

Pappano's Vaughan Williams, with Bruce Liu in Beethoven

Thursday, November 26, 2026 · 19:00 · Barbican
Antonio Pappano, conductor · Bruce Liu, piano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	VAUGHAN WILLIAMS 1872–1958 <i>A Pastoral Symphony (Symphony No. 3)</i>	35'
2	BEETHOVEN 1770–1827 <i>Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37</i>	33'
3	VAUGHAN WILLIAMS 1872–1958 <i>Symphony No. 8 in D minor</i>	27'
TOTAL MUSIC		95'

Ralph Vaughan Williams

1872–1958

A Pastoral Symphony (Symphony No. 3)

THE COMPOSER

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) was the central figure of the twentieth-century English musical renaissance: the composer who, more than any other, gave English music a distinct national voice freed from German domination. Drawing deeply on English folk song (which he collected) and on the Tudor church music he loved, he forged a style at once rooted in the past and strikingly original. A late developer who went to Paris in his mid-thirties to study with Ravel and clarify his textures, he produced a vast and varied output over sixty years (nine symphonies, the Tallis Fantasia, The Lark Ascending, operas, songs and choral works), ranging from pastoral serenity to harsh modernity. He composed into his eighties, his music marked throughout by a visionary, questing spirit and a deep humanity.

ABOUT THE WORK

For decades *A Pastoral Symphony* was heard as a picture of the English countryside, gentle and a little sleepy. Vaughan Williams himself knew better. The piece began to take shape in his mind in 1916, while he was serving as a medical orderly with an ambulance unit just behind the front line in northern France. Years later he wrote to Ursula Wood, who became his second wife: ‘It’s really war-time music, a

35 minutes

great deal of it incubated when I used to go up night after night with the ambulance waggon ... and we went up a steep hill and there was a wonderful Corot-like landscape in the sunset. It's not really lambkins frisking at all, as most people take for granted.'

Vaughan Williams was in his forties when war broke out, and he volunteered anyway, serving in France and in Greece, and later as an officer in the artillery. Serious composing was impossible in those years, but ideas could still form. One of them came from an army bugler he heard practising in the evenings, a sound that he said became part of that landscape. It grew into the long trumpet solo in the second movement.

Back home after the war, he finished the new symphony in time for its premiere at the Queen's Hall in London on 26 January 1922, with Adrian Boult conducting the orchestra of the Royal Philharmonic Society. His own note for that first performance warned the audience what to expect: the mood is 'almost entirely quiet and contemplative', with 'few fortissimos and few allegros'. Most of the symphony is slow, and its harmony is full of soft dissonance handled so gently that it sounds like a new kind of consonance.

The symphony has no programme, and Vaughan Williams never wrote publicly about what the war did to him. But knowing where the music came from, many listeners now hear it as a quiet elegy for the dead of the First World War, a symphony and a requiem at once.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

There are four movements, and three of them are slow, so give yourself over to the pace. The first movement moves in gently overlapping layers, with chords sliding against each other. The second, marked *Moderato maestoso*, opens with a horn solo and builds to the symphony's most famous moment: a long, free trumpet cadenza over a quiet pedal note in the strings. This is the bugler's call, heard from a distance.

The third movement is what Vaughan Williams called a 'slow dance', heavy-footed and a little rustic, but it ends with the only really quick music in the whole symphony, a scurrying coda played *pianissimo*.

The finale begins with a voice alone: a soprano singing without words, unaccompanied except for a soft drum roll. The orchestra then takes up a broad, elegiac melody, and at the end the voice returns, now over muted violins, and fades into silence.

Ludwig van Beethoven

1770–1827

Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37

THE COMPOSER

Beethoven needs little introduction, but the period in which he wrote his Second Symphony does. Born in Bonn in 1770 and trained in Vienna under Haydn, by 1800 he was already one of the most talked-about pianist-composers in Vienna. Around the same time, Beethoven had to face an alarming truth: his hearing was deteriorating, and would never recover. By 1802 he had retreated to the village of Heiligenstadt outside Vienna, where, in a state of suicidal despair, he wrote the famous letter to his brothers known as the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, in which he confessed his condition and his agony. The letter, never sent in his lifetime, was found among his papers after his death.

