

Maxime Pascal conducts Berlioz's *L'Enfance du Christ*

Thursday, December 17, 2026 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

Maxime Pascal, conductor · Julie Boulianne, mezzo-soprano · Allan Clayton, tenor · Huw Montague Rendall, baritone · Jean Teitgen, bass · Edwin Crossley-Mercer, baritone · Theodore Platt, baritone · Caspar Singh, tenor · Rundfunkchor Berlin, chorus

approximately 95 minutes

Hector Berlioz

1803–1869

L'Enfance du Christ, Op. 25

THE COMPOSER

Hector Berlioz was music's great revolutionary. Born in 1803 near Grenoble, he was expected to follow his father, a physician, into medicine and dutifully enrolled at the School of Medicine in Paris. But the lure of music proved irresistible.

Berlioz's path was never easy. His independent mind and refusal to follow traditional rules put him at odds with the conservative Parisian musical establishment. He won the prestigious Prix de Rome in 1830. Throughout his life his music was more appreciated abroad, in Germany, Britain and Russia, than at home. Yet his innovations in orchestration, program music, and musical narrative transformed the art form.

Unlike most of his contemporaries, Berlioz never studied the piano and played it haltingly at best. The orchestra was his instrument, and he expanded its expressive possibilities in ways no one had imagined.

ABOUT THE WORK

L'Enfance du Christ (The Childhood of Christ) grew backwards, from its middle outwards. In 1850 Hector Berlioz wrote a short piece for organ for his friend Joseph-Louis Duc, and soon turned it into a chorus in which shepherds bid farewell to the infant Jesus as the Holy Family leaves Bethlehem. He then played a practical joke on Paris: he had the chorus performed as the work of "Pierre Ducre", an invented seventeenth-century choirmaster of the Sainte-Chapelle. Listeners who normally found Berlioz noisy and bizarre praised the piece warmly, and one lady is said to have remarked that Berlioz could never write a tune as simple and charming as old Ducre's.

95 minutes

The chorus became the centre of *La Fuite en Égypte* (The Flight into Egypt), to which Berlioz added an overture and a tenor narration describing the Holy Family at rest. Its success persuaded him to continue. He wrote *L'Arrivée à Saïs* (The Arrival at Saïs), in which the exhausted travellers look for shelter in Egypt, and finally, in 1854, a new opening part, *Le Songe d'Hérode* (Herod's Dream). Berlioz wrote the words himself, based loosely on the account in Matthew's Gospel, and called the result a *trilogie sacrée*, a sacred trilogy.

The first complete performance, conducted by Berlioz in Paris on 10 December 1854, was an immediate success with a Parisian press that had usually been hostile to him. Some critics put this down to a new, gentler manner. Berlioz rejected the idea firmly: the subject called for simple music, he wrote, and he would have written the piece in exactly the same way twenty years earlier.

The score deliberately looks back. He used an archaic style in his text, touches of the old church modes, and a trio for two flutes and harp to suggest an ancient, far-off world. The work ends not with a grand chorus but with a quiet, unaccompanied one. It has long been a favourite at Christmas.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Part One: Herod's Dream. There is no overture. The narrator (tenor) sets the scene in a few lines, and then Roman soldiers patrol the streets of Jerusalem at night in a *Marche nocturne*: a quiet, fugal march whose lines weave in and out of each other as the patrol comes and goes. Herod (bass) is sleepless, haunted by a recurring dream of a child who will overthrow him. His long aria "O misère des rois" is one of the finest things in the score, gloomy and modal, with low brass shadowing his despair. Soothsayers are summoned and perform a strange, fitful dance in 7/4 time before confirming his fears; Herod orders every newborn child to be killed. The scene then changes to the stable at Bethlehem, where Mary and Joseph sing tenderly over the child, until an unseen choir of angels warns them to flee. Berlioz asks for these voices to sound from a distance, with an organ.

Part Two: The Flight into Egypt. This short central part is the original *Fuite en Égypte*. A gentle, modal overture leads to *L'Adieu des bergers* (The Shepherds' Farewell), the chorus that began the whole project. The narrator then describes the family resting by the roadside in *Le Repos de la Sainte Famille*, a pastoral scene in which female voices join briefly at the end.

Part Three: The Arrival at Saïs. After three days crossing the desert the family reaches the Egyptian city of Saïs. Mary and Joseph beg for shelter and are turned away at door after door, with anxious, stumbling music in the orchestra. Finally an Ishmaelite father of a family (baritone) takes them in, and, discovering that Joseph is a carpenter like him, has music played to comfort the guests. Their music is the Trio for two flutes and harp, one of the very few pieces of chamber music Berlioz ever wrote. In the epilogue the narrator reflects on the story, and the work ends with the unaccompanied chorus “O mon âme”, which fades into silence.

Tonight's artists

Julie Boulianne *mezzo-soprano*

Julie Boulianne sings Mary, whose music in the stable scene and at the doors of Saïs is some of the most tender in the work.

Julie Boulianne is a French-Canadian mezzo-soprano, born in Québec in 1978. She trained at the Schulich School of Music of McGill University and at the Juilliard School in New York, and won first prizes at the Canadian Music Competition and the Joy in Singing competition. At the Metropolitan Opera her roles have included Siébel in Faust, Stéphanie in Roméo et Juliette and Ascanio in Les Troyens, and she has sung at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Glyndebourne, La Monnaie, the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées and the Vienna State Opera. Known for the agility and dark colour of her voice, she is closely associated with Mozart, Rossini and the French repertoire, Berlioz included: she has sung Marguerite in La Damnation de Faust and Les Nuits d'été in concert.

