

Season Opening: Pappano's Mahler 2 and Fujikura's Amber Alchemy

Sunday, October 18, 2026 · 19:00 · Barbican
Antonio Pappano, conductor · Maria Bengtsson, soprano · Noa Beinart, con-
tralto · London Symphony Chorus, choir

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	FUJIKURA b. 1977 <i>Amber Alchemy (UK premiere)</i>	10'
2	MAHLER 1860–1911 <i>Symphony No. 2 in C minor ('Resurrection')</i>	85'
TOTAL MUSIC		95'

Dai Fujikura

10 minutes

b. 1977
Amber Alchemy (UK premiere)

THE COMPOSER

Dai Fujikura (born 1977) is a Japanese composer based in Britain. Born in Osaka, he moved to the UK at fifteen on a music scholarship to Dover College, then studied composition at Trinity College of Music and the Royal College of Music. He earned a doctorate at King's College London, where he studied with George Benjamin. His catalogue ranges from solo and chamber pieces to a large body of concertos and orchestral works, and it includes several operas, among them *Solaris* (2015), after Stanisław Lem's novel. His orchestral music is known for its shimmering, fluttering and trembling textures and its fine attention to instrumental colour.

ABOUT THE WORK

Amber Alchemy is a brand-new piece, and tonight is its first performance in the city that inspired it. Dai Fujikura wrote it for the London Symphony Orchestra and Sir Antonio Pappano on a commission from Nomura, the Japanese financial group, to mark the company's centenary. The orchestra gave the world premiere at Suntory Hall in Tokyo on 28 September 2026, played it again in Osaka two days later, and now brings it home to open the 2026/27 Barbican season. Strangely,

for a composer who has been going back and forth between Japan and Britain for more than thirty years, it is the first time Fujikura has been asked to write for the LSO.

The idea came from an unlikely place: the roof of Nomura's London office, where the company keeps beehives. On a visit there Fujikura met a member of staff who had moved from finance into beekeeping with the firm's support, and he found himself going back to the roof and reading about bees. What caught him was not the buzzing but the hive as a society. In his words it is "incredibly organised and at the same time completely organic": thousands of tiny individual actions somehow add up to something far bigger than any single bee, a living architecture of labour, communication and care.

The title carries that idea in two directions. "Amber" is the colour of honey, with its warmth and glow. "Alchemy" is transformation, which Fujikura calls the heart of the piece: inside a hive nectar becomes honey, wax becomes architecture, and individual movement becomes collective meaning. There is a quieter second layer, too, fitting for a financial commission. Money also moves and is transformed through exchange, trust, risk and time, though Fujikura is careful to say the music is not literally about finance.

The music evokes these processes rather than illustrating them, so don't expect a musical bee. His orchestral writing has long been full of shimmering, fluttering and trembling sounds, but here they are not imitations of insects. The piece is, by his own account, melodic and lyrical at root: many separate lines, each with its own shape and direction, that weave around one another, cluster together, pull apart and then suddenly line up, so that the whole orchestra seems to become a single organism. At around ten minutes for full orchestra, it is a compact curtain-raiser. It also makes a thoughtful partner for Mahler's Second, another work about what emerges when countless small lives are gathered into one.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for lines rather than for one big tune. Fujikura's material is melodic, but no single melody is in charge. Try following one strand, a violin figure or a woodwind line, and notice how it gets drawn into a thicket of other voices moving in their own directions. That busy, many-voiced texture is the hive.

Then listen for the moments when everything comes together. Fujikura describes separate lines that sometimes suddenly co-ordinate, so that the whole orchestra seems to become a single organism. He hopes listeners will carry away the feeling of "a

complicated world somehow becoming harmonious without losing all its individual life". These moments of alignment are the payoff of the piece. They are the musical equivalent of thousands of individual actions adding up to something larger.

Listen too for colour: the shimmer, flutter and tremble that run through Fujikura's orchestral writing, and the warm, glowing sound the title's "amber" suggests. Because the piece is so new, nobody in the hall has a settled idea of how it goes. That is part of the pleasure. You are hearing it at the very start of its life, played by the orchestra it was written for.