ABOUT THE WORK

Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto, in C minor, stands at the point where he began to move beyond the model of Mozart and Haydn. He was sketching it around 1800, and it was first heard at a marathon benefit concert he gave for himself at the Theater an der Wien on 5 April 1803. The same programme included the premieres of his Second Symphony and his oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives*.

The concerto was not finished in time. Ignaz von Seyfried, who turned pages for Beethoven that night, later remembered seeing 'almost nothing but empty pages', with a few scribbles that looked to him like Egyptian hieroglyphs: Beethoven played most of the solo part from memory, and gave Seyfried a secret sign whenever it was time to turn, much amused by his page-turner's anxiety. It took him about another year to write the solo part out properly, and the concerto was published in 1804.

The shadow of Mozart hangs over the piece. Beethoven greatly admired Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 24, K. 491, also in C minor, and both works open quietly in the strings, with the winds joining for the first climax. But the Third is bigger and more dramatic. The orchestral introduction is long and symphonic, and when the piano finally enters it does so with forceful rising scales. The debt shows at the end of the first movement too: after the cadenza, the piano keeps playing into the coda, with arpeggios that recall Mozart's in K. 491. The slow movement then jumps to E major, a key far from C minor, which gives it a sense of stepping into a different world. The finale returns to C minor for a muscular rondo, before turning to C major for a high-spirited finish.

Tonight's soloist is Bruce Liu, the Canadian pianist who won the International Chopin Piano Competition in 2021.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement opens softly with a terse, marching theme in the strings, and the orchestra has a long exposition before the soloist arrives. Listen for the piano's entry, with forceful rising scales that announce who is in charge. Near the end comes Beethoven's own cadenza, stormy at first and then winding down through trills. Instead of closing straight away, Beethoven prolongs the last trill and lets the piano ripple through arpeggios before the music settles back into C minor and drives to a resolute end.

The Largo begins with the piano alone, singing a slow, hymn-like melody in E major, with Beethoven's detailed pedal markings giving it a soft, blurred glow. Later, listen for a magical passage where the piano's arpeggios accompany a duet between flute and bassoon.

The finale is a rondo, returning to C minor with a spiky, restless theme first played by the piano alone. There is a fugal episode along the way, and then the coda switches to C major and a quicker tempo, ending the concerto in high spirits.

Ralph Vaughan Williams

1872–1958

Symphony No. 8 in D minor

THE COMPOSER

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) was the central figure of the twentieth-century English musical renaissance: the composer who, more than any other, gave English music a distinct national voice freed from German domination. Drawing deeply on English folk song (which he collected) and on the Tudor church music he loved, he forged a style at once rooted in the past and strikingly original. A late developer who went to Paris in his mid-thirties to study with Ravel and clarify his textures, he produced a vast and varied output over sixty years (nine symphonies, the Tallis Fantasia, The Lark Ascending, operas, songs and choral works), ranging from pastoral serenity to harsh modernity. He composed into his eighties, his music marked throughout by a visionary, questing spirit and a deep humanity.

27 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Vaughan Williams was in his eighties, the grand old man of English music, when he wrote his Eighth Symphony. He began sketching it in 1953 and took the rough score with him to the United States in 1954, where he spent months lecturing and conducting; by early 1955 it was largely complete. Sir John Barbirolli, who had asked him for a new piece for the Hallé Orchestra, got it, and the symphony is dedicated to him. Barbirolli and the Hallé played it through for the composer in February 1956 and gave the premiere in Manchester that May.

Most of his earlier symphonies seemed to carry some extra-musical idea, the sea, London, the war, the Antarctic. The Eighth is lighter and more playful, often called the lightest of his symphonies, though that is only partly true. It is compact, under half an hour, and each of its four movements uses a different part of the orchestra in a different way.

One late addition came from the opera house. While finishing the score, Vaughan Williams went to Puccini's *Turandot* at Covent Garden and was so taken with its tuned gongs that he added them to his already large percussion section. By his own description, the finale uses 'all the 'phones and 'spiels known to the composer': vibraphone, xylophone, glockenspiel, tubular bells, celesta and more.

