

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Pappano: Elgar's Enigma Variations and Mahler's Fifth

Thursday, June 11, 2026 · 19:00 · Barbican

Antonio Pappano, conductor

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	ELGAR 1857–1934 <i>Variations on an Original Theme, 'Enigma', Op. 36</i>	30'
2	MAHLER 1860–1911 <i>Symphony No. 5</i>	70'
TOTAL MUSIC		100'

Edward Elgar

1857–1934

Variations on an Original Theme, 'Enigma', Op. 36

30 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Elgar's 'Enigma' Variations is the work that made him famous overnight and remains one of the best-loved of all English orchestral works: a set of fourteen variations on an original theme, each a musical portrait of a friend or family member.

Completed in 1899, it grew out of a charming domestic moment: improvising at the piano one evening, Elgar played a tune and then began varying it in the manner of various friends, amusing his wife by sketching their personalities in music. From that game came this affectionate, brilliantly orchestrated gallery of portraits of ‘my friends pictured within,’ each headed with initials or a nickname. The result is both deeply personal and universally appealing, full of warmth, humour, tenderness and nobility, and it announced a major new symphonic voice in British music.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen first to the ‘Enigma’ theme itself: a wistful, slightly melancholy melody in the strings, with a distinctive falling-and-rising shape, which then undergoes its fourteen transformations. Each variation has its own character; listen for how Elgar conjures a different personality in each.

A few highlights to listen for: the very first variation (‘C.A.E.’), a tender portrait of Elgar’s wife Alice; the boisterous, leaping ‘Troyte’ (a friend’s hopeless attempts at the piano); the gentle, watery ‘Dorabella’ with its fluttering woodwinds (depicting a young woman’s slight stammer, affectionately); and above all the great central variation, ‘**Nimrod**’: a profound, slowly building hymn of friendship (portraying Elgar’s friend A. J. Jaeger), one of

the most moving pieces in all music, often played at memorials and ceremonies. Listen for the way it grows from hushed strings to a glorious, noble climax. The finale ('E.D.U.', Elgar's own self-portrait) gathers up earlier themes and builds, with organ and full orchestra, to a triumphant, life-affirming close. Throughout, savour Elgar's masterly orchestration and his gift for melody, warmth and nobility.

Gustav Mahler

1860–1911

Symphony No. 5

70 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Mahler's Fifth Symphony is one of his greatest and most popular, a vast, five-movement journey from the depths of a funeral march to a blaze of triumphant joy. Composed in 1901–02, it marks a new phase in his work: he set aside the songs, voices and explicit programmes of his earlier 'Wunderhorn' symphonies and wrote a purely orchestral symphony of immense scale and ambition, relying on the orchestra alone to carry an overwhelming emotional and spiritual argument. It was also composed during the happiest period of his life (he met and mar-

ried the beautiful Alma Schindler while working on it), and the symphony's progress from darkness to radiant light reflects that turn toward love and hope.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The symphony falls into three parts. **Part One** (movements 1–2): listen for the very opening: a solo trumpet sounding a fateful fanfare (echoing Beethoven's Fifth) that launches a grim funeral march, full of grief and shattering outbursts. The second movement is stormy and turbulent, wrestling with the first's despair, but listen for the blazing brass chorale that flares up like a vision of triumph, only to collapse, the victory not yet won.

Part Two is the gigantic central **Scherzo**, the symphony's pivot from darkness toward light. Listen for the exuberant Ländler (Austrian country dance) rhythms, the prominent solo horn (a real concerto-like role), and the sheer life and energy bursting out. **Part Three** (movements 4–5): listen for the famous **Adagietto**, scored for strings and harp alone: slow, tender, intimate and heart-melting (Mahler's love-song to Alma); let its hushed beauty envelop you. Then, without a break, the

Finale bursts in, joyful, intricate and contrapuntal, full of bustling fugal energy and rustic good humour. Listen for how Mahler brings back the brass chorale from the second

movement, now in full triumph, and drives the whole symphony to an exultant, life-affirming close: darkness conquered, joy attained.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2026-06-11-pappano>

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