Gustav Mahler

85 minutes

1860–1911

Symphony No. 2 in C minor ('Resurrection')

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 Second Symphony, the 'Resurrection', is one of the biggest and most ambitious works in the orchestral repertoire, and it took him six years to find its ending. The first movement began life in 1888 as a free-standing symphonic poem called *Todtenfeier* ("Funeral Rites"), a vast funeral march for the hero of his First Symphony. Then Mahler stalled. He had asked the great questions (why did we live, why did we suffer, is it all a meaningless joke?) and could not find an

answer to them. The middle movements came in 1893, drawing on his settings of the folk poetry collection *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, but the finale would not come.

The breakthrough came in March 1894, at the Hamburg funeral of the conductor Hans von Bülow. A boys' choir sang a setting of Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock's hymn *Die Auferstehung* ("The Resurrection"), and Mahler later wrote that it struck him "like lightning". He took Klopstock's opening verses and added lines of his own, which carry the finale's central message: nothing is lost, and everything that has lived will rise again. He finished the symphony that year and conducted the complete work for the first time in Berlin on 13 December 1895.

The scale is enormous. Five movements run about eighty to ninety minutes, and the forces are huge: a greatly enlarged orchestra with quadruple woodwind, ten horns and extra trumpets, a group of brass and percussion playing offstage, organ, soprano and alto soloists, and a large mixed chorus. Mahler meant every bit of it. The voices arrive only in the last two movements. After four movements of purely orchestral searching, the arrival of the human voice, first a single alto and then a whispered chorus, is the symphony's turning point.

Mahler asked in the score for a pause of at least five minutes after the huge first movement, a gap that is rarely observed in full today. It is a sign of how he heard the work: a stark, tragic opening, a set of recollections of life, and then a long journey toward the finale's vision of resurrection. The symphony ends not in a church but in something more universal, a promise of redemption for all. For Mahler, who was born Jewish and converted to Catholicism two years after the premiere, the vision was personal rather than doctrinal.

It is a natural choice to open a season. The LSO and Pappano toured it to Japan before bringing it home. With the London Symphony Chorus, the orchestra's own choir, joining for the finale, it is a full-company statement of intent.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

First movement (*Allegro maestoso*). The symphony opens with a violent tremolo in the violins and violas and a savage, snarling figure in the cellos and double basses. This is a funeral march on the grandest scale, and in Mahler's own words it asks the big question about life and death. Listen for the contrast between the grim marching music and a gentle, consoling second theme,

high in the violins, that keeps trying to offer comfort. The movement builds to shattering climaxes and ends with a sudden, brutal descending run.

Second movement (*Andante moderato*). After that, an old Austrian *Ländler*, a gentle country dance, arrives like a memory of happier days. Listen for the charming, lilting strings, and later for a passage where the strings play *pizzicato* under a singing cello line.

Third movement (*Scherzo*). This is an orchestral version of Mahler's own *Wunderhorn* song about St Anthony preaching to the fishes: the fishes listen politely to the sermon and then swim off exactly as they were. The music flows in an endless, slightly sardonic stream of semiquavers, starting with two timpani strokes. Mahler heard it as life seen from a distance, busy and senseless. Near the end comes a terrifying outburst that he called a "cry of despair".

Fourth movement (*Urlicht*, "Primal Light"). Out of the silence, the alto sings a simple *Wunderhorn* song, "O Röschen rot!" ("O little red rose"), with a hushed brass chorale. Humanity lies in great need and pain, and longs to return to God. After forty minutes of instrumental music, listen for how the plain human voice changes everything.

Fifth movement (*Finale*). The finale erupts with the same scream of despair heard in the *scherzo*, and then unfolds as a vast drama. Listen for the offstage horns calling from far away, like voices in a desert. Then a great march of the dead breaks out, with percussion crescendos and ever more urgent brass. It collapses into the "great summons": offstage brass calls answered by a solitary flute and piccolo, like a bird singing over an empty world. Then comes the most magical moment of all: the chorus enters almost inaudibly, unaccompanied, singing "Aufersteh'n, ja aufersteh'n" ("Rise again, yes, you will rise again"). From there the voices grow, with the soprano soaring above the chorus. The music builds, with organ and full brass and the offstage players brought into the hall, to an overwhelming final climax of bells, organ and full chorus. It is one of the great endings in music.

Tonight's artists

Maria Bengtsson *soprano*

The soprano does not sing until the finale, and then her part is short but crucial. First she rises out of the hushed chorus's opening "Aufersteh'n", and later she floats above the massed voices as the vision of resurrection gathers strength. It needs a voice of purity and radiance rather than sheer weight. Maria Bengtsson is a Mozart and Strauss soprano whose line and clarity suit exactly that kind of writing, and she sang the symphony with Pappano and the LSO in Tokyo at the start of their autumn tour.

