

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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)

35 minutes

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 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.’

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

33 minutes

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.

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

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.

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).

CONCERT PROGRAMS

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

Version 2, 30 September 2026