, before an ominous calm falls across the orchestra, with lower strings providing an eerie atmosphere and wind instruments exploring their higher registers to showcase a breadth of colour. *Dies Irae* is a high-intensity 'dance of death', with fast, repeated notes and stabs thrown across the orchestra. *Requiem aeternam* returns to a more sombre, peaceful mood – albeit with a whisper of comfort, provided in the D Major concluding key.

© Freya Parr

**Edward Elgar** (1857-1934)

# Cello Concerto

## in E Minor Op85



**FIRST PERFORMANCE**

London, 27 October 1919

**DURATION** 26 minutes

- 1. Adagio – Moderato**
- 2. Lento – Allegro molto**
- 3. Adagio**
- 4. Allegro – Moderato – Allegro, ma non troppo**

It would be easy to hear Edward Elgar's Cello Concerto of 1919 as a great musical gasp of grief and horror at the losses and sufferings brought about by the Great War, which had finally ended the previous year. Sombre, introspective and anguished, the work appears to encapsulate what the British public must have been feeling as they quietly surveyed the conflict's aftermath.

In reality, though, while the war undoubtedly played its part in forming the music's emotional world, the Concerto's darkly reflective mood probably owes more to the increasing bleakness of the composer's more immediate personal, social and artistic surroundings.

As Elgar penned the Concerto during the summer of 1919, his beloved wife of 30 years, Alice, began her descent into the illness that would claim her life the following spring. He later described her literally 'fading away before one's very eyes'.

Socially, Elgar's beloved Edwardian England was also fading away, as new, more socialist ideals captured the imaginations of post-war society. Likewise, new ideals were gathering momentum in the world of music. Across the channel in Paris, 1919 saw the completion of Darius Milhaud's surrealist ballet *The Ox on the Roof*, its lively, Brazilian-influenced music playfully sidestepping the traditional rules of harmony. Likewise, Prokofiev's first two piano concertos – thoroughly modernist of aesthetic, and tonally dissonant – were already a number of years old. Elgar's implacably tonal, late 19th-century style was beginning to sound dated.

Even so, when the Concerto received its premiere that autumn at the opening concert of the London Symphony Orchestra's first post-war season, its intense autumnal beauty should have won it a warm reception. The fact that it didn't receive one was largely down to the fact that the

conductor of the rest of the concert, Eric Coates, had devoted the majority of the rehearsal time to his own favourite work on the programme, Scriabin's *Poem of Ecstasy*. *The Observer* reported afterwards of Elgar's work, 'The orchestra was virtually inaudible, and when just audible was merely a muddle. No one seemed to have any idea of what it was the composer wanted.'

Still, even without that Eric Coates-shaped torpedo, it's possible that the work, as gloriously affecting as it was quickly discovered to be by subsequent audiences, still wouldn't have met with an ecstatic reception that night, simply due to its mood. Right at that moment, Scriabin's lushly scored, otherworldly, euphoric music probably delivered the sheer escapism that the war-weary audience needed. By contrast, the searing pathos of Elgar's work might well have hit the national psyche a bit too squarely on the head for an evening that was supposed to be entertainment.

The Concerto opens with an impassioned cello solo. This solitary outpouring of emotion is eventually overtaken by a flowing, lyrical theme introduced by the violas, which the cello then picks up. The mood lifts briefly for the central section, but only slightly; when the cello reintroduces the flowing theme as the movement moves towards its climax and close, there's no perceptible shift in temperament.

The music slips into the second movement without a break, starting off tense and hesitant, with the cello alternating between plucked notes and nervous bowed statements. The orchestra then launches the movement proper with two sharp woodwind chords, off which the cello immediately bounces and is away, hesitating no more. In the Scherzo-like music that follows, full of fast, gossamer-light cello runs, the overarching tension is punctuated by moments of brightness and even humour.

With the slow movement, peace and profundity combine. More than ever the cello dominates, with the orchestra largely the sympathetic background texture. Mournful acceptance appears to be the message of the cello's intensely lyrical song.

The finale opens with a doom-laden statement from the orchestra, which heralds a cello solo echoing that of the work's opening. As the movement continues, there are upbeat moments, and even a gentler theme containing glimmers of hope. However, sorrow is never completely out of earshot, meaning that it's no surprise when eventually, towards the end, the music irrevocably darkens. First, the cello re-utters a lamenting passage from the *Adagio*. It follows this with the anguished phrase from the very opening of the Concerto, then the music swiftly builds to its dramatic conclusion.