Maria Bengtsson is a Swedish soprano, born in Trelleborg in 1975. She studied voice at the Musikhochschule in Freiburg and joined the Vienna Volksoper in 2000. In 2002 Kirill Petrenko engaged her for the Komische Oper Berlin, where she stayed until 2007. Since then her freelance career has taken her to the Paris Opéra, the Royal Opera House, both Berlin state houses, the Bavarian State Opera, La Scala, the Vienna State Opera and the Salzburg and Aix-en-Provence festivals. She is especially associated with Mozart and Richard Strauss.

Noa Beinart *contralto*

The alto has the symphony's most exposed and intimate moment: "Urlicht", the simple Wunderhorn song that is the first human voice heard in the symphony, and a plea to return to God sung almost as a prayer. It needs a true dark, low voice and complete stillness. Noa Beinart is a genuine contralto whose opera roles include Wagner's Erda, the earth goddess, and she brings exactly that depth and gravity to the movement.

Noa Beinart is a contralto born in Tel Aviv. She trained at the Hanns Eisler School of Music in Berlin. After a season in the Opera Studio of the Bavarian State Opera, she was a member of the Vienna State Opera ensemble from 2020 to 2023, singing roles including Erda in the Ring, Maddalena in Rigoletto and Suzuki in Madama Butterfly. She has since appeared at the Bayreuth Festival and made her Royal Opera debut in 2024 in Elektra.

London Symphony Chorus *choir*

Mahler keeps his chorus silent for more than an hour. When it finally enters in the finale, it is barely audible and unaccompanied, singing “Aufersteh’n, ja aufersteh’n” (“Rise again, yes, you will rise again”). That entry is one of the great moments in the choral repertoire, and it builds to the symphony’s overwhelming close. The London Symphony Chorus, the orchestra’s own choir, joins for this season opener.

The London Symphony Chorus was founded in 1966 as the chorus of the London Symphony Orchestra. Now an independent, self-governing choir, it keeps a close association with the LSO, performing and recording the great choral-orchestral repertoire with the orchestra at the Barbican and elsewhere, and also working with other orchestras.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Gustav Mahler: A Life in Crisis**

Stuart Feder, Yale University Press 2004

A biography by a psychoanalyst that looks at Mahler’s life through its crises, including the years when he wrote the Resurrection Symphony.

ACCESSIBLE **Mahler: A Biography**

Jonathan Carr, Overlook Press 1998

A readable biography of Mahler that follows the long composition of the Second Symphony and its first performances.

DEEPER **Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies**

Constantin Floros, Amadeus Press 2003

A study of all Mahler’s symphonies that analyses the Second movement by movement and traces its programme.

SOURCES

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2. London Symphony Orchestra/Sir Antonio Pappano: Season Opening: Mahler 2 and Fujikura, Barbican. <https://www.barbican.org.uk/node/222138>
3. On Tour in Tokyo, 28 Sep 26, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/on-tour-in-tokyo-28-sep-26/>
4. Dai Fujikura on Amber Alchemy, Boulez and the LSO, Japan Nakama. <https://www.japan-nakama.co.uk/creativity/music/dai-fujikura-amber-alchemy-lso/>
5. Dai Fujikura, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dai_Fujikura
6. Symphony No. 2 (Mahler), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._2_\(Mahler\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._2_(Mahler))
7. Mahler Notes by Michael Steinberg, Minnesota Orchestra. <https://msomn.org/mahler-2-note-by-michael-steinberg/>
8. Gustav Mahler, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustav_Mahler
9. Maria Bengtsson (soprano), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maria_Bengtsson_\(soprano\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maria_Bengtsson_(soprano))
10. Maria Bengtsson, Opéra national de Paris. <https://www.operadeparis.fr/en/artists/maria-bengtsson>

Gustav Mahler ·Symphony No. 2 in C minor ('Resurrection')

11. Noa Beinart, Royal Ballet and Opera. <https://www.rbo.org.uk/people/noa-beinart>
12. Noa Beinart, Bayreuther Festspiele. <https://www.bayreuther-festspiele.de/en/fsdb/performers/noa-beinart/>
13. Gustav Mahler: A Life in Crisis, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300103403>
14. Mahler: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780879518028>
15. Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781574670257>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2026-10-18-pappano>

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