WIGMORE HALL

125

The Score



2025 SUMMER ISSUE

WIGMORE HALL PREPARES FOR ITS 125TH BIRTHDAY
+VÉRONIQUE GENS, STEPHEN KOVACEVICH, LEONKORO QUARTET

Welcome

Dear Friends

Another sparkling lineup of concerts awaits next season — and a very special anniversary. Wigmore Hall will be 125 years old in 2026, and it's preparing to throw a marvellous party: a two-week festival of the biggest names in the classical world. There's a preview listing of these concerts in the current September-December brochure.

This birthday comes with extra fizz, as its Director, John Gilhooly, explains in a wide-ranging interview (first published in the *Daily Telegraph*) to coincide with the news that the Hall will be ending its funding arrangement with the Arts Council next spring. What this means both for the Hall and for its devoted patrons is spelled out there, so be sure to read it.

If you want to donate towards the Hall's continuing success, you can read about a new fundraising venture, the 1901 Patrons' Circle; and you can track how the Hall evolved over those 125 years in a timeline by Julia Boyd, whose history of the venue will be published next year.

An array of fascinating artists have contributed their thoughts to this issue, including a pianist also celebrating a birthday, his 85th, Stephen Kovacevich. The supreme *chanson*-singer Véronique Gens talks about the wonders of French song, Il Giardino Armonico's Giovanni Antonini praises the surprising side of Haydn, and harpsichordist Jean Rondeau explains why he is championing the less well-known Couperin, Louis.

A big welcome too to Thomas Larcher, the Hall's new Composer in Residence, and to debuting percussionist Manu Delago, who cycles to his recitals wherever possible and has recorded an album up in the Austrian Alps. *Prost!*



Helen Hawkins
Editor of *The Score* magazine

Helen Hawkins © Andrew Ward

Cover image © Lisa Melkumov

Contents

4
Véronique Gens talks about her all-French recital

8
How Stephen Kovacevich is celebrating his 85th birthday

12
Looking back at 125 years of Wigmore Hall

16
Interview: John Gilhooly on a new independent era for the Hall

21
Fund the future: join the 1901 Patrons' Circle

22
What the prize-winning Leonkoro Quartet is doing next

25
Manu Delago, a percussionist who literally got on his bike

28
Why harpsichordist Jean Rondeau is a fan of Louis Couperin

32
Andrew Stewart on the birth of JS Bach's blockbusters

35
Introducing Thomas Larcher, new Composer in Residence

38
Il Giardino Armonico: making its debut with Haydn surprises

42-46
Book for Christmas Events for Friends Wigmore Hall News

Véronique Gens, queen of the chanson

BY ALEXANDRA COGHLAN

‘You’ll never find me doing an all-Debussy recital. I’d find it so boring!’

It’s an unlikely statement from the veteran soprano Véronique Gens, queen of French song, whose long relationship with Wigmore Hall has been measured out in *mélodies* and *chansons*. After pausing for effect, she relents and explains. ‘It would just be too much – the music is so complicated and difficult. It’s much more fun, both for me and the audience, if I can be a chameleon.’

A chameleon is exactly what we will be seeing at Wigmore Hall this autumn, when Gens returns with an almost-all-French programme spanning more than a dozen composers and nearly 150 years of repertoire. ‘We are so lucky with French song,’ she says. ‘Debussy’s are so different from Hahn, from Gounod, from Duparc… All composers have their own identity; you’re choosing from such a rich variety of atmospheres, scents, colours.’

It’s a Sunday night, and the soprano is at home in France, where her weekdays are currently consumed with preparation for an operatic role debut she has been ‘longing for’ for the past 20 years (more of that later). Right now Gens’s mind is on a concert that also represents a substantial first.

‘I can never come to Wigmore Hall without singing French songs,’ she explains, ‘because they are inside of me, in my blood. But this time I wanted to try something new. I wanted to find something very different for the second half.’

Canteloube and Kurt Weill, *La vie en rose* and *Hymne à l’amour*, even Jerome Kern and *The Music Man*’s Meredith Wilson: this is new – and unexpected – territory for a singer who built a career in French Baroque, before expanding via Mozart to 19th-century opera and art-song.

‘To sing in English to an English audience – it’s the first time for me. It’s a big challenge, but why not? And then there are the French songs: nobody can be Édith Piaf and I’m not trying to be, but I do want to show how beautiful this music is.

‘I know I have this image as someone very serious, very classical, maybe even boring! But I hate to be in a box. Okay, I’m a classical singer, but why not sing other things if my voice allows? Maybe people won’t like it, but I will try, and I hope they won’t be scared and will join me on my new adventure and challenge.’



Gens is now in full flow, championing the less familiar items in her programme, works by Franck-pupil Joseph Guy Ropartz, whose luscious ‘Ceux qui parmi les morts d’amour’ she describes as ‘full of hope’, and Reynaldo Hahn’s ‘Néère’ – an all but unknown song before Gens recorded it, and now one of her favourites. ‘Something just changes in the atmosphere when you perform those two songs, everything just stops around you. They are heartbreaking, and their simplicity makes them even more so.’

Love – particularly unhappy love – runs through the recital, but mention the word ‘theme’ at your peril. ‘That’s the fashion now, isn’t it?’ Gens says with a shrug. ‘But I don’t like it. I don’t want to force myself to sing something just because it fits a theme. If you do not like a song, you cannot sing it. I think it’s the same for all music: if you do not believe in it 100% then you should perform something else.’

Gens has balanced concert hall and opera



Page 5: Véronique Gens © Sylvain Gripoix
Page 6: Véronique Gens © Jean-Baptiste Millot

‘We can try things out, and not just in rehearsal but in live performance. He suggests something to me in the music and I answer – it’s like tennis.’

house throughout her career, sustaining a full recital and concert life alongside her stage roles. It’s essential, she says, if you want to be ‘the complete classical singer’. But what is it she gets from recitals that the theatre cannot or does not give her?

‘Freedom!’ She laughs. ‘Definitely freedom. I need both in my life: I need a conductor to tell me what to do, and I also need to be able to do exactly what I feel with the music. In recital there’s this trust between you and the pianist. With James Baillieu, for example, I’ve found a real complicity. We can try things out, and not just in rehearsal but in live performance. He suggests something to me in the music and I answer – it’s like tennis.’

For a singer who ‘hates’ rehearsals, this kind of spontaneity and flexibility is essential. ‘I don’t like things to be fixed forever: we sing forte here, rallentando there. We are not machines.’

But rehearsals were the all-consuming reality for Gens when I spoke to her. In May she was due to sing her first Marschallin in Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier* at Paris’s Théâtre de Champs-Elysées for director Krzystof Warlikowski – a ‘role of a lifetime’ that, after decades of waiting, had arrived unexpectedly suddenly.

‘I am replacing a singer who cancelled,’ she explains, ‘so I was only approached in February. I always wanted to sing the Marschallin, but the opportunity never came, so I didn’t have the time to learn a role I might never get to perform. So now, I am working very hard indeed – I didn’t realise how difficult the music is, it never quite goes where you think it will.’

We discuss the character – another complicated, conflicted woman in a long line of operatic heroines Gens has made her speciality. Can this kind of emotional depth and complexity, built up over weeks of rehearsal and hours of performance, ever find comparable intensity in song?

‘It’s very difficult,’ Gens acknowledges. ‘Especially with French songs, which are so short: maximum three or four minutes. But what I always tell my students is that you have to seize your audience from the first note, the first word. I want to see it in your face, your body, your eyes, to know immediately where you are and who you are. It’s hard, but there are so many ways you can carry people along with you.’

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FRI 12 SEP 2025, 7.30PM

A master of finding harmony at the keyboard

BY JESSICA DUCHEN

How would you like to celebrate your 85th birthday by performing at Wigmore Hall? Some might prefer to take afternoon tea at the Savoy or a holiday in the sun. Not Stephen Kovacevich, though. 'It's fun!' he says. 'I played there for my 70th, 75th and 80th birthdays. Maybe 90 will be pushing it, but who knows?'

The celebratory concert on 22 October (his actual birthday is the 17th), is a mix of musical joys in which Kovacevich plays solo and also with some treasured colleagues. It culminates with Beethoven's own four-hands piano arrangement of the Grosse Fuge for string quartet, Op. 133, in which he is joined by the revered Martha Argerich.

The two pianists are former life-partners and have a daughter, the film director Stéphanie Argerich. Despite having gone their separate ways long ago, for around the last quarter-century they have often joined forces on the concert platform.

It was at a party in the mid 1960s at the Hampstead home of the pianist Fou Ts'ong and his first wife, Zamira Menuhin, that the pair met for the first time. 'I was about 25,' Kovacevich says. 'And I suppose a little while afterwards I asked her out to dinner…'

During their various spells as a couple ('We refer to it now as "round one" and "round two",' he remarks) they played together only offstage. 'We'd maybe read through some Mozart,' he says. 'She's a very good sight-reader. I'm middling. We also heard each other quite a bit – we'd play to each other, which was natural. We were in our twenties, our careers had begun, but basically there was a lot of time in London when we could do things like that.'

