

Rattle: Gerhard, Strauss's Four Last Songs and Mahler's Fourth

Thursday, May 21, 2026 · 19:00 · Barbican
Sir Simon Rattle, conductor · Lucy Crowe, soprano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	GERHARD 1896–1970 <i>Symphony No. 3, 'Collages'</i>	20'
2	STRAUSS 1864–1949 <i>Four Last Songs</i>	25'
3	MAHLER 1860–1911 <i>Symphony No. 4 in G major</i>	60'
TOTAL MUSIC		105'

Roberto Gerhard

1896–1970

Symphony No. 3, 'Collages'

THE COMPOSER

Roberto Gerhard (1896–1970) was a Catalan-British composer whose remarkable career bridged Spain and Britain, tradition and the avant-garde. Born in Valls, Catalonia, he studied first with the great Spanish nationalist Felipe Pedrell and then, crucially, became Arnold Schoenberg's only Spanish pupil in Vienna and Berlin, absorbing the twelve-tone method while never losing his Spanish roots. After the Spanish Civil War forced him into exile, he settled in Cambridge, England, in 1939, and spent the rest of his life there, becoming a major (if long under-appreciated) figure in British music. His output ranges from colourful, Spanish-flavoured early works (the ballet *Don Quixote*, the opera *The Duenna*) to a bold, experimental later style embracing serialism, electronic music and a vivid, exploratory approach to orchestral and electronic sound. A pioneer of electronic and tape music in Britain, he composed four symphonies and much else, and is now recognised as one of the most original voices of his era.

ABOUT THE WORK

Roberto Gerhard's Third Symphony, subtitled 'Collages,' is one of the boldest and most original orchestral works of its time: a piece that fuses a large symphony orchestra with electronic sounds on tape,

20 minutes

written by a composer in his sixties at the height of his experimental powers. Commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation and dedicated to the memory of Serge and Natalie Koussevitzky, it was first performed in London in 1961. Its very title, 'Collages,' signals Gerhard's method: rather than developing themes in the traditional symphonic way, he juxtaposes and layers contrasting blocks of sound, orchestral and electronic, much as a visual artist assembles a collage from disparate materials.

Gerhard said the work was inspired in part by the experience of watching a sunrise from an aeroplane, and it has a real sense of vast space, light and elemental wonder. The electronic tape part, remarkable for 1960, adds an extra dimension of strange, otherworldly sound to the already vivid and imaginative orchestral writing. This is genuinely adventurous music: atmospheric, dramatic, sometimes violent, sometimes mysterious, demanding open and curious ears. As the opening work of a Rattle programme that moves from this modernist sound-collage through Strauss's autumnal farewell to Mahler's child-like heaven, it sets up a fascinating journey, and reminds us of Gerhard's importance as a pioneer of new sound.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Approach this with open ears, ready for something genuinely experimental. Listen for the 'collage' technique itself: blocks of contrasting sound placed side by side and layered, rather than melodies that grow and develop: sudden shifts of texture, colour and mood, like cutting between images.

Listen especially for the electronic tape: passages where strange, synthetic or processed sounds emerge alongside or against the orchestra, adding an eerie, futuristic dimension (extraordinary for a work of 1960). Listen for Gerhard's brilliant and unconventional orchestration (glittering percussion, vivid instrumental colours, dramatic contrasts of dense and sparse textures) and for the sense of vast space and light that reflects his sunrise-from-an-aeroplane inspiration. There are moments of violence and high drama, and others of mystery and stillness. Don't search for conventional tunes or structure; instead, let the sequence of vivid sonic images wash over you, and experience a striking, atmospheric work by one of the twentieth century's unjustly neglected originals.

Richard Strauss

1864–1949

Four Last Songs

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

The Four Last Songs (Vier letzte Lieder) are Richard Strauss's sublime farewell to life and to music, among the most beautiful and moving works ever written for the human voice. Strauss composed them in 1948, when he was eighty-four, in the shattered aftermath of the Second World War, with his own death less than a year away. After a lifetime as one of the great masters of the orchestra and of opera, he returned at the very end to the intimate form of the orchestral song, setting three poems by Hermann Hesse and one by Joseph von Eichendorff. The songs were not conceived or published by Strauss as a set; the title and the grouping were supplied posthumously by his friend, the publisher Ernst Roth, who issued them together in 1950, after the composer's death.