© Charlotte Gardner

# Kian Soltani

## Cello



Kian Soltani's playing is characterised by profound depth of expression, sense of individuality and technical mastery, complemented by his charismatic stage presence. He appears regularly with many of the world's esteemed orchestras and conductors, firmly establishing himself as a leading voice among today's generation of cellists.

25/26 season highlights include his performance with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra and Gianandrea Noseda at the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg, his return to the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France under Daniel Harding and debuts with the Orchestre National de France, Sydney Symphony Orchestra, New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and St Louis Symphony Orchestra. Further highlights include a European tour with the WDR Sinfonieorchester and Cristian Măcelaru, and his residency with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, during which he embarks on a European tour with their Chief Conductor Eva Ollikainen. He tours Europe in trio with Renaud Capuçon and Mao Fujita, and in duo with

Benjamin Grosvenor, while also touring the US in a chamber programme.

Soltani has performed with many leading ensembles, such as the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich, Staatskapelle Berlin, Munich Philharmonic, Wiener Symphoniker, Netherlands Radio Philharmonic, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Toronto Symphony Orchestra, NHK Symphony Orchestra Tokyo and Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia. He is also a frequent guest at prominent festivals such as Verbier, Rheingau, Dvořák Prague, Bregenz, Gstaad Menuhin, Grafenegg and Salzburg.

In 2017 Soltani signed an exclusive recording contract with Deutsche Grammophon, releasing his acclaimed debut album *Home* in 2018, featuring works by Schubert, Schumann and Reza Vali. He went on to record Dvořák's Cello Concerto with the Staatskapelle Berlin and Daniel Barenboim in 2020 and released a Schumann album with Camerata Salzburg featuring the Cello Concerto and Lieder transcriptions in 2024. His 2021 album *Cello Unlimited* earned him the Innovative Listening Experience Award at the 2022 Opus Klassik Awards.

Born in Bregenz, Austria, to a family of Persian musicians, Soltani began playing the cello at age four and was only 12 when he joined Ivan Monighetti's class at the Basel Music Academy. He was the recipient of an Anne-Sophie Mutter Foundation scholarship in 2014 and completed further studies at the Kronberg Academy in Germany and International Music Academy in Liechtenstein.

Soltani plays 'The London, ex Boccherini' Antonio Stradivari cello, kindly loaned to him by a generous sponsor through the Beares International Violin Society.

**Richard Wagner** (1813-83)

# Prelude to Act I

## from *Tristan und Isolde*



**FIRST PERFORMANCE**

Full opera: Munich, 10 June 1865

**DURATION** Prelude: 13 minutes

First performed in Munich in 1865, Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* belongs to the small category of works that can genuinely be said to have changed musical history. In this intense exploration of a love between two individuals that achieves a transcendent level, and can only be consummated in death, Wagner represented the heights and depths of his central characters' inner feelings in music that reaches an unprecedented level of chromaticism – that is, using notes outside the main key of any given section. The result is to undermine the individual key to the point where it ceases to have any real solidity.

From a historical perspective, this was a highly influential procedure – it would lead to an increased use of chromaticism in the works of many other composers, and eventually to the dissolution of tonality (or key structure), to atonality (or the absence of key), to the 12-note system of Schoenberg and other far-reaching developments.

Beyond its historical position, *Tristan* was an exceptional achievement in its own right. Wagner started sketching his score in 1854, when in exile in Switzerland from his criminal revolutionary activities in Germany. It was inspired partly by his love for Mathilde Wesendonck, the wife of a Zurich silk-merchant who was supporting him financially. But by the time of its premiere, Wagner was involved with Cosima von Bülow, daughter of another supporter, Franz Liszt, and the wife of the conductor of that first performance, Hans von Bülow. Cosima left her husband the following year and became Wagner's second wife in 1870.

During the course of the opera, the Cornish knight Tristan and the Irish princess Isolde take a potion which they believe will lead to their deaths, but which instead is a love potion that allows them to admit feelings for each other that they have had to deny hitherto. Once released, the impact of these feelings devastates their lives and those of others.