London in the Swinging Sixties was a magnet for the world's finest musicians, and Kovacevich counted such glowing talents as Vladimir Ashkenazy and Jacqueline du Pré among his circle of friends and colleagues. He had first moved to the UK on a scholarship to study privately with the great Dame Myra Hess; after making his Wigmore Hall debut in 1961, he was soon hailed as Dame Myra's musical heir.

It was only much later that he and Argerich started to give concerts as a duo – 'probably from about the age of 60,' Kovacevich says. 'I've no idea why it took so long. Possibly it was because of festivals that are interested in you doing more than just a recital. And we played at Wigmore for my 70th birthday concert.'



Stephen Kovacevich

During their various spells as a couple ('We refer to it now as "round one" and "round two",' he remarks) they played together only offstage.



Martha Argerich and Stephen Kovacevich © Thomas Manillier

‘We have played quite a bit together now,’ he says, ‘and although we’re completely different musical types, it works. The pieces we’ve done a lot – such as the Bartók Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion and Debussy’s *En blanc et noir* – we feel rather similar towards them. We’ve never had an issue, and I don’t think we’ll have an issue with the Beethoven either.’

One of their chief differences, he says, is the nature of their sounds. ‘Recently, when I was thinking of the Myra Hess sound that has gone into mine, Martha said to me: “No – she had a wonderful sound, but your sound is only yours and we don’t know why it’s there.” And it’s true. Occasionally, when I start a concert, there’s a sound that I don’t know I’m looking for, and there it is. But I think that Martha and I have rather a similar sound for Beethoven and I think that in the Debussy and the Bartók there are no differences at all. Maybe when we’re working, some electricity is there, and it’s just natural. I can’t remember that we’ve ever had an argument or discussion about tempo – not once in all these years.’

When he rehearsed with Jacqueline du Pré, sometimes the differences in their interpretations were so extreme that compromise was impossible. ‘We’d toss a coin to decide!’

That is not always the case with other colleagues, he says. When he rehearsed cello and piano sonatas with Jacqueline du Pré, sometimes the differences in how each wished to play a movement proved so extreme that compromise was impossible: they had to choose one interpretation or the other. ‘We’d toss a coin to decide!’ He adds wryly that he and Argerich used to argue only away from the piano: ‘We were Olympic champions at that.’

Beethoven’s four-hands arrangement of the Grosse Fuge, Kovacevich relates, was created at the request of the composer’s publisher, after the quartet had at first proved all but unplayable. Beethoven was not content with various attempts at duet versions by other composers; eventually he capitulated and wrote his own.

‘It’s for one piano, four hands,’ Kovacevich says, ‘but we’ll play it on two pianos. It’s stupidly written – there are difficulties in it that are just not necessary – and to use only one piano would be asking for a traffic jam.

‘It is strange that the piece ends in a rather trumpet-like, conventional way. After everything that’s gone before, all this chromaticism and dissonance for page after page, it seems almost like too easy a solution. But the middle section has that tenderness that only late Beethoven has. It’s the tenderness of something very, very beautiful. Just occasionally he writes *teneramente* in his late pieces, which is odd. I don’t think he was a very tender creature.’

Tenderness is the order of the day, however, in a concert that includes not only the Grosse Fuge, but Kovacevich’s choice of Brahms late piano pieces and the same composer’s intimate and introspective G major Violin Sonata. There could be few more wonderful ways for his devoted listeners to celebrate Kovacevich’s birthday with him – even if he assuredly deserves a luxury afternoon tea as well.

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WED 22 OCT 2025, 7.30PM

125 years of Wigmore Hall

BY JULIA BOYD

31 May 1901
King Edward VII has been on the throne four months when Bechstein Hall opens its doors for the first time. After Helen Trust sings the national anthem, Ferruccio Busoni performs Beethoven's Sonata in E, Op. 109.



20 October 1909
Pablo Casals plays Bach's Cello Suite No. 3 in C – the first time that any of the six suites is heard at Bechstein Hall.

27 January 1902
The Bohemian String Quartet becomes the first quartet to perform at the Hall with Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden' and Beethoven's third 'Razumovsky' Quartet.

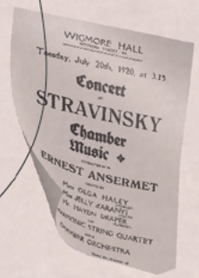
1 May 1912
Arthur Rubinstein makes his London debut playing a programme of Schumann, Liszt and Szymanowski.

26 February 1921
Black tenor Roland Hayes gives a recital that includes four songs by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, pictured below.

20 July 1920
A programme of Stravinsky's music, including *A Soldier's Tale*, attracts a fashionable audience, among them Lady Randolph Churchill. Along with many others in the audience, she is appalled.

23 July 1914
A group of Tobias Matthay students give the last concert before the First World War.

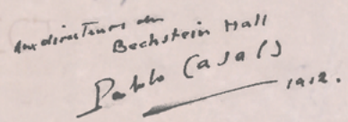
22 March 1915
John Buchan, author of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, introduces Foreign Secretary Edward Grey, who addresses a packed hall on patriotism.



7 November 1916
Bechstein Hall is bought at auction by the Debenhams department store for £56,500.

16 January 1917
At 3pm, the newly-named Wigmore Hall presents its first concert. Virginia and Leonard Woolf are in the audience.





8 January 1923
Avant-garde composer and pianist George Antheil, billed as a 'Futurist-Terrible', plays five of his own pieces.

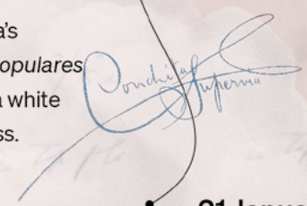
6 May 1926
Leoš Janáček is in the hall to hear a programme of his works including the London première of his String Quartet No. 1, 'The Kreutzer Sonata'.

8-14 September 1929
The Third Congress of the World League of Sexual Reform takes place. Among the speakers are Bertrand Russell, George Bernard Shaw, Marie Stopes, Vera Brittain and Aldous Huxley.

17 January 1931
Sergey Prokofiev plays a programme of his own work.



19 June 1934
Spanish mezzo Conchita Supervía, bottom right, performs Falla's *7 canciones populares españolas* in a white flamenco dress.



9 December 1936
Seven-year-old John Julius Cooper (later Viscount Norwich) plays a piano piece called *Scolding Teddy*.

30 July 1944
The Griller Quartet, which performed at Wigmore Hall more than any other string quartet during the war, gives its last concert. Its members are in uniform.

23 September 1942
Benjamin Britten's *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* is premièred at the hall by tenor Peter Pears, accompanied by the composer.

18 May 1941
Austrian and German refugees hold a concert commemorating the 30th anniversary of Mahler's death.

8 May 1945
Victory in Europe is declared. The evening concert features premières of works by Lennox Berkeley, Elizabeth Lutyens, Elisabeth Maconchy and Priaulx Rainier.

16 May 1939
French cabaret star Yvette Guilbert, above left, gives her final performance at the Hall. Her first was on 19 December 1902.

21 January 1937
Samuel Barber accompanies cellist Felix Salmond in a performance of his Cello Sonata, Op. 6.

1946
The Arts Council takes over as the Hall's administrator.



22 May 1969
David Bowie, centre, appears at the Hall wearing a space suit. The first moon landing takes place two months later on 20 July.

31 May 1976
89-year-old Arthur Rubinstein performs at the Hall's 75th birthday celebration, his farewell appearance as a concert pianist.

3 October 1968
Cornelius Cardew's controversial *The Great Learning*, commissioned by Anne Macnaghten, Elizabeth Lutyens and Iris Lemare to promote contemporary music, is performed.

1979
Sunday Morning Coffee Concerts are instituted.

October 1966
William Lyne is appointed Director.

1987
The Arts Council relinquishes the Hall's lease to Westminster City Council.

25 February 1966
Gerald Moore performs for the last time at Wigmore Hall, accompanying Derek Hammond-Stroud in *Winterreise*.

1989
The first computer is introduced to the Box Office.



9 June 1957
Ravi Shankar, bottom right, gives the first sitar concert at the Hall.

1 July 1991
The Hall closes for 16 months to refurbish the basement and create the Restaurant.

May – September 1951
The Hall puts on some 20 Festival of Britain concerts.

December 2000 to July 2001
The Hall celebrates its 100th birthday with a centenary festival of 52 recitals.