The songs form a profound meditation on the cycle of life, the acceptance of death and the consolations of love and nature. Three of them (all but 'Spring') deal directly with endings (sleep, autumn, sunset), yet there is no fear in them, only a serene, glowing, valedictory peace. Strauss writes for a soprano voice soaring over a rich, warm orchestra, with luminous, sunset harmonies and exquisite instrumental solos. They are the perfect centre of this programme: a great composer's autumnal leave-taking, framed by Gerhard's modernist dawn and Mahler's vision of heaven.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The four songs trace a journey from spring to sunset. Listen first to **‘Frühling’ (‘Spring’)**, the most ardent, the voice blossoming, like nature itself, into warmth and colour. Then **‘September’**, in which summer fades: listen for the gentle melancholy and the exquisite closing horn solo (a personal touch: Strauss’s father was a famous horn player) as the garden dies into autumn.

‘Beim Schlafengehen’ (‘When Falling Asleep’) is the emotional heart: listen for the heavenly orchestral interlude, in which a solo violin rises and soars before the voice returns, one of the most transcendent passages Strauss ever wrote, evoking the soul taking flight in sleep. Finally, **‘Im Abendrot’ (‘At Sunset’)**, setting Eichendorff’s poem about an old couple watching the sun go down after a long life together. Listen for the radiant orchestral sunset, and, at the words ‘Is this perhaps death?’, for the magical, hushed quotation Strauss makes of his own tone poem *Death and Transfiguration* from sixty years earlier, followed by the song of two larks (trilling flutes) as the music dissolves into serene, accepting peace. Lucy Crowe’s soprano carries this glowing farewell.

Gustav Mahler

1860–1911

60 minutes

Symphony No. 4 in G major

THE COMPOSER

Gustav Mahler was born on July 7, 1860, in the Bohemian village of Kaliště (now in the Czech Republic), the second of fourteen children in a Jewish family. Death was a constant presence in his childhood: many of his siblings died in infancy. This early acquaintance with mortality would permeate his music throughout his life.

Mahler’s prodigious musical talent emerged early: at four he discovered his grandparents’ piano and took to it at once. At fifteen he entered the Vienna Conservatory, and he later turned to conducting to earn his living, reserving composition for summer holidays. His conducting career was meteoric: by 1897, at age thirty-seven, he had become artistic director of the Vienna Court Opera, where his innovative productions and exacting standards made him one of the most celebrated opera conductors of his era.

As a composer, Mahler worked on a monumental scale. His nine completed symphonies (plus an unfinished tenth) and five song cycles represent a titanic achievement, bridging nineteenth-century Romanticism and twentieth-century modernism. Yet during his lifetime, his conducting reputation far

outstripped his recognition as a composer. It was only after his death in 1911, and particularly after 1945, that Mahler's compositions gained the worldwide acclaim they enjoy today.

ABOUT THE WORK

Mahler's Fourth is the sunniest, most intimate and most classically poised of his symphonies, a work of deceptive lightness that conceals real depth. After the vast, world-embracing canvases of his Second and Third Symphonies (which call for huge forces, choirs and soloists), Mahler scaled back here to a smaller orchestra (notably with no trombones or tuba) and a more transparent, almost eighteenth-century clarity, producing something that often sounds like a sophisticated fairy tale. The whole symphony grows from and points toward a single song: 'Das himmlische Leben' ('The Heavenly Life'), a setting of a folk poem from the *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* collection, in which a child describes heaven as a place of endless food, music, dancing and joy. Mahler called this song the 'tapering spire' of the whole edifice, and saves it for the finale.

Most radically, Mahler ends the symphony not with a grand orchestral climax but with this gentle song for solo soprano: a child's naive, beatific vision of paradise. The journey there passes through a genial, song-filled first movement (opening with sleigh-bells), an eerie 'dance of death' scherzo, and one of the most profound and beautiful slow movements Mahler ever wrote. Completed in 1900 and premiered, with the composer conducting, in 1901, it is a perfect, luminous conclusion to a programme about endings and heavenly visions, and a wonderful showcase for orchestra, conductor and soprano alike.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen at the very start for the jingling sleigh-bells and chirping flutes that open the first movement, an instant evocation of a child's wintry, magical world. The movement is genial and song-like, but full of Mahlerian surprises: sudden shifts of mood, ironic touches and moments of shadow amid the sunshine.

