

Adès Conducts Sibelius, Saariaho and His Own 'America'

Sunday, November 8, 2026 · 19:00 · Barbican

Thomas Adès, conductor · Anna Dennis, soprano · London Symphony Chorus, choir

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	SIBELIUS 1865–1957 <i>The Oceanides, Op. 73</i>	10'
2	SIBELIUS 1865–1957 <i>Symphony No. 7 in C major, Op. 105</i>	22'
3	SAARIAHO 1952–2023 <i>Oltra mar</i>	22'
4	ADÈS b. 1971 <i>America: A Prophecy</i>	22'
TOTAL MUSIC		76'

Jean Sibelius

1865–1957

The Oceanides, Op. 73

THE COMPOSER

Jean Sibelius (1865–1957) is Finland’s greatest composer and one of the supreme symphonists of the twentieth century. His music, above all the seven symphonies and tone poems such as Finlandia and Tapiola, became inseparable from Finland’s emerging national identity during its struggle against Russian domination, and he was revered as a national hero in his own lifetime. His style evolved from late-Romantic richness toward an increasingly concentrated, organic and original conception of symphonic form, in which themes seem to grow and fuse like living things, shot through with the cold light and vast spaces of the Nordic landscape. Famously, after completing the Seventh Symphony, the incidental music to *The Tempest* and the tone poem *Tapiola* in the mid-1920s, he fell almost completely silent for the last thirty years of his life: the ‘silence of Järvenpää’.

10 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

The *Oceanides* is Sibelius's great seascape, which the American critic Olin Downes called the finest evocation of the sea ever produced in music. He wrote it in 1913–14 on a commission from an American music festival, and conducted the premiere himself at the Norfolk Festival in Connecticut in June 1914, during a triumphant visit to the United States on which Yale awarded him an honorary doctorate. The title refers to the *Oceanides*, the sea nymphs of Greek mythology, daughters of the ocean, but the real subject is the sea itself, in all its moods.

Sibelius captures the play of light on the waves, the swell and surge of the open ocean and, at the climax, the overwhelming power of a great wave before the waters settle again. It is a masterpiece of orchestral colour and atmosphere, its shimmering textures looking toward the Impressionists while remaining unmistakably Sibelian in their cold northern light. It makes a luminous opening to a programme exploring the sea, time and prophecy.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for the two contrasting ideas Sibelius wove together: a playful, rippling figure (the dancing sea nymphs, in shimmering woodwinds and strings) and a broader, more majestic theme (the power of the ocean itself). The piece is built less on melody than on atmosphere and the gradual building of waves of sound.

Follow the great arc of the music as it swells. Sibelius builds, with tremendous cumulative power, toward a shattering climax, the crash of an enormous wave, crowned by timpani and full orchestra. Then listen for the calm that follows, the waters subsiding into a few quiet, mysterious final chords. In barely ten minutes he conjures the whole living presence of the sea, from glinting surface to crushing depth.

Jean Sibelius

1865–1957

Symphony No. 7 in C major, Op. 105

THE COMPOSER

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ABOUT THE WORK

Sibelius’s Seventh is his last symphony and the culmination of his lifelong rethinking of symphonic form: one of the most original and concentrated symphonies ever written. Completed in 1924, it compresses what might have been a symphony in several movements into a single continuous span of around twenty minutes, in which slow and fast music, different tempos and moods flow into one another without a break, the whole growing organically from its opening bars. At its premiere in Stockholm Sibelius called it ‘*Fantasia sinfonica*’, as if unsure whether so unusual a structure was a symphony at all.

The result is a miracle of organic growth: themes emerge, transform and recur, the music constantly evolving yet feeling utterly inevitable. Its emotional and structural anchor is a great, noble theme for solo trombone, which rises three times out of the orchestral texture like a beacon, with a sense of hard-won grandeur and serenity. After this symphony and a few more works, Sibelius fell silent for thirty years. The Seventh stands as a kind of summit and farewell, and the Sibelius scholar James Hepokoski has called it his ‘most remarkable compositional achievement’.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The key is to follow the music as a single, unbroken, ever-changing stream. There are no movement breaks, so let it carry you. Listen, near the start, for a rising scale in the strings that leads into the work’s first great moment: the entrance of the solo trombone with a broad, noble, hymn-like theme in C major that emerges majestically from the orchestra. This trombone theme is the symphony’s lodestar. Listen for its two further returns, each at a crucial structural point, the last bringing the work to its powerful close.