9 October 1992
The new Wigmore Hall Trust is incorporated. Sir Trevor Holdworth is appointed its first chairman.

2000
John Gilhooly becomes Executive Director of Wigmore Hall.

1993
The Friends of Wigmore Hall scheme is launched.

1994
Wigmore Hall Learning, the Hall's pioneering education programme, is founded.



2008
Luke Bedford is made first Composer in Residence.

2009
Music for Life, a world-renowned creative programme for people living with dementia and their carers, becomes part of Wigmore Hall Learning.

Julia Boyd's *There Is Sweet Music Here: The Story of Wigmore Hall* will be published by Elliott & Thompson in May 2026

February 2007
Matthias Goerne becomes the first recipient of the Wigmore Medal.

2011
Wigmore Hall Live, the Hall's record label established in 2005, wins the Gramophone Award for Label of the Year.

2005
John Gilhooly becomes Artistic and Executive Director. £3.2 million is raised to purchase a 250-year lease from the Howard de Walden Estate.

2015
The Hall launches its £5 ticket scheme for Under 35s, opening up hundreds of concerts a year to young people.

Summer 2015
New technological infrastructure is installed to enable live streaming.

4 October 2023
Wigmore Hall launches the Director's Fund, with the aim of becoming financially self-sufficient by 2026.

6 June 2023
The Hall inaugurates large-scale concerts at St James's, Spanish Place with a visit from HM The King.

2004
Extensive renovations include new seats in the auditorium and improved lighting.

March 2020
The COVID-19 crisis looms and the Hall closes.

1 June 2020
Stephen Hough performs Busoni's Bach to an empty Hall, with hundreds of thousands watching online and listening on BBC Radio 3.

May 2003
William Lyne retires after 37 years as Director.

31 May 2021
John Gilhooly announces nine new Associate Artists to celebrate Wigmore Hall's 120th anniversary.



1 September 2021
The Hall returns to pre-pandemic levels of programming.

An exciting new start for a venerable venue

John Gilhooly talks to Liam Kelly about Wigmore Hall's glittering 125th Anniversary Season next year and dropping Arts Council funding



John Gilhooly © David Rose

Staff at Wigmore Hall have, of late, been walking into London's premier chamber music venue with an extra spring in their step. John Gilhooly, the Hall's Artistic and Executive Director since 2005, told them recently that it would stop taking money from Arts Council England, meaning that his charges will no longer be subject to the onerous bureaucracy that comes with being publicly subsidised.

As part of their funding agreements, institutions in receipt of taxpayer cash must produce detailed quarterly reports on three topics: their 'investment principles', activities and finances. So intricate are the demands – on everything from schools outreach to environmental policies – the three accompanying instruction manuals run to a combined 60 pages.

'The amount of quarterly reporting – which goes on and on and on – it zaps creativity. So the organisation, all the staff here, suddenly you can feel the energy lifting, because we've told them that within 12 months, they won't have to do this,' Gilhooly says of leaving the Arts Council's portfolio. 'There is a sadness in parting, but our core values don't change.' The biggest bugbear for Gilhooly is the Art's Council's 10-year mission statement, Let's Create. Published in 2020, it puts more emphasis on social outreach and diversity, equity and inclusion – aka DEI – rather than elite artistic endeavours. Funding has been shifted from large institutions, especially those in London, to community projects. Those that still benefit from the largesse of the public purse are made to work even harder for less.

Sitting in Wigmore Hall's smart basement restaurant, Gilhooly tells me that while Let's Create 'has great intentions', it 'inadvertently discriminated against classical music and opera, and I think that's a pity'. The cookie-cutter approach is wrong, he reckons. 'You cannot impose the same criteria on a great artist that you impose on a community event,' he says. 'Of course an amateur choir is excellent, just like amateur football is excellent, but it's not the same as the Olympics. And what we put on the stage here is the Olympics, but we believe in all of it, and all of it can be excellent, but to have this one-size-fits-all criteria, I think, is where the tension has come in.'

Wigmore Hall is unusual in that it has robust enough finances to be able to decline public cash. The 550-seat venue, which hosts 600 concerts a year, costs about £8.5 million to run annually. A little more than £4 million is generated by ticket sales, with much of the rest coming from donors and sponsors; the Arts Council grant of almost £350,000 only forms 3% of its income and is ultimately not worth the hassle.

'It's jumping through so many hoops and the language is not helpful. It's kind of a language of its own.' Is it corporate jargon? 'It's not even that, it's Arts Council jargon and it's got progressively worse over the years as funding has gone down,' he adds. 'I understand that it is public money and it has got to be accounted for, but there must be a more efficient way of doing it and probably even less intrusive on staff time and trustee time… There are plenty of orchestras and others who I'm sure would love to do this, but they can't.'

The Irish impresario, 51, is keen to emphasise that he would not like to see the Arts Council, which used to own Wigmore Hall, abolished, 'but they have lost the confidence of classical music, and hopefully that can be repaired'. To that end the quango's chairman, Nicholas Serota, has chaired meetings with disaffected classical music and opera bosses, 'but we need to know that they're listening'.

Gilhooly made Wigmore Hall Arts Council-proof by launching a 'Director's Fund' last year; the aim was to reach £10 million in pledged donations by 2027, but that target has already been met. 'I didn't expect that in a year,'

Gilhooly says modestly. ‘It’s just good luck and hard work, I suppose, and wonderful donors, who really believe in the place, because it’s not an easy time to fundraise. We’re in a position to move on from public funding. Others are not.’ His new target is to make the Director’s Fund worth £30 million.

As well as celebrating financial independence, Gilhooly talks about Wigmore’s 125th Anniversary Season to be marked next year and he insists that he is more excited than ever despite having had the top job for 20 years. ‘The scope of the Season is so different. There’s an African concert series, there’s a Cuban, Brazilian focus,’ he says. ‘You’ve got the great artists of the world, they’re all here.’ He has also programmed a two-week festival next May for the anniversary, which has ‘everything from Lise Davidsen, who’s one of the great sopranos of our time, to an evening of Stockhausen, which people wouldn’t expect. The repertoire is so diverse – this is not just a house of old Vienna of Schubert, Mozart and Haydn’.

Other starry names announced include Errollyn Wallen, Master of the King’s Music, four of the celebrated Kanneh-Mason siblings, Mitsuko Uchida and Sir Stephen Hough. Meanwhile, Simon Russell Beale will bring Claude Debussy’s life to stage with acclaimed pianist Lucy Parham and Mary Beard is to narrate an International Women’s Day programme.

He has also raised £500,000 to underpin Wigmore’s popular £5 tickets for under 35s scheme which, since it was launched a decade ago, has seen 200,000 take advantage of it. It has had the effect of bringing down the average age of concert-goers, as well as being an investment in Wigmore’s future: one couple who would not have been able to afford to see concerts without the hefty discount have now got high-paying jobs and are donating £50,000 a year to the Hall. ‘It has transformed the audience. And I think it’s one of the reasons fundraising is doing so well, because it’s encouraging the established audience to really embrace that and to give as they see that there is a future.’

While Wigmore may have had something of a stuffy reputation before Gilhooly took over in 2005, he has steadfastly maintained its high-class output without resorting to trendy bandwagon-jumping that some other venues have tried. ‘Absolutely no gimmicks: that was instilled in me by my predecessor, William Lyne. No gimmicks, no circus tricks. That was his only advice,’ says Gilhooly. ‘And he was right. Let the music speak for itself.

‘Which is, again, my issue with public funding… We go back several hundred years [in terms of repertoire], and we’re commissioning right up to yesterday, and the cross section of artists is huge. So why not cherish that? And why not cherish other people? The South Bank has a niche – cherish that. The Royal Shakespeare Company has a niche – cherish that. But the thing is, we all have to look the same under these things.’ He adds: ‘This is where great artists come to earn their credentials. This is where we unapologetically put on difficult repertoire. That will not change, but the breadth of repertoire has changed, and how you define difficult repertoire has changed.’

Wigmore Hall works closely with both BBC Radio 3 and Classic FM to broaden its audiences and, unlike many in the classical world, Gilhooly does not despair at the fall in radio audiences in recent years. ‘People are saying it’s not the same as what it used to be – it’s just fine. There are millions of people listening to Classic FM, there are millions of people listening to Radio 3. And Haydn would never have imagined that we would be beaming his string quartets from London across the world to millions of people via radio or digital,’ he says. ‘It is astonishing, but there’s work to be done. We’re never going to convert the whole world.’ Instead, he reckons that about 10% of the UK population are ‘interested vaguely in what we do’, and his job is to get them in with so many competing demands on their time and attention.

Gilhooly has also been heartened by the Labour Government’s warm words about the importance of music education in schools. ‘They seem to get the fact that it is the universal right of every child and every citizen to have that access. But if they don’t, there’s only so much we can do. If they don’t fix it in the classroom we can’t fix it because we can reach hundreds of thousands collectively as orchestras, opera houses, theatre but then there are millions disenfranchised, unless you get to them in those early years,’ he warns. ‘It’s just essential for the curriculum that people know Bach came before Beethoven. And that you don’t have to read music to love music, but that they’re not frightened of it. Literacy is part of the curriculum, and music literacy should be part of it too.’

