

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

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

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

1864–1949

34 minutes

Also sprach Zarathustra, Op. 30

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.



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