

Hannigan: Bowler's The White Book, Ligeti and Also sprach Zarathustra

Thursday, March 5, 2026 · 19:00 · Barbican
Barbara Hannigan, conductor · Barbara Hannigan, soprano · Bar Avni, conductor

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	BOWLER <i>The White Book</i>	36'
2	LIGETI 1923–2006 <i>Lontano</i>	11'
3	STRAUSS 1864–1949 <i>Also sprach Zarathustra, Op. 30</i>	34'
TOTAL MUSIC		81'

Laura Bowler

36 minutes

The White Book

THE COMPOSER

Laura Bowler is a British composer and vocalist, one of the most striking voices in contemporary British music, known for boldly theatrical, multidisciplinary work that often blurs the line between concert music and performance art. Her pieces include the chamber opera *The Blue Woman* for the Royal Opera House, *Wicked Problems* for voice and bass flute (which won a Royal Philharmonic Society Award) and *Antarctica*, a fifty-minute multimedia work for voice and orchestra, and she has written for the LSO, the BBC Symphony Orchestra and the Royal Opera House. She is also an accomplished performer of her own and others' vocal music, which gives her writing for the voice an unusual physicality and immediacy, and she teaches composition at the Royal Northern College of Music and Trinity Laban.

ABOUT THE WORK

The White Book is a substantial new work for soprano and orchestra by Laura Bowler, shaped around Barbara Hannigan's voice and stage presence; these concerts are its UK premiere, and the LSO is one of the three orchestras that commissioned it. It takes its title and text from the acclaimed novel *The White Book* by the Korean writer Han Kang (winner of the 2024 Nobel Prize in Literature), a spare, poetic,

fragmentary meditation on grief, mortality and survival, built around the narrator's older sister who died only two hours after being born. Han Kang structures her book around white things (snow, salt, rice, fog, a baby's gown, a shroud), using the colour white as a thread linking life and death, presence and absence. Bowler has fashioned from this a deeply personal exploration of loss.

As a brand-new piece, it comes without the familiarity that surrounds the Ligeti and Strauss that follow, and that is part of its power. Bowler is a composer-vocalist with a strong theatrical instinct and an unusually visceral feeling for the voice, and in Hannigan she has the ideal interpreter: a soprano of fearless range and dramatic commitment who has built her career on bringing brand-new music to vivid life. The result is a major contemporary statement that opens the programme, setting an intimate, searching meditation on grief against the cosmic scale of the Strauss to come.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Approach this with open ears: you are hearing music at the very start of its life. Without recordings to anticipate, follow the soprano: listen for how Bowler uses Hannigan's extraordinary voice, by turns singing, speaking, whispering and crying out, to embody Han Kang's fragmentary text about a lost sister and the colour white.

Listen for the relationship between voice and orchestra (whether the orchestra cushions, shadows, threatens or overwhelms the solo line) and for the work's emotional architecture as it moves through the novel's images of snow, fog, salt and shrouds. Bowler is a theatrical composer, so expect strong contrasts of texture and atmosphere: moments of fragile, frozen stillness set against more agitated or anguished passages. Above all, listen to the words and the voice together, and to the way a living composer and a great singer collaborate to turn a meditation on grief and white things into sound for the first time.

György Ligeti

1923–2006

Lontano

THE COMPOSER

György Ligeti (1923–2006) was one of the most original and influential composers of the twentieth century. Born into a Hungarian Jewish family in Transylvania, he survived the Holocaust (which killed much of his family)

11 minutes

and lived under Communist Hungary until he fled west after the failed 1956 uprising, settling eventually in Austria. Freed from isolation, he became a leading figure of the European avant-garde, but always an independent one, never bound to any school. He is famous for his technique of ‘micropolyphony’, dense, slowly shifting clouds of sound made from many tightly interwoven individual lines, heard in works like *Atmosphères* and *Lux Aeterna*, several of which reached a vast audience through Stanley Kubrick’s film 2001: A Space Odyssey. His restlessly inventive output ranges from the absurdist opera *Le Grand Macabre* (his ‘anti-anti-opera’) to the intricate, rhythmically dazzling late *Piano Études*. A composer of wit, imagination and profound seriousness, he transformed how we think about musical texture and time.