Gilhooly says that his childhood in Limerick was a ‘typical Irish Catholic upbringing’. Ireland in the 1970s was not a wealthy country. ‘We did not live in poverty, but there was a lot of it around,’ he says. When he started going to concerts, in the late 1980s, they were at the local Protestant school and church, and ‘it was actually an issue that I was going to these concerts for some people. My parents were very enlightened. And I owe them a lot, really’. He and his siblings all trained as singers. So, does he ever sing these days? ‘Absolutely

‘Absolutely no gimmicks: that was instilled in me by my predecessor, William Lyne. No gimmicks, no circus tricks,’ says Gilhooly. ‘And he was right. Let the music speak for itself.’



William Lyne © Keith Saunders

not,' he instantly replies. 'I hear it here at such a standard it's enough to shame you. I don't regret anything. If I studied music all my life I wouldn't be doing my job. I'm glad I didn't take it professionally.'

William Lyne spent 46 years at Wigmore Hall, 37 of them as Director. As he enters his third decade running the place, Gilhooly is inevitably thinking about how his own tenure will last. 'I'll have to go at some point, and I don't want to die in the job,' he says.

'I'll go on for a while yet, but hopefully if I run out of steam, I think I'm self aware enough to know when it's time to go. But there's road to run, and there are things to be done, because I want to get to that £30 million target.' Few would bet against him succeeding.

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John Gilhooly © Andrew Crowley

A new way to fund our future

As Wigmore Hall moves towards an independent future without Arts Council funding, how will the move affect audiences? Simply put, it won't, except to make their concert-going even more rewarding. The Hall's new funding arrangements mean it can more securely follow its favourite course of showcasing rising stars and rare repertoire, as well as being able to more readily secure big-name artists. Wigmore Hall's 125th Anniversary Festival in 2026 is an ample demonstration of this newfound freedom. The names appearing then are the stuff all venue promoters dream of: next summer all these superstars are performing at the Hall in the space of two weeks.

Audiences can look forward to seeing world-class artists such as singers Lise Davidsen, Christian Gerhaher and Asmik Grigorian (pictured below), pianists Yunchan Lim and Alexandre Kantorow, violinist Christian Tetzlaff, the Belcea Quartet, Jordi Saval, Les Arts Florissants, vocalist Elaine Mitchener, the inspirational folk musician Rhiannon Giddens and many more. This monumental season will need support: the Hall is not, nor has it ever been, rolling in money, Wigmore Hall's Director John Gilhooly is very quick to stress. 'In response to our departure from annual public funding, Arts Council England has suggested we are a wealthy organisation – we're not – and that the £10 million for the Director's Fund was easy to achieve, which it wasn't,' Gilhooly states. 'They know better than anybody that until really quite recently, this organisation was operated on a hand-to-mouth basis.'

Gilhooly has recently announced the creation of the 1901 Patrons' Circle: an exciting new philanthropic giving circle that will support the programming of the Hall's star-studded 125th Anniversary Season, with a suggested donation of £5,000. Members of the Circle will be playing a pivotal part in Wigmore Hall's story as it approaches this significant milestone through their support of this special Anniversary Festival. It is a moment, not just to celebrate the past 125 years, but to play a vital role in the Hall's future.

For more details about how to join the 1901 Patrons' Circle see page 45.

'Arts Council England has suggested we are a wealthy organisation – we're not – and that the £10 million for the Director's Fund was easy to achieve, which it wasn't,' Gilhooly states.



Asmik Grigorian © T Kolesnikov

Four young players flying high

BY RICHARD BRATBY

The Leonkoro Quartet won the Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition in 2022, and its reputation has been on the rise ever since.



Leonkoro Quartet © Nikolaj Lund

The Leonkoro Quartet is going places. Literally, as it happens – on the morning that I speak to second violinist Amelie Wallner and viola player Mayu Konoe in their Berlin base, they're days away from setting out on the quartet's first North American tour, a 13-concert marathon that takes them from Texas to Canada. A busy time: are they all set? 'Not quite yet,' laughs Wallner. 'A few things are still missing, but the worst of it is sorted. Everything is a bit complicated nowadays – all the documents involved in travelling to the US with instruments. So that part is already solved. Because we're doing both East and West coasts, it's going to be a bit stressful, but it's our first time in the US, so we wanted to take as many engagements as possible. Maybe in the future we'll decide to focus on one side – but for now, our first time, we felt we should take everything'.

For a young quartet, that's a good problem to have. The rise of the Leonkoros has been so swift, and so universally praised, that it's hard at times to remember just how new a group they are. The four players – Wallner and Konoe, plus the brothers Jonathan and Lukas Schwarz on first violin and cello respectively – were still students at the Berlin University of the Arts when they came together as a quartet in 2019: a 'school project', in Konoe's words, that blossomed into a much deeper musical relationship.

Then, of course, the world screeched to a halt. Günter Pichler, formerly of the Alban Berg Quartet, urged them to make use of the enforced career break, as Konoe recalls. 'He said, "This is the time to actually rehearse. You have so much time, you have literally nothing else to do." He even made us send him recordings.'

The results – when COVID restrictions were finally lifted – speak for themselves. Since the Leonkoro Quartet won the Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition in April 2022, the accolades and the bookings have come faster than a Haydn finale: a Borletti-Buitoni Trust award, a stint as BBC New Generation Artists, a debut recording (in 2023) of Schumann and Ravel, and a long-term deal with Alpha Classics, to name just a handful.

Somewhere amid all that activity, meanwhile, the Leonkoros have been finding their collective voice; a way of working and living together, and a shared musical personality. Their American tour programmes suggest that the process is already well advanced. Among quartets by Berg and Mendelssohn there's a signature work (the Ravel quartet), a statement of intent (Beethoven's Op. 132) and something a little left-field: Paul Hindemith's gloriously unfashionable Second Quartet.

'I think Jonathan discovered it,' says Wallner. 'The rest of us hadn't heard it before, and it's actually the same for our audience: they can be sceptical. But each time we play, it's always the one piece that people are most surprised by. Each time we finish a concert, everyone's like, "Wow, the Hindemith – such an amazing piece and so full of energy!"

'We're exploring, I would say,' adds Konoe. 'Because there's too much that we haven't played yet. The repertoire is huge! At this point, we enjoy playing anything.'

The Leonkoros have been finding their collective voice; a way of working and living together, and a shared musical personality.



Leonkoro Quartet © Nikolaj Lund

The Leonkoros are excited but reticent about their recording plans: watch this space. But how do they approach the major classics, those benchmarks of the repertoire, like the late Beethoven quartets, against which every quartet sooner or later has to measure itself?

‘I think we actually start them the same way as any other repertoire,’ says Konoe. ‘We refer to a lot of recordings for those huge works. At one time, during COVID, we had blind listenings, and I'm happy to say that we usually agreed on the same ones!’ Dare I ask? ‘It was usually our mentors, the Alban Berg Quartet or the Artemis Quartet.’

That seems to suggest a healthy unanimity, and the 21st Century, after all, is a golden age of democracy, within string quartets at least. Konoe sums up the philosophy – surprisingly simple – that has made the Leonkoro Quartet one of the most sought-after chamber groups of the decade: ‘Everyone in the group has the right and the responsibility to speak out and to bring themselves in. But in musical decisions, no one has the final say, and we really do go on the majority opinion.

‘We’re not afraid to disagree — but we agree most of the time, I'd say. Generally, we don't have huge arguments about musical decisions. I guess that’s why we play together!’

The musician who got his band on their bikes

BY DAN CAIRNS

Life for a touring musician can be both arduous and monotonous, a blur of planes, tour buses and hotel rooms. The sweetener – a performance at your destination – doesn’t always compensate for the tedium of travel. The Austrian percussionist Manu Delago, whose music will be the focus of a concert at Wigmore Hall in September, has found novel ways to remedy this.

In 2018, he trekked, with seven other musicians, up into the snow-covered Austrian Alps to record an album, *Parasol Peak*, and an accompanying film. Then in 2021, and again two years later, Delago and his eponymous ensemble presented the ReCycling tour, the latter of which involved their cycling from Innsbruck to Amsterdam, their instruments travelling with them in trailers, with concerts staged in venues along the route.

This isn’t mere gimmickry. Delago is a passionate environmentalist who regularly recharges by skiing and trekking in the mountains above his home in Innsbruck. A fêted composer who has performed in the world’s top concert halls, he is equally happy collaborating with Björk, Ólafur Arnalds, Anoushka Shankar and Nitin Sawhney. Each feeds the other, he believes.