Between these pillars, notice how Sibelius moves seamlessly between slow, sustained music and faster, scherzo-like or agitated passages, the tempo subtly shifting, themes constantly being reshaped. There is a remarkable sense of everything being connected, growing from the same source. Listen for the cold,

clear orchestral colours and the feeling of vast space, and for the hard-won arrival of the final C major cadence, a resolution that feels both triumphant and valedictory.

Kaija Saariaho

1952–2023

Oltra mar

THE COMPOSER

Kaija Saariaho (1952–2023) was among the most celebrated composers of her time: a Finnish artist based for most of her career in Paris, where her work at IRCAM, the centre for electroacoustic research, decisively shaped her style. She became renowned for music of luminous, shimmering, mysterious textures, created by synthesising and layering timbres, harmonies and rhythms (often combining live performers with electronics) into vast, slowly shifting sonic landscapes, an outgrowth of the ‘spectral’ approach to composition. Her operas, above all *L’Amour de loin*, brought her international fame, and her orchestral and vocal works are widely performed. Her music is sensuous and atmospheric, concerned with colour, light and the gradual transformation of sound.

ABOUT THE WORK

Oltra mar (‘across the sea’, in old French) is a large work for chorus and orchestra that Kaija Saariaho wrote in 1998–99 on a commission from the New York Philharmonic, which premiered it under Kurt Masur in November 1999. Subtitled ‘seven preludes to the new millennium’, it is a meditation on the great universal themes (love, death, time and the sea) and draws its texts from strikingly varied sources: a love poem by the Arab poet Abu Sa’id, a traditional Pygmy death song, and a passage on time from *Samarcande*, a novel by the Lebanese-French writer Amin Maalouf.

The sea is the work’s unifying image and metaphor: for crossing, for the passage of time, for the boundary between life and death. Saariaho’s characteristic sound-world suits it perfectly, with shimmering, wave-like orchestral textures, the chorus deployed for colour and atmosphere as much as for words, and the music rising and falling in great slow swells. It connects naturally to the Sibelius seascape that opens the concert and to the prophetic, apocalyptic tone of the *Adès* that follows: three very different visions of water, time and fate.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Approach *Oltra mar* as an immersive soundscape rather than a narrative. Listen for Saariaho’s extraordinary orchestral and choral colours: shimmering, watery textures, with the chorus of-

22 minutes

ten used as a sustained, luminous wash of sound rather than for crisp word-setting. The music moves in slow waves, swelling and subsiding like the sea that is its central image.

Follow the contrasts between the seven sections as the music turns from love to time to death, with the sea returning between them, and listen for how Saariaho conjures vast spaces and a sense of the eternal through layered, gradually shifting sonorities. This is contemporary music of great sensuous beauty. Give yourself over to its atmosphere, its play of light and shadow, and the slow tidal motion that carries it from beginning to end.

Thomas Adès

22 minutes

b. 1971

America: A Prophecy

THE COMPOSER

Thomas Adès, born in London in 1971, is among the most celebrated composers of his generation, a triple threat who is also a formidable pianist and conductor. He studied piano and composition, read music at King's College, Cambridge, and emerged in the 1990s with a series of works whose technical command and vivid imagination made an immediate impression. His breakthrough came young: the orchestral work *Asyla* (1997), written for Simon Rattle and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, won the Grawemeyer Award in 2000, making Adès its youngest-ever recipient. His operas have been particularly admired: *Powder Her Face* (1995), with its scandalous subject and dazzling score; *The Tempest* (2004), after Shakespeare; and *The Exterminating Angel* (2016), after Buñuel. The last two have both been staged at the Royal Opera House and the Metropolitan Opera. Adès's music is marked by glittering, intricate orchestration, a fascination with dance rhythms and mechanical processes, harmonies that hover between tonality and dissonance, and a wit that can turn suddenly to menace or grief. He was artistic director of the Aldeburgh Festival from 1999 to 2008 and later the Boston Symphony Orchestra's first artistic partner, conducting both his own music and a wide repertoire, and he is often placed in the English line that runs through Britten.