ABOUT THE WORK

Lontano (the title is Italian for ‘far away’ or ‘distant’) is one of Ligeti’s most beautiful and mysterious orchestral works, composed in 1967. It is a supreme example of his ‘micropolyphony’: a technique in which the orchestra is divided into a great many individual parts, each playing slightly different lines that weave together into a dense, slowly evolving web of sound. The individual threads are inaudible as such; what we hear instead is a shimmering, continuously transforming cloud of harmony, in which colours and chords seem to crystallise out of the texture and then dissolve again, as if glimpsed from a great distance.

Unlike some of Ligeti’s more famously dissonant cluster pieces, *Lontano* is often surprisingly consonant and even diatonic, which gives it a strange, glowing beauty, at times almost like distant, half-remembered tonal music heard through fog. The effect is hypnotic and spatial: sounds emerge imperceptibly, swell, and recede, with no melody, beat or conventional development to hold onto, only the slow breathing of the orchestral mass. At around eleven minutes it is a short but utterly immersive experience, and a perfect bridge between Bowler’s intimate new work and the cosmic grandeur of Strauss.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Let go of any expectation of tune, rhythm or development: *Lontano* is about pure sound, colour and slow transformation. Listen for the way the music emerges almost imperceptibly from near-silence, and for the sensation of a vast, shimmering cloud of sound that is constantly, gradually changing without ever seeming to ‘move’ in the ordinary sense.

Listen especially for the moments of harmonic crystallisation, passages where, out of the dense woven texture, a recognisable chord or glowing consonance seems to form, hover, and then blur away again, like a shape coming into and out of focus in mist. Notice the extraordinary control of dynamics and orchestral colour: the music swells and fades in long, breathing arcs, with sudden surprising depths and heights. The title's promise of distance is everything here: the sense of sound coming from far away, of vast space and slow time. It is music to be bathed in rather than followed, and a mesmerising experience in the concert hall.

Richard Strauss

34 minutes

1864–1949

Also sprach Zarathustra, Op. 30

THE COMPOSER

Richard Strauss was the heir to Wagner and Liszt, the composer who carried the late Romantic tradition into the twentieth century. Born in Munich in 1864, the son of the principal horn player of the Munich Court Orchestra, he received a conservative musical education before an encounter with Alexander Ritter, a violinist married to one of Wagner's nieces, converted him to the "music of the future."

Between 1889 and 1898, Strauss composed a series of tone poems that made him the most famous composer in Germany: *Don Juan*, *Death and Transfiguration*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, *Don Quixote*, and *Ein Heldenleben*. Each pushed the orchestra to new extremes of virtuosity and expression. Then he turned to opera, creating the scandalous *Salome* (1905), the shattering *Elektra* (1909), and the nostalgic masterpiece *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911).

Strauss lived long: through two world wars, the Nazi era, and the destruction of the German musical culture he had embodied. His late works, including the *Metamorphosen* for strings and the *Four Last Songs*, are elegies for a lost world. He died in 1949, shortly after completing those final songs.

ABOUT THE WORK

Also sprach Zarathustra ('Thus Spake Zarathustra') is one of the most spectacular of Richard Strauss's tone poems, and the owner of perhaps the most famous opening in all orchestral music. Composed in 1896, when Strauss was at the height of his powers as the boldest orchestral colourist of his day, it takes its inspiration from Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical prose-poem of the same name, with its vision of humanity striving to transcend itself and become the 'Übermensch' (Superman). Strauss did not attempt to set Nietzsche's text or tell a

literal story; instead he wrote a series of linked orchestral sections, each headed with a chapter title from the book, that evoke humanity's journey from primal nature through religion, science, passion and doubt toward a kind of cosmic questioning.