‘When I was a classical student I was also playing in a metal band. The conservatoire was very technical, very academic. You had to play pieces exactly how 10,000 others had already done so, and in my other life, if you like, I was doing the opposite of that. My mum has recordings of me playing my own pieces when I was seven or eight, and you can hear how I liked to make things up. I guess that stayed with me, whether it was playing in rock bands as a teenager or jazz quartets when I was student. And I’m really thankful for both sides.’

Delago’s career as a composer was kickstarted by his introduction to the handpan, a descendant of the Trinidadian steelpan and percussion instruments from Southeast Asia. ‘It was a completely new and open situation,’ he says, ‘because there was no music written for it. The instrument was invented 25 years ago, and I started learning it around then – so I sort of had to write my own music for it. That was liberating, though, because I wasn’t bound to any particular genre, I was free. I’d studied classical music



The trumpet player was the biggest hero because he couldn’t get to the place where he could stay in tune, so on the spot he had to transpose up a semitone – and none of us had scores in front of us.

first, but I also studied Jazz in London. I’ve always felt very in between. It felt natural to be drawn to the unusual and the experimental.’

That’s a pretty good way to describe *Parasol Peak*, a project, Delago recalls with a wry chuckle, that was fraught with difficulty. ‘I had to choose people who I knew would be up for it, with a certain degree of fitness and durability. There are some musicians who just don’t want to have cold fingers. But I was also limited to people who could carry their instruments, so that obviously meant no pianists, harpists or double bass players.

‘I looked through all the contacts on my phone, and I had at least 500 musicians, but there were only eight or nine I thought would fit with the project. The trumpet player was the biggest hero because he couldn’t get to the place where he could stay in tune, so on the spot he had to transpose up a semitone – and none of us had scores in front of us. Playing by heart and transposing, that was phenomenal.’

Wigmore Hall will be more conducive to music making – and warm fingers.

Delago is busy planning the recital, which will, he says, ‘feature a fair amount of new things. I’m writing a lot of music at the moment, so there will be various premières, and I’m performing with an eight-piece ensemble, so we will be playing some of my existing music in new ensemble versions. The singer Douglas Dare will be a special guest on some songs.

‘I’ll be arranging the work of other composers, too – both classical and contemporary. I want to play on the fact that a lot of classical music is played in Wigmore Hall, and build a bridge to that.’ And will he be cycling to London for the concert? ‘No,’ he laughs. ‘That is too far even for me. But definitely by train.’

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SAT 13 SEP 2025, 7.30PM

Manu Delago © Simon Rainer

How to put a master back on track

BY RACHEL HALLIBURTON

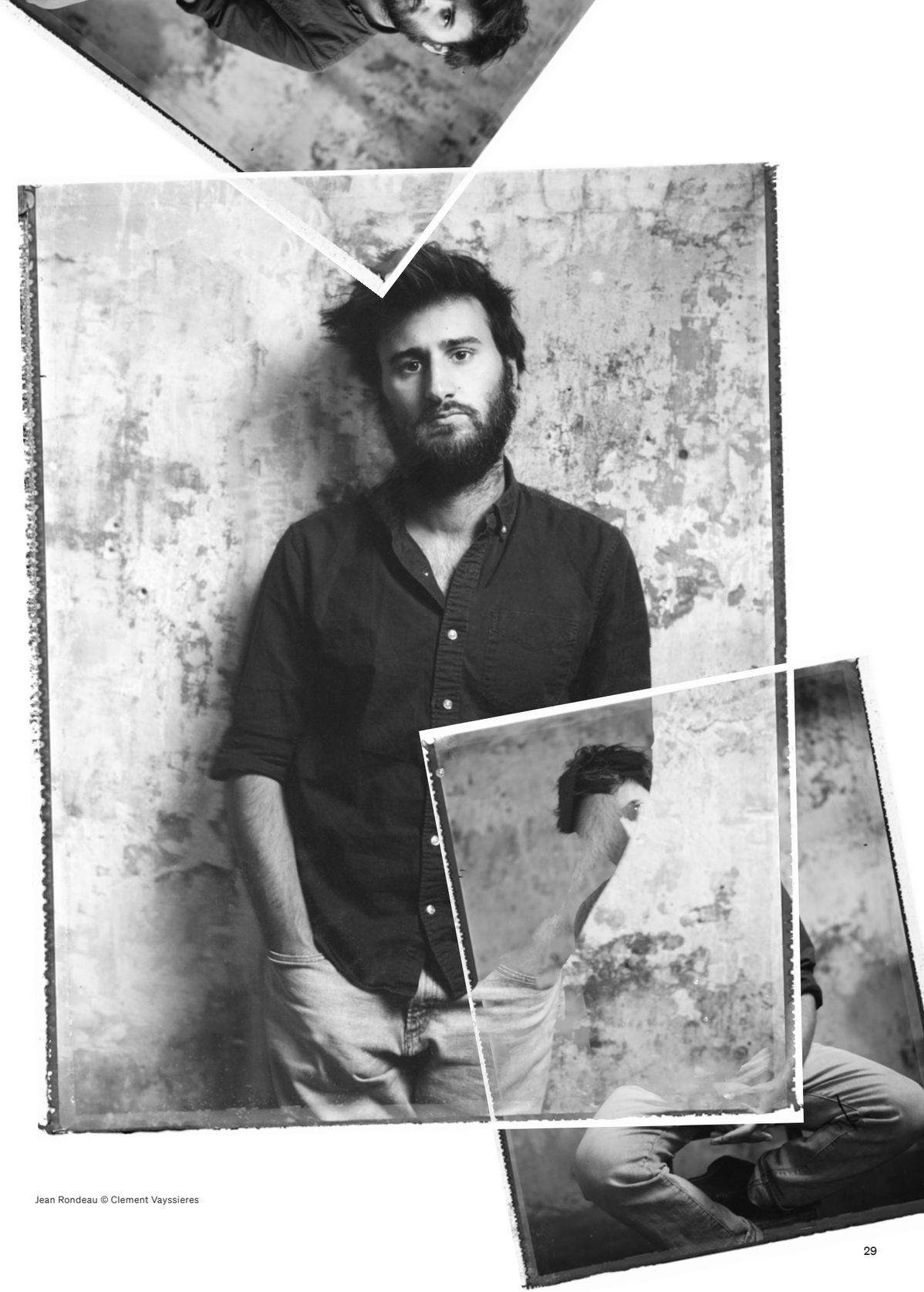
The day before I talk to harpsichordist Jean Rondeau about his ambitious odyssey through the works of Louis Couperin is the day a massive power cut hits Spain, Portugal and part of southwest France. Rondeau is visiting Spain, and since we are scheduled to talk on Zoom, for a few hours it seems the interview might not go ahead.

Thankfully the power cut is sorted out in time, but we spend the first minutes of our conversation pondering on the degree to which, as Rondeau puts it, 'our society is based on electricity'. Asked if he thinks the experience put him more in touch with the Baroque era, his mouth twitches. 'Most art forms need electricity now – cinema, theatre, dance, even most music – but Baroque musicians don't, so we might have a tiny future.'

It's a rare moment of levity in a discussion about a passion project that started out simply but has spiralled to another level since Rondeau first conceived it. While live, non-electricity-dependent concerts will be involved – including at Wigmore Hall – a significant aspect is the collection of CDs that Rondeau finished recording in the summer of 2024. 'It started out as one CD, but then it became seven, then eight, and now it's ten,' he reveals. 'It just escalated. I realised I didn't just want to do an index of Couperin's work, I really wanted to build a story, so I brought in many different components.'

There are several holes in what's known about the life of Louis Couperin, the brilliant keyboard player born in 1626 who was the uncle of the more famous François Couperin. Rondeau recounts how Louis grew up in the French countryside during the time of the Thirty Years' War, 'so the social and economic situation was tough'. According to a book written by Évrard Titon du Tillet in 1732, *Le Parnasse françois*, Couperin's fortunes transformed when he and his brothers sought out Jacques Champion de Chambonnières, harpsichordist at the court of Louis XIV. There are various versions of how their encounter took place, but the one that clearly appeals to Rondeau he describes as when 'they came to a party where they knew Chambonnières would be and performed outside the castle in the early morning. Chambonnières heard the music from a window and was so impressed, he demanded to find out more about who had composed it'.

Whether it was a small-hours ambush or something more formal, it worked. That same



Jean Rondeau © Clement Vayssieres

year, Chambonnières introduced Couperin to the court, and by 1651 he was living in Paris. The politics of Louis XIV's household was notoriously cut-throat, and just a few years later Couperin was invited to replace Chambonnières as royal harpsichordist. Yet he loyally refused to usurp his patron, negotiating instead to join the ensemble as a viola da gamba player.

'I like this story because it shows he was a very humble man,' says Rondeau. 'He was so devoted to Chambonnières that he didn't want to succeed him, even though it could have set him up for life.' Still, the course was set for a gilded career beneath the approving gaze of the Sun King. But it was cut short when Couperin died in 1661 at the age of 35. While none of his works were published during his lifetime, they can be found in two important collections of 17th-century harpsichord music – the Bauyn and Parville manuscripts – as well as in the Oldham manuscript, which was discovered in 1957.