Allan Clayton *tenor*

Allan Clayton is the Narrator (Le Récitant), the voice that opens the work, carries the long Repose of the Holy Family in Part Two and leads the quiet closing chorus.

Allan Clayton, born in 1981, is a British tenor. He was a chorister at Worcester Cathedral, a choral scholar at St John's College, Cambridge, and a student at the Royal Academy of Music, and was a BBC New Generation Artist from 2007 to 2009. His roles at the Royal Opera House include the title roles in Peter Grimes and Jephtha and Christian in the world premiere of Festen, for which he won the 2025 Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement in Opera. He has sung Grimes at the Metropolitan Opera and the Paris Opera, and the title role in Brett Dean's Hamlet at Glyndebourne, the Met and the Bavarian State Opera. He received the Royal Philharmonic Society Singer Award in 2018 and was appointed MBE in 2021.

Huw Montague Rendall *baritone*

Huw Montague Rendall sings Joseph.

Huw Montague Rendall is a British baritone, the son of the tenor David Rendall and the mezzo-soprano Diana Montague. He trained at the Royal College of Music, was a Jerwood Young Artist at Glyndebourne, where he won the John Christie Award in 2016, and took part in the Salzburg Festival's Young Singers Project and the International Opera Studio in Zurich. His roles since then include Papageno and Count Almaviva at the Royal Opera House, Pelléas at the Aix-en-Provence Festival and the Paris Opera, and the title role in Billy Budd at the Vienna State Opera. He was named Best Newcomer at the 2024 Oper! Awards.

Jean Teitgen *bass*

Jean Teitgen sings Herod, whose sleepless aria is the dramatic centre of Part One.

Jean Teitgen is a French bass who studied economics before training as a singer at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique in Paris. His repertoire runs from Lully and Rameau to the twentieth century, with a particular strength in Verdi and in French opera, from Arkel in Pelléas et Mélisande to Frère Laurent in Roméo et Juliette. He has sung at the Paris Opera, the Royal Opera House, La Monnaie, the Vienna State Opera, the Teatro Real and the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, and has performed L'Enfance du Christ in concert in Paris and Utrecht.

Edwin Crossley-Mercer *baritone*

Edwin Crossley-Mercer sings the Ishmaelite father of a family who gives the Holy Family shelter at Saïs.

Edwin Crossley-Mercer is a French bass-baritone, born in Clermont-Ferrand in 1982. He studied at the Centre de musique baroque de Versailles and then at the Hanns Eisler School of Music in Berlin, and was a pupil of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. Since his opera debut in 2006 he has sung leading roles by Mozart, Rossini, Handel and Rameau at houses and festivals including Glyndebourne, Aix-en-Provence and Salzburg, and he has a particular affinity for French composers such as Berlioz, Gounod and Massenet. He is also a committed recitalist in German Lieder and French song.

Theodore Platt *baritone*

Theodore Platt sings Polydorus, the officer who announces the soothsayers to Herod.

Theodore Platt is a British-Russian baritone, born in London. He studied music at St John's College, Cambridge, and trained at the Royal College of Music Opera Studio and the Bavarian State Opera's Opera Studio, and was an ensemble member of the Royal Danish Opera in Copenhagen. His awards include the Kathleen Ferrier Awards, the 2022 International Art Song Competition in Stuttgart with the pianist Keval Shah, and a Borletti-Buitoni Trust fellowship.

Caspar Singh *tenor*

Caspar Singh sings the Centurion.

Caspar Singh is a British-Indian tenor. He trained at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London and in the opera studio of the Bavarian State Opera, where he then joined the ensemble, and from 2022 to 2024 he was Principal Mozart Tenor at the Komische Oper Berlin. He has sung at Glyndebourne, English National Opera and the BBC Proms, and in concert with the Berliner Philharmoniker under Kirill Petrenko.

Rundfunkchor Berlin *chorus*

The Rundfunkchor Berlin sings the soldiers, soothsayers, angels, shepherds and Ishmaelites, and the unaccompanied final chorus.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz**

Hector Berlioz, translated by David Cairns, Alfred A. Knopf 2002

Berlioz's own memoirs, in David Cairns's translation, tell his life in his own words, with wit and candour, and are the best way to meet the composer of *L'Enfance du Christ*.

ACCESSIBLE **The Life of Berlioz**

Peter Bloom, Cambridge University Press 1998

A short, readable life of Berlioz that places *L'Enfance du Christ* in the later part of his career.

DEEPER **Berlioz, Volume Two: Servitude and Greatness, 1832-1869**

David Cairns, University of California Press 2003

The second volume of David Cairns's major biography covers 1832 to 1869, including the composition and 1854 premiere of *L'Enfance du Christ*.

SOURCES

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14. Huw Montague Rendall, Salzburg Festival. <https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/a/huw-montague-rendall>
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20. About, Theodore Platt. <https://www.theodoreplatt.com/about>
21. Biography, Caspar Singh. <https://www.casparsingh.com/biography>
22. The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780375413919>
23. The Life of Berlioz, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521485487>
24. Berlioz, Volume Two: Servitude and Greatness, 1832-1869, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780520240582>



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