The work is, of course, immortal because of its opening 'Sunrise' (the 'Introduction, or Dawn'), made universally famous by Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey: a slow, awe-inspiring crescendo from the depths to a blazing brass proclamation that has become shorthand for grandeur and revelation. But the whole tone poem is a magnificent showcase: a huge orchestra deployed with dazzling virtuosity across some thirty-five minutes of richly varied music, including a lush 'Dance Song' waltz with a prominent solo violin, a great fugue representing 'science,' and an enigmatic, unresolved ending. It is a thrilling, monumental close to the concert, and a fascinating counterpart to the Ligeti, another work about cosmic scale and the depiction of the universe in sound.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen, of course, for the celebrated opening 'Sunrise': from a barely audible deep rumble (organ, double basses and contrabassoon on a low C), a solo trumpet intones the rising three-note 'nature' motif (C–G–C), answered by colossal blazing chords from the full orchestra and thundering timpani, one of the great spine-tingling moments in music, repeated and capped by a tremendous climax. That little three-note 'world riddle' motif recurs throughout the piece; listen for its returns.

After the famous dawn, follow the journey through Strauss's vividly contrasted episodes: the hushed, devotional music for the 'backworldsmen' (with a chorale-like passage and organ); surging, yearning string melodies for the great longings and passions; and the remarkable fugue of 'Science,' a knotty theme using all twelve notes of the scale. Listen for the glorious 'Dance Song,' a sweeping Viennese waltz led by a solo violin (the concertmaster's big moment), depicting human joy and sensuality. And listen, finally, for the extraordinary, unresolved ending: a midnight bell tolls, and the music dies away with the orchestra divided between two keys at once, the 'world riddle' left deliberately unanswered, the universe's question hanging in the air.

Tonight's artists

Barbara Hannigan *soprano*

Laura Bowler shaped *The White Book* around Barbara Hannigan's voice, and she sings it as soprano soloist in its UK premiere, stepping out from her conducting role for this piece. The pre-eminent interpreter of new vocal music of her generation, with more than eighty premieres to her name, Hannigan brings her fearless range, dramatic intensity and total commitment to a work conceived from the first note for her voice.

Barbara Hannigan, born in Nova Scotia, Canada, in 1971, is one of the most extraordinary musicians of our time: a world-renowned soprano who is also, increasingly, a celebrated conductor, often doing both at once. As a singer she is the foremost interpreter of contemporary vocal music of her generation, having premiered more than eighty new works and become especially associated with composers such as Ligeti, Boulez, Dutilleux, Hans Abrahamsen and George Benjamin (she created the role of Agnès in his *Written on Skin*). She later added conducting to her career, making a sensational impact with programmes in which she directs the orchestra and sings simultaneously, and she now holds major podium positions including Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Iceland Symphony Orchestra and Principal Guest Conductor of the Gothenburg Symphony. Fearless, charismatic and a tireless champion of new music, she is the perfect guiding spirit for this adventurous programme, singing in Laura Bowler's new work and conducting the Ligeti and Strauss.

Bar Avni *conductor*

While Barbara Hannigan both sings and conducts much of this programme, the UK premiere of Laura Bowler's *The White Book*, in which Hannigan is the soprano soloist, calls for a conductor on the podium, and that role is taken by Bar Avni. A prize-winning young conductor and recent winner of the La Maestra competition, Avni partners Hannigan in bringing Bowler's new work to life.

Bar Avni, born in Israel in 1989, is a fast-rising conductor who began her musical life as a percussionist before turning to the podium. She studied conducting with Yoav Talmi in Tel Aviv, then with Martin Sieghart in Graz and Ulrich Windfuhr in Hamburg. In 2024 she won the prestigious La Maestra competition in Paris (taking several additional prizes), and she served from 2021 to 2024 as Chief Conductor of the Bayer Philharmoniker, the first woman to hold that post in the orchestra's history. She is in growing demand with major orchestras across Europe.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century**
Alex Ross, Picador 2008

Ross's history of twentieth-century music runs from Strauss, whose *Zarathustra* opens tonight's second half, to the postwar avant-garde of Ligeti, so it frames the whole programme.

ACCESSIBLE **György Ligeti**
Richard Toop, Phaidon 1999

A compact, well-illustrated life of Ligeti that explains how his cloud-like textures, heard in *Lontano*, grew out of his escape from Hungary and his years in the West.

DEEPER **György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination**
Richard Steinitz, Faber and Faber 2003

A full study of Ligeti's life and works by a composer and scholar, with detailed discussion of the micropolyphonic orchestral pieces of the 1960s, *Lontano* among them.

SOURCES

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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/Iso-2026-03-05-hannigan>

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