Rondeau is 34, just one year younger than Couperin was before his life ended prematurely. His remarkable career as a harpsichordist has been marked as much by the versatility of his repertoire, ranging from Bach to Ligeti, as by the luminous sensitivity of his playing. These days his hair is tamer than the Samson-like locks he used to sport, earning him such nicknames as 'the bad boy of Baroque'. It was a reputation that belied his intense seriousness, something that becomes ever clearer the more he talks about this project.

What made him decide Couperin was the composer to whom he wished to devote such a large chunk of his life? 'For me, his music is like my mother tongue,' he replies. 'I wouldn't say I'm comfortable with his work, because that's not a proper word for music, but I feel really at ease and immersed in his language.'

Would Rondeau agree with his fellow French harpsichordist, Christophe Rousset – another highly respected interpreter of Couperin – that the composer seemed to write in the first person, making his style almost confessional?



'I wouldn't say I'm comfortable with his work, because that's not a proper word for music, but I feel really at ease and immersed in his language.'

Armand-Louis Couperin, by Charles-Nicolas Noël

'I realised I didn't just want to do an index of Couperin's work, I really wanted to build a story'

He reflects for a moment. 'I know what he means by that,' he eventually replies. 'I would say he takes the music and brings it to us in a very authentic and intimate way. He manages to make it speak directly to our most innate emotions.'

Rousset once described the difference between playing a 17th-century harpsichord and an 18th-century harpsichord in terms of drinking wine. The former was 'a little more green, a little more wild', while the latter was 'more well-rounded, like a good Bordeaux'. How would Rondeau describe the qualities of the instruments he has used for this project?

'I did the recordings on seven different instruments, five harpsichords and two 17th-century organs that were absolutely incredible. I chose the harpsichords because I love them.' He continues with a delightful and unintentional example of how the same word can have very different connotations in different languages. 'I'm very peculiar on instrument choices.' (When I look it up, I realise the French for peculiar is *particulier*, which unsurprisingly also translates into 'particular').

One harpsichord was a historical model in a museum in Colmar made by the Dutch Ruckers family. 'Many recordings have been made on this harpsichord,' Rondeau says. 'But it was the first time it could be moved into another room with a nice acoustic, and you could really hear this instrument's substantial sound.' The other four harpsichords were 'historical facsimiles', including 'one of my favourite instruments in the world, an Italian harpsichord made by Philippe Humeau.' Beyond that he sought out two 17th-century organs, 'one in Bolbec, Normandy, one in Juvigny, east of Paris. The big time for the evolution of organs was in the 19th Century, so it's not so often you can find models like this'.

Rondeau's dedication to his vision is in no doubt. What would he say if Louis Couperin were to turn up in France today? 'It's always interesting to do this kind of thought exercise,' he says, 'but I think we have to be careful with such questions. If you're a huge fan of an individual, it's easy to be disappointed when you meet them. A composer is not always the best interpreter of their work. I prefer, for instance, recordings of Pierre Boulez conducting *The Rite of Spring* to recordings of Stravinsky conducting it.'

Even so, he continues, 'I think I would get along with him. It seems clear he was humble and warm, not a diva. But I'm not sure I would ask many questions. For me the answers are within the music itself.'

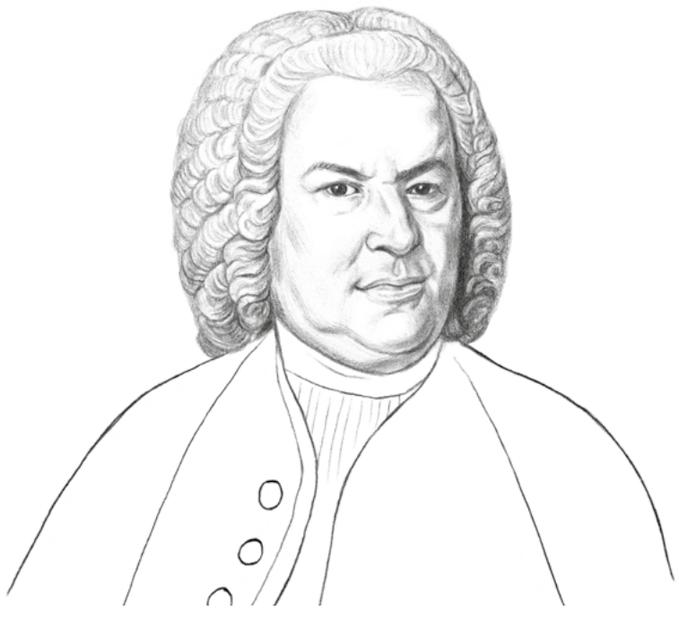
FRI 28 NOV 2025, 7.30PM
WED 11 MAR 2026, 7.30PM
FRI 01 MAY 2026, 7.30PM
TUE 21 JUL 2026, 7.30PM

Jean Rondeau's The Couperin Project is being released in late 2025.

The birth of Bach's blockbusters

BY ANDREW STEWART

Two of JS Bach's greatest pieces will be performed at Wigmore Hall and St James's, Spanish Place in September



Whether writing for Lutheran services, the ruling elite, Leipzig's town council or a coffeehouse audience, Johann Sebastian Bach set great store by the perfection of his craft. For him, there was no division between sacred and secular: he wrote *Jesu juva* ('Jesus, help') at the beginning of his scores, *Soli Deo Gloria* ('To God alone be the glory') at their close.

The composer's Lutheran faith was informed by a complex blend of orthodox thinking; the heartfelt fervour of Pietism, where God was regarded as 'a presence in the soul', not as an object for scientific dissection; and his personal reconciliation of Enlightenment rationalism with age-old German mysticism.

Those distinct, often contrasting strands are interwoven in two of his greatest creations, the Mass in B minor and the *St Matthew Passion*, each in its own way a profound contemplation of mankind's redemption. Both works can be heard during the opening month of Wigmore Hall's new season, with Bach's 'Great Passion' brought to life on Wednesday 10 September by the Dunedin Consort and his equally extraordinary setting of the Latin Mass presented on Thursday 18 September by Vox Luminis and the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra at St James's, Spanish Place.

It was the tradition in Protestant German states to offer a musical reflection on the story of Christ's passion, as recounted in St Matthew's Gospel on Palm Sunday and in St John's Gospel on Good Friday. Long before Bach became director of music at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig in May 1723, he set the passion story while serving the ducal court in Weimar (although its music has not survived). He composed the *St John Passion* for his first Good Friday in Leipzig, the performance of which formed part of a vespers service comprising hymns, a sermon, a Latin motet, prayers and a reading from the Book of Isaiah.

The liturgical framework was there again on 11 April 1727 when the congregation at St Thomas's heard the première of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. The piece was revived in slightly different form in 1729 and in a substantially reworked version at Good Friday vespers in 1736. The latter, lightly revised, was most likely presented again in 1742, the last time it was heard during Bach's lifetime. The Dunedin Consort will perform the work in its final form, with eight voices singing one-voice-per-part in company with a lithe period-instrument orchestra.

The *St Matthew Passion* is based on a text by the Leipzig-based poet Christian Friedrich Henrici, otherwise known by the pseudonym of Picander. It seems that Bach began setting Picander's words at the beginning of 1725 but was unable to finish the work before Good Friday. The libretto also remained incomplete at least until the middle of the year, and grew to such an extent that it made heavy demands on Bach's time. Picander interleaved the drama of Jesus's betrayal, trial and crucifixion, as told in chapters 26 and 27 of Matthew's Gospel, with an intricate web of commentaries and meditations on Christ's passion. These took the form of solo arias and duets; set-piece choruses, including expansive chorale fantasias; and well-known Lutheran hymns, the Passion Chorale, 'O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden' prominent among them. The libretto's complexity is mirrored in music of striking variety and remarkable depth, a depth intensified by Bach's grasp of Christian theology and compassion for the grief surrounding Christ's death.

When Jesus cries from the cross, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' ('My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' [Matthew 27:46]), Bach strips away the halo of string sound used up to this point to accompany Christ's words, reinforcing the work's central message: that the voluntary sacrifice of God's Son, an act of unconditional love, prefaces mankind's journey from earthly suffering to eternal salvation. The themes of pain, love and redemption are united in the

Bach invites listeners to contemplate the meaning of Christ's death through the often overwhelming emotions that his score arouses.

St Matthew Passion to form a sermon in music that surely complemented the hour-long sermon that in its original liturgical setting stood between the work's two halves. Bach invites listeners to contemplate the meaning of Christ's death through the often overwhelming emotions that his score arouses.