Wagner originally gave the title *Liebestod*, or love-death, to the opera's Prelude, now a familiar concert work that distils the essence of the opera it begins.

© George Hall

Please note: Scriabin's *Poem of Ecstasy* follows Wagner's Prelude to Act I from *Tristan und Isolde* without a break.

**Alexander Scriabin** (1872-1915)

# Poem of Ecstasy

Op54



**FIRST PERFORMANCE**

New York, 10 December 1908

**DURATION** 22 minutes

Born in Moscow into nobility, Alexander Scriabin began his career as a concert pianist and composer of piano music, studying as a boy with Nikolai Zverev, who taught Rachmaninov, and then at the Moscow Conservatory where his teachers included Anton Arensky and Sergei Taneyev. Listen to his early-career works and you hear simply Russian-flavoured, crowd-pleasing late Romanticism; in fact, his Piano Concerto – his first orchestral work, composed in 1896, and his only concerto – sounds thoroughly Rachmaninov-esque. However, with his ambitious six-movement First Symphony of 1900 came the beginnings of a change: a slightly more chromatic harmonic language; more mystical-sounding and ecstatic in tone; and featuring an optional chorus in its final movement whose lyrics, penned by Scriabin himself, were a hymn to Art as a deity capable of transforming mankind. ‘You breed thoughts of a new order,’ it proclaims. ‘An endless ocean of emotion you breed in the enraptured heart’ – and for what was left of Scriabin’s short life, it was this mystical, theosophy-inspired belief in music’s ability to bring man into ecstatic union with the cosmos that his increasingly chromatic, borderline atonal works espoused.

*Poem of Ecstasy*, the single-movement ‘Fourth Symphony’ he composed between 1905 and 1908 from Italy – while lying low with pianist Tatiana Schlözer, for whom he was leaving his wife – represents the full flowering of that philosophy on his musical style. Its forces are massive, including eight horns, five trumpets, three trombones, two harps, celeste, organ, and a percussion section featuring tam-tam and church bells. Its high-intensity language then out-Wagners Wagner in its voluptuously scored high chromaticism and its long-drawn build-up towards a final ecstasy via successive rolling, yearning musical waves whose textures, teeming with complex contrapuntal writing, feature a solo

violin among their many colours. Not for nothing was it Scriabin's original intention to name the work 'Poème orgiaque' (Orgiastic Poem).

Scriabin's own programme note for a 1909 Moscow performance was no less voluptuously articulated. To quote just a tiny extract of this attempt to explain his extra-musical ambitions for his music, 'Poem of Ecstasy is the joy of liberated action ...,' it reads. 'The stronger the pulse-beat of life and the more rapid the precipitation of rhythms, the more clearly the awareness comes to the Spirit that is consubstantial with creativity, immanent within itself, and that its life is a play. When the Spirit has attained the culmination of its activity and has been torn away from the embraces of teleology and relativity, when it has exhausted completely its substance and its liberated active energy, the Time of Ecstasy shall then arrive.'

Scriabin would only complete one more orchestral work, the similarly mystical *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire* (1910), before succumbing to sepsis in 1915, aged 43.

© Charlotte Gardner

## What was happening in 1908?

**24 Jan** Robert Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys* was published, effectively beginning the Boy Scout movement

**3 Apr** Glasgow-born Henry Campbell-Bannerman resigned due to ill health and died on 22 Apr in 10 Downing Street – the only prime minister to do so

**26 May** The first Middle East oil discovery was made at Masjed Soleyman in Persia; the UK quickly acquired the rights

**30 Jun** A huge atmospheric explosion, known as the Tunguska event, thought to be caused by a stony asteroid 50-60m wide, felled 2150 sq km of forest in eastern Siberia

**1 Jul** The SOS distress signal came into force internationally

**13-25 Jul** The Summer Olympics were held in London, moved there from Rome after the Mount Vesuvius eruption of 1906

**26 Jul** The Federal Bureau of Investigation was founded in the US

**17 Aug** The first animated cartoon, *Fantasmagorie* by Émile Cohl, was released

**1 Oct** The Model T motor car was officially launched at the Ford Piquette Avenue Plant in Detroit, Michigan

**3 Nov** Republican William Howard Taft defeated William Jennings to become US President



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