The second movement is a scherzo with a sinister edge: listen for the solo violin, deliberately tuned up a tone to sound harsh and uncanny. This is 'Freund Hein' (Death) playing his fiddle, leading a spooky, lopsided dance. The third movement (*Ruhevoll*, 'peacefully') is the symphony's sublime heart: a set of variations of deep serenity and tenderness. Listen for its long, hymn-like calm, and for the astonishing moment near the end when the gates of heaven seem to burst open in a blazing fortis-

simo, with a foretaste of the finale's tune. Then comes the finale: the soprano enters to sing 'The Heavenly Life,' a child's delighted catalogue of heaven's pleasures. Listen for its innocent, folk-like charm (and the recurring sleigh-bells), the contrast between earthly and heavenly music, and the way it all fades, at the close, into a hushed, glowing serenity: heaven, at last, in sound. Lucy Crowe is the soprano soloist; note Mahler's instruction that she sing with a childlike, joyful expression, without parody.

Tonight's artists

Lucy Crowe *soprano*

The soprano is the radiant thread linking the two halves of this concert, taking the solo role both in Strauss's autumnal Four Last Songs and in the heavenly finale of Mahler's Fourth Symphony. They are two of the most beautiful and exposed soprano parts in the orchestral repertoire, the one a serene leave-taking, the other a child's vision of paradise. Lucy Crowe, celebrated for the purity and warmth of her voice and her expressive range, brings both the radiance and the tenderness these contrasting masterpieces demand.

Lucy Crowe, born in Staffordshire, England, is one of the most versatile and admired British sopranos of her generation, awarded an OBE in 2023. A graduate of the Royal Academy of Music, she has built a distinguished career spanning repertoire from the Baroque to the twentieth century, appearing at leading opera houses (the Royal Opera, English National Opera, Glyndebourne, Deutsche Oper Berlin, the Bayerische Staatsoper and the Metropolitan Opera) in roles such as Mozart's Pamina and Susanna, Handel heroines, Musetta and Janáček's Vixen. Equally celebrated on the concert platform, she is admired for the purity, agility and radiant warmth of her voice and for her expressive intelligence, qualities ideally suited to the soaring lines of Strauss's Four Last Songs and the childlike serenity of Mahler's Fourth.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Why Mahler?: How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed Our World**

Norman Lebrecht, Anchor 2011

A personal, opinionated guide to why Mahler's symphonies, the Fourth among them, speak so strongly to listeners today.

ACCESSIBLE **Richard Strauss: Man, Musician, Enigma**

Michael Kennedy, Cambridge University Press 2006

A biography of Strauss that follows him to the end of his long life and the Four Last Songs, written in 1948 and premiered after his death.

DEEPER **Gustav Mahler**

Jens Malte Fischer, Yale University Press 2013

A detailed biography of Mahler, translated from the German, that sets works such as the Fourth Symphony in the Vienna of his time.

SOURCES

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3. The Symphonies of Roberto Gerhard, by Paul Conway, MusicWeb International. <http://www.musicweb-international.com/gerhard/>
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5. Roberto Gerhard, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roberto_Gerhard
6. Four Last Songs, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Last_Songs
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8. Symphony No. 4 (Mahler), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._4_\(Mahler\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._4_(Mahler))
9. The Heavenly Life: A Guide to Mahler's Symphony No. 4, Houston Symphony. <https://houston-symphony.org/guide-mahler-symphony-no-4/>
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11. Lucy Crowe, Askonas Holt. <https://askonasholt.com/artist/lucy-crowe>
12. Lucy Crowe, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucy_Crowe
13. Why Mahler?, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781400096572>
14. Richard Strauss: Man, Musician, Enigma, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521027748>
15. Gustav Mahler, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300194111>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2026-05-21-rattle>

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