Scholars have long debated whether Bach was primarily moved to serve God through music or whether, after creating a flurry of sacred compositions in the 1720s out of duty, he was relieved to return to the composition of secular works. The Mass in B Minor, completed in 1749, the year before Bach's death, shows that he enlisted sacred and secular, ancient and modern, the world of the courtly dance and the church lament, to form one monumental act of musical worship.

While Martin Luther had rejected the Catholic dogma of transubstantiation, the mystical transformation of the eucharistic bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, the liturgy of his Protestant church contained space for the *Kyrie* and *Gloria* of the Latin Mass. In 1733, unhappy with his lot in Leipzig, Bach sent settings of both to Friedrich August II, the new elector of Saxony, together with a letter in which he asked to be given a court title. Near the end of his life and still in Leipzig, Bach revised his Dresden Mass and carefully matched existing compositions, some written for secular occasions, to the remaining text of the Ordinary of the Mass: the *Nicene Creed*, the *Sanctus*, *Osanna*, *Benedictus*, *Agnus Dei* and *Dona nobis pacem*.

The Mass in B minor was to be Bach's final choral composition, a summary of prolonged reflection on the Lutheran liturgy and its deep roots in Catholic ritual. To his joyful setting of the Latin *Sanctus*, which he had written for performance on Christmas Day 1724, he added newly composed pieces, revisions of now-lost originals and adaptations of known cantata movements, the earliest of which dates from 1714. The composition's range of musical styles and expressive contrasts is breathtaking, its cumulative effect one of *ekstasis*, a glorious transcendence of the mundane. As John Butt, director of the Dunedin Consort, notes in his monograph on the work, Bach 'seems to have had but one aim in mind' when compiling his *Missa tota*: 'the summation and perfection of his entire lifework'.

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WED 10 SEP 2025, 7.00PM
THU 8 SEP 2025, 7.30PM
AT ST JAMES'S, SPANISH PLACE



Thomas Larcher © Richard Haughton

A composer resisting the tyranny of the new

BY DAN CAIRNS

People involved in the creative arts tend to need little encouragement to wax lyrical and mystical about their craft and their 'process'. Which makes the candour of Thomas Larcher not only refreshing but startling.

The Austrian composer and pianist, the Hall's Composer in Residence, whose music will be the subject of a Focus Day at Wigmore Hall on 1 November, is a man seemingly utterly without illusions or artifice.

‘It’s the perfect hall. It’s untouched, no harm has been done to it. And it’s so important that they are continuing to programme daring counterpoints within this fantastic, old-fashioned space.’



Thomas Larcher © Richard Haughton

Larcher’s explanation for this is characteristically matter-of-fact. ‘I think the problem was related to my many, many encounters with the piano repertoire. It turned me off the idea of composing for piano, because everything somehow felt like old ground that had already been worked on – there seemed no space left for something new. Later, I understood that I needed to go a step back and not care about what has already been written, and to trust myself with these little ideas I had. But if I’m honest, I can still get back to that point of, “Oh well, this has been done before.” Even now. Although I can also get to the point of thinking, “This has all been written by *me* before!”’

The music that belatedly emerged from Larcher, including works such as *The Living Mountain*, *A Padmore Cycle*, *Oroboros* and the opera *The Hunting Gun*, possessed a tellingly pent-up expressiveness. Yet the 61-year-old remains clear-eyed about the business, as it were, of composition and admits to being torn between ‘everything being about looking back, trying to recapture those impressions of long ago, and the dictatorship of this imperative to find something new, that you have to be at the forefront of some exploration of new materials, breaking new ground or coming up with an innovative technique. But I think if you try too hard to find something you will find nothing’.

Larcher is currently juggling a huge number of projects and tasks, and he confesses he’s struggling. ‘I wish I had a disciplined process, but at the moment there are multiple concerts, my opera is being staged in Munich, I have to programme my festival, do my taxes, have discussions with musicians. I think there are two types of composers: those that have children and get up at 4.30am and write until 7am, and those that get up at 9am, when the other type is long finished, and start composing at 8pm.

‘It’s a strange dichotomy, the inspiration and the stark reality, but it can strongly influence your life and your thinking. It can be annoying, but you can’t live, and you shouldn’t live, in a bubble of so-called inspiration as a composer; you also need to be confronted with the world as it is. That tension, that clash of different spheres, is in the end maybe where a spark can be found.’

He relishes the prospect of the Focus Day, when he will hear the sonata he composed for the pianist Paul Lewis for the first time. ‘It was commissioned by a Californian winemaker but never performed because of Covid, and has only just been premièred in Spain. I haven’t heard it being played yet! It’s just out of my grasp. Perhaps that’s a metaphor. What for? My life, maybe.’

As those remarks suggest, Larcher is a man of waspish, bone-dry humour. At one point, discussing Radio 3’s controversial new Unwind radio stream, he suggests the BBC ‘only needs to play two pieces, Elgar’s “Nimrod” and Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings*. Are they not all you need to comfort your soul?’

In common with countless other musicians, Larcher glories in Wigmore Hall’s acoustic. ‘It’s the perfect hall. It’s untouched, no harm has been done to it. And it’s so important that they are continuing to programme daring counterpoints within this fantastic, old-fashioned space. They are proving that you can square the circle. Wigmore is an enigma, in a way – it possesses this magnetic force.’

And then, as if taken aback by such a burst of unabashed enthusiasm, he seems suddenly morose. It turns out that there is one drawback to the Focus Day, which perhaps only Larcher could locate. ‘In one sense it’s a shame, because I won’t be able to hear all of the programme as I myself will be playing.’

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SAT 1 NOV 2025, 11.30AM, 3.00PM & 7.30PM

Delivering the shock of the Baroque

BY MARK PULLINGER

Giovanni Antonini on the pioneering spirit of Il Giardino Armonico and presenting the surprising side of Haydn at Wigmore Hall

My first encounter with Il Giardino Armonico was its Vivaldi recordings for Teldec, bringing Italian exuberance to the sometimes anaemic period instrument world then dominated by ensembles from north of the Alps. I've been hooked ever since. Now, following its 2023 Wigmore Hall debut, it is returning for a three-concert residency.

As Giovanni Antonini, the ensemble's co-founder, explains, Vivaldi was there almost from the beginning. 'The first group of musicians that started as Il Giardino Armonico was in 1985, just a small group. In the beginning we were a trio with recorder [Antonini], cello [Paolo Beschi] and harpsichord [Lorenzo Ghielmi]. Our first Vivaldi project happened in 1987, recording and performing the *concerti da camera*, where we worked hard to find a new, different way to read this music.'

Their main approach was dramatic, to play works with an Italian spirit deriving from opera. 'Vivaldi's music is built around contrasts of characters, even within the same movement,' Antonini says. 'We worked so much on articulation, to let each instrument really speak, even finding sometimes harsh sounds that, in some ways, sounded quite modern at the time.

'There was a sort of polemic spirit to break something. We had grown up listening to Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Gustav Leonhardt, Frans Brüggen, who were absolutely important. Harnoncourt was the first to put this emphasis on articulation, to use this, let's say, Baroque approach. I say Baroque in a strict sense because the Baroque spirit is to touch people, to shock people, both in a good and a bad way. Even if you take paintings, for example, Caravaggio, who's not yet Baroque, but it's really shocking. He showed the drama, the violence, the sensuality. And I think we started to build our sound and our approach to the Baroque repertoire from that same spirit.'

Vivaldi featured in the ensemble's Wigmore Hall debut, performing with the star mandolin virtuoso Avi Avital. What were Antonini's first impressions of the Hall? 'Wigmore Hall is a mythical hall,' he muses, 'a unique place for music, with a public so passionate to listen. The acoustics are perfect for this type of music. It was a special experience to have this debut, and I'm even



Giovanni Antonini © Federico Emmi

more happy that we were appreciated to the point of being reinvited for more concerts, which is absolutely a great privilege. Wigmore Hall is so special, such an intimate way to taste the music. So we cannot dream of anything more!'

The group's first programme includes two *Sturm und Drang* symphonies by Haydn, a composer who has come to dominate Antonini's time. His hugely ambitious Haydn2032 project, split between Il Giardino Armonico and the Kammerorchester Basel, where he is guest conductor, aims to perform and record all of Haydn's symphonies by the time of the 300th anniversary of the composer's birth. It's already been quite a journey.

'In the standard repertoire not so many Haydn symphonies are performed, even by period instrument groups, probably 20 or 25. But the rest, at least for me, were quite unknown. We're now already more than halfway through, and every time it's absolutely a discovery. I'm not saying that all the symphonies are masterpieces, but I can always find a point of great interest even in the lesser ones.

'When you start an integral project, the danger is falling into routine. We always take four days of rehearsals, for example, when we prepare a new programme, then four or five days of recording, so we have the musical luxury of time to think about how to perform it. I learn a lot also from listening to the edits. Recordings are an artificial product, like making a film, so we adjust things and learn. This is the spirit of the project.'