Light does not mean trivial, though. Commentators have pointed to melodic echoes of Holst and of Bach in the score: the flute tune in the first variation has been linked to Holst's hymn tune for 'O Valiant Hearts', a Remembrance Day hymn, and the slow movement has its own Bach connection (see below). Some hear a quiet thread of remembrance running under the good humour, for friends and for the dead of the First World War.

It makes a bright companion to the Pastoral Symphony at the start of tonight's programme, written more than thirty years earlier.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement is a set of variations without a clear theme, which Vaughan Williams called 'seven variations in search of a theme'. Listen for three short ideas at the start: two rising intervals on the trumpet answered by the vibraphone, a jig-like flute phrase, and a falling figure in the strings. Everything that follows is built from them, and the movement ends with the trumpet motif again and a shimmer of vibraphone and strings.

The second movement is a brisk scherzo for wind instruments alone, woodwind and brass, with a comic bassoon theme and a short fugal passage. The third, a Cavatina, is for strings alone, a slow, meditative song for the cellos. Its opening theme resembles the Passion chorale ‘O Sacred Head’, which the composer said got mixed up in his mind: ‘I am quite unrepentant!’

The finale is a Toccata. It opens with a stroke of gong and bell, then the full orchestra and the tuned percussion trade the main theme back and forth. Unlike most of his symphonies, which fade away, this one ends loudly, in a blaze of bells.

Tonight’s artists

Bruce Liu *piano*

Bruce (Xiaoyu) Liu is a Canadian pianist, born in Paris to Chinese parents in 1997. He moved to Montreal with his father at the age of six, studied with Richard Raymond at the Montreal Conservatoire and then with Đặng Thái Sơn. At fifteen he won the grand prize of the Orchestre symphonique de Montréal’s competition. In October 2021 he won the XVIII International Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw, and in March 2022 he signed an exclusive contract with Deutsche Grammophon, which had already released a live album of his competition performances. His studio albums for the label include Waves, music by Rameau, Ravel and Alkan (2023).

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Vaughan Williams**

Simon Heffer, Faber & Faber 2014

A short, lively life of Vaughan Williams that places the Pastoral Symphony in the aftermath of his war service in France and follows him to the late Eighth Symphony.

ACCESSIBLE **Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph**

Jan Swafford, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2014

A readable modern life of Beethoven that covers the years around 1800 when he wrote the C minor Piano Concerto, No. 3.

DEEPER **The Cambridge Companion to Vaughan Williams**

Alain Frogley, Aidan J. Thomson, Cambridge University Press 2013

Essays by leading scholars on Vaughan Williams's music, including the symphonies, for readers who want to go further into the Pastoral and the Eighth.

SOURCES

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3. A guide to Vaughan Williams's Symphony No. 3 'A Pastoral Symphony', BBC Music Magazine. <https://www.classical-music.com/features/works/guide-vaughan-williamss-symphony-no-3-pastoral-symphony>
4. Piano Concerto No. 3 (Beethoven), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._3_\(Beethoven\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_Concerto_No._3_(Beethoven))
5. Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37, Hollywood Bowl. <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/2773/piano-concerto-no-3-in-c-minor-op-37>
6. On This Day, 5 April: Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 was premiered, Interlude. <https://interlude.hk/on-this-day-5-april-beethovens-piano-concerto-no-3-was-premiered/>
7. Symphony No. 8 (Vaughan Williams), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._8_\(Vaughan_Williams\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._8_(Vaughan_Williams))
8. A guide to Vaughan Williams's Symphony No. 8, BBC Music Magazine. <https://www.classical-music.com/features/works/guide-vaughan-williamss-symphony-no-8>
9. Bruce Liu, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bruce_Liu
10. Bruce Liu: Biography, Deutsche Grammophon. <https://www.deutschegrammophon.com/en/artists/bruce-liu>
11. Vaughan Williams, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780571315390>
12. Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780544245587>
13. The Cambridge Companion to Vaughan Williams, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521162906>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2026-11-26-pappano>

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