ABOUT THE WORK

America: A Prophecy is one of Thomas Adès's most powerful and unsettling works. Like the Saariaho, it was written for the New York Philharmonic and premiered there under Kurt Masur in November 1999, as part of a series of pieces marking the new millennium. Tonight it is heard in the composer's 2024 version for soprano, orchestra and chorus. Adès delivered not a celebration but a 'prophecy' of doom. He set ancient Mayan texts from the books of Chilam Balam, prophecies of the destruction of the Mayan world by foreign invaders,

for a solo voice, while the chorus sings 15th- and 16th-century Spanish and Latin texts of war and conquest. The result is a searing meditation on the collision of civilisations, on conquest and apocalypse, with obvious and deliberate resonance for the Americas and for any culture facing its own end.

The music is correspondingly stark and visionary: the lone voice of the doomed culture lamenting and prophesying, set against the relentless, militaristic weight of the conquerors. It is taut, dramatic and harmonically arresting, with Adès's characteristic brilliance of orchestration turned to dark, ominous ends. Hearing the composer himself conduct it, at the end of a programme threading sea, time and fate, gives the evening a stark and prophetic conclusion.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen for the central opposition that drives the piece: the solo soprano, the voice of the Mayan prophecy lamenting the foretold destruction, set against the chorus, which delivers the harsh, militaristic texts of the European conquerors. The two forces inhabit different sound-worlds, and their collision is the work's subject.

Adès is a master orchestrator, so listen for the vivid, often menacing colours: ominous low sonorities, sharp percussion, music that conveys foreboding and catastrophe. The vocal writing for the soprano is intense and exposed, by turns keening and incantatory. This is not comfortable music. It is a 'prophecy' of doom, deliberately disquieting, building a sense of inexorable fate. Let its starkness land, and notice how, after the shimmering seas of Sibelius and Saariaho, the concert ends not in consolation but in dark, prophetic warning.

Tonight's artists

Anna Dennis *soprano*

The solo part in Adès's *America: A Prophecy*, the voice of a doomed civilisation lamenting and foretelling its own destruction, is intense, exposed and dramatically demanding. Anna Dennis, a soprano celebrated for her command of contemporary music and her vivid stage presence, brings the keening, prophetic vocal line the conviction and clarity it needs.

Anna Dennis is a British soprano admired for the beauty and intelligence of her singing across a wide range, from Baroque opera to the cutting edge of contemporary music. She studied at the Royal Academy of Music and won the Royal Philharmonic Society's Singer Award in 2023. She is a noted creator of roles in new works: she sang the title role in Tom Coult's opera *Violet* at the Aldeburgh Festival, and has premiered music by composers including Francisco Coll and Tansy Davies. She has already sung *America: A Prophecy* with the New York Philharmonic under Adès, and her keen musicianship and fearlessness in modern repertoire make her an ideal soloist for its exposed, incantatory vocal writing.

London Symphony Chorus *choir*

Two of tonight's works call on the chorus in very different ways: as a shimmering, atmospheric wash of sound in Saariaho's *Oltra mar*, and as the harsh, militaristic voice of the conquerors in Adès's *America*. The London Symphony Chorus, the orchestra's own chorus, supplies both: luminous colour for the Saariaho, stark power for the Adès.

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 **The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century**

Alex Ross, Picador 2008

Ross's history of twentieth-century music includes a chapter on Sibelius and his late works, among them the Seventh Symphony heard tonight.

ACCESSIBLE **Kaija Saariaho**

Pirkko Moisala, University of Illinois Press 2009

A short study of Kaija Saariaho's life and music, a good introduction to the composer of *Oltra mar*.

DEEPER **The Cambridge Companion to Sibelius**

Daniel M. Grimley (ed.), Cambridge University Press 2004

Essays by Sibelius specialists on his symphonies and tone poems, including the Seventh Symphony and *The Oceanides*.

SOURCES

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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2026-11-08-ades>

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