Antonini's love for Haydn's music shines through. 'First comes Haydn's strategy of composition, especially in sonata form and how he manages the development sections. And, of course, there is his theatrical approach. Haydn's symphonies sort of correspond to the Mozart-Da Ponte operas, which are miraculous. I just finished conducting *Le nozze di Figaro*, and every time, in the second act finale, I am so surprised and astonished at how Mozart was able to manage this sense of form, of strategy over such a long piece of music. And in some ways also in Haydn's symphonies, especially the later ones, it is the same.

'Haydn always had this ability to surprise people, to touch people. His public in Eisenstadt was always expecting something new. And there's often irony behind even quite serious music – not just the musical jokes that we know, especially in the London Symphonies – but a sort of irony behind almost each phrase. That doesn't mean that it's superficial. Irony is a very serious thing.

'But Haydn can also be very boring if the performers don't understand aspects that are beyond the written notes. Take his Minuets: they can be incredible, but they can also be something that orchestras hate. If you see a Minuetto as a sort of miniature drama, a portrait of characters in which the performers have to participate to translate it into sound, then this Minuetto, which can be a small nightmare if played in a blind way, can be transformed into a miniature masterpiece.'

Antonini gives a wry smile. 'I always compare it to the work of an actor. Even Shakespeare can be very boring if the actor is not good.'

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SUN 2 NOV 2025, 7.30PM
WED 18 FEB 2026, 7.30PM
WED 8 JUL 2026, 7.30PM

Il Giardino Armonico © Alberto Panzani



IGA © Alberto Panzani

Christmas at Wigmore Hall

Booking is now open for Wigmore Hall's December line-up, and it's packed with Christmas presents for its audiences. There are items ideal for traditionalists, but also intriguing novelties, all performed by the world's leading ensembles and soloists.

The German soprano Christiane Karg sets the seasonal mood on 1 December with a gorgeous selection subtitled *Weihnachten – es naht die jubelvolle Zeit* (The joy of Christmas-time is near). This is a generous helping of mainly 19th-century items from Mendelssohn to Massenet, including rarities such as Ravel's *Noel des jouets* and a selection of *villancicos españolas* by the Cuban composer Joaquín Nin.

A few days later, the baritone Ashley Riches, accompanied by the pianist David Owen Norris, presents an unusual musical spin on Charles Dickens's evergreen favourite *A Christmas Carol*, using traditional and contemporary works to tell the familiar story, with Riches playing its lead characters (5 December).

Baroque ensembles will, of course, be much in evidence. First to appear, on 3 December, will be the Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin, under violinist Georg Hallweit, featuring guest violinist Mayumi Hirasaki. They play pieces inspired by the Christmas story, including the Bach Double Concerto for Two Violins in D minor.

Choral music will be on offer on 15 December from the Choir of St John's College Cambridge, who will perform modern carols by Sally Beamish, John Rutter, Eleanor Daley and Jonathan Dove, alongside works by Britten, Walton and traditional items. Delving further back, into the 18th Century, Vox Luminis features three major pieces composed in Leipzig, by JS Bach's predecessor Kuhnau and Bach himself (19 December); Solomon's Knot presents Handel's *Israel in Egypt* (22 December); and a day later Siglo de Oro will offer a lovely medley of compositions, old and new, about the Christmas story, from anonymous classics such as the Coventry Carol, the Nailsbourne Beasts Song and *Gaudete* (arr. Karl Jenkins) to Judith Weir's *My Guardian Angel*.



THE SCORE, 2025 SUMMER ISSUE

MON 1 DEC 2025, 7.30PM

Christiane Karg SOPRANO
Gerold Huber PIANO

£40 £37 £33 £27 £18

WED 3 DEC 2025, 7.30PM

Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin
Georg Kallweit VIOLIN, CONCERTMASTER
Mayumi Hirasaki VIOLIN, CONCERTMASTER

£40 £37 £33 £27 £18

FRI 05 DEC 2025, 7.30PM

Ashley Riches BASS-BARITONE
David Owen Norris PIANO

A Christmas Carol

£40 £37 £33 £27 £18

MON 15 DEC 2025, 1.00PM

Choir of St John's College Cambridge
Christopher Gray DIRECTOR

£18 (CONCESSIONS £16)

BBC RADIO 3

FRI 19 DEC 2025, 7.30PM

Vox Luminis
Lionel Meunier DIRECTOR

£50 £43 £33 £27 £18

MON 22 DEC 2025, 7.30PM

Baroque Ensemble in Residence

Solomon's Knot
Zoë Brookshaw SOPRANO
Clare Lloyd-Griffiths SOPRANO
Kate Symonds-Joy ALTO
James Hall ALTO
Thomas Herford TENOR
David de Winter TENOR
Jonathan Sells ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, BASS
Alex Ashworth BASS

£50 £43 £33 £27 £18

TUE 23 DEC 2025, 7.30PM

Siglo de Oro
Patrick Allies DIRECTOR

£40 £37 £33 £27 £18

Membership Events

THU 6 NOV 2025, 11.00AM & 2.00PM

Members' Guided Tour of Steinway Hall

Join us for an exclusive tour of Steinway & Sons' London home, Steinway Hall, which opened in 1875 and is celebrating 150 years of service to music this year. Led by Steinway's Director of Concert and Artists services, Ulrich Gerhartz, the tour will explore the showrooms and workshops where our new concert grand was prepared. Discover the intricacies of these world-renowned instruments and the finer details that influence the artists' relationship with them.

Please ensure you book a ticket for admission.
Spaces are limited so we advise you to book early.

£5



Ulrich Gerhartz

Further autumn events will be announced soon. Please keep an eye on your emails for updates.

How to book
By phone:
Call 020 7258 8230
(Monday-Friday 10.00am-5.30pm)

Online:
Visit wigmore-hall.org.uk/membership-events
(You will need to sign in to your online account or set up an account to book).

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Membership



Join the 1901 Patrons' Circle...

...for a unique opportunity to become part of Wigmore Hall's enduring legacy, as we celebrate over a century of world-class music making.

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- A signed copy of a **new publication on the Hall's history**
- **Named acknowledgement** in our online donor listing and in printed materials where possible

Suggested minimum donation £5,000

For more information on the Anniversary Festival, or to join the Circle, please contact **Tara Fry, Head of Grants and Donor Care**
tara@wigmore-hall.org.uk | 020 7258 8220
or visit wigmore-hall.org.uk/1901patrons

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Igor Levit © Felix Broede

Wigmore Hall News

Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition 2025

After four days of fascinating Preliminary Round performances of a very high standard, including 20th-century repertoire and works by Haydn, Mozart and Judith Weir, the 11 quartets were reduced to six for the Semi-finals, where they performed 19th-century repertoire. Just three quartets went through to the Final where we heard an all-Beethoven programme of Op. 132, Op. 59 No. 1 and Op. 130. The First Prize as well as three repertoire prizes went to Opus13, a Swedish-Norwegian quartet. The Terra String Quartet (USA) was awarded Second Prize; Third Prize and one of the repertoire prizes went to Quartet Integra (Japan). Congratulations to all the prize winners!



Opus13 with John Gilbooly
© Benjamin Ealovega

Simon Majaro MBE 1929-2025

Simon Majaro MBE – 'people person', academic, author, musical instrument maker and philanthropist – died on 1 April 2025. He and his wife, Pamela, founded the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust in 1998, with the aim of developing the next generation of chamber music lovers and players. Simon and Pamela's work with CAVATINA was recognised in 2011 when they were made MBEs for services to music. Pamela sadly died in 2016, and Simon handed CAVATINA over to Wigmore Hall's care in 2019. Simon and Pamela were regular attendees at Wigmore Hall, particularly for string quartet concerts. All at Wigmore Hall are deeply saddened by Simon's passing, and we will miss him greatly.

Future Funding: how legacies helped our fundraising this year

A significant boost to Wigmore Hall's Director's Fund over the past year came from legacy income. This helped the fund reach its first target of £10 million, underpinning our plans for investing in the Hall's long-term future, ensuring its independence, and supporting the emerging artists who perform there. If any Score readers would like to discuss leaving a gift in their Will and joining the Wigmore Society, please get in touch with John Gilhooly or Marie-Hélène Osterweil.

jgilhooly@wigmore-hall.org.uk | 020 7258 8266
mhosterweil@wigmore-hall.org.uk | 020 7258 8220
or visit wigmore-hall.org.uk/support-us/leave-a-legacy

Step into summer with our cocktail menu

Valkyrie's Kiss? Bellini? Chopin's Tipple? Explore the craft and creativity of Wigmore Hall's new cocktail menu, which features a rich variety of alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks, juices and liqueurs. Let our bar staff mix you the perfect cocktail, made with fresh, high-quality ingredients and a lot of care.



© Daniel Davis

DIRECTOR

JOHN GILHOOLY, CBE, OSI, HONFRAM, HONRCM, HON FGS, HONFRIAM

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