

On Tour in Ann Arbor: Maconchy, Elgar's Cello Concerto and Ein Heldenleben

Thursday, March 4, 2027 · 19:30 · Hill Auditorium
Antonio Pappano, conductor · Alisa Weilerstein, cello

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	MACONCHY 1907–1994 <i>Nocturne for Orchestra</i>	7'
2	ELGAR 1857–1934 <i>Cello Concerto in E minor, Op. 85</i>	30'
3	STRAUSS 1864–1949 <i>Ein Heldenleben, Op. 40</i>	45'
TOTAL MUSIC		82'

Elizabeth Maconchy

7 minutes

1907–1994

Nocturne for Orchestra

THE COMPOSER

Elizabeth Maconchy (1907–1994) was born in Hertfordshire to Irish parents and spent much of her childhood in Ireland, where she was writing music from the age of six. At sixteen she entered the Royal College of Music in London, studying with Charles Wood and Ralph Vaughan Williams, who became a lifelong friend. Her own tastes ran less to English pastoralism than to the modernism of central Europe, Bartók above all, and she completed her training in Prague with Karel Jirák. She first came to public notice in 1930, when Henry Wood conducted her orchestral suite *The Land* at the Proms. The core of her output is a cycle of thirteen string quartets written between 1932 and 1983, music of concentrated argument that she likened to an impassioned debate among four voices; she also wrote operas, orchestral works and a great deal of vocal music. She chaired the Composers' Guild of Great Britain, was President of the Society for the Promotion of New Music, and was made a Dame in 1987. The composer Nicola LeFanu is her daughter.

ABOUT THE WORK

Elizabeth Maconchy is best known for her thirteen string quartets, and her orchestral music is heard far less often. The Nocturne is a short piece for full orchestra, about seven minutes long, dating from 1950 and 1951. It comes from the busy years after the war, when she was much in demand among British orchestras and ensembles, and beyond its date very little about its origins has been recorded: programme notes written for recent performances say frankly that hardly any documentation survives.

The title places it in a long line of night pieces, from Chopin's piano nocturnes to the orchestral ones of Debussy, and Maconchy would have known another kind as well. She was drawn to the music of central Europe more than to the English pastoral school in which she had been trained, and Bartók, whose slow movements are full of the rustlings and stillness of the night, was the composer she admired most. Her Nocturne is not a lullaby. Commentators describe a piece that is evocative and mysterious, at moments menacing, with a full-blooded climax at its centre.

It has gained ground in recent years as interest in Maconchy's music has revived. Sir Antonio Pappano and the London Symphony Orchestra opened a concert of British music at the Barbican with it in February 2025, and it serves the same purpose on this tour: a few minutes of unfamiliar British music before two of the best-loved works in the repertoire.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The piece opens high and still. The upper strings hold a thin, glinting sonority and shift slowly between two chords, and against that background the woodwind play angular, searching lines that overlap one another.

The lower strings are more restless and push the music forward. Listen for the harp, which ushers in a more dream-like passage coloured by tuned percussion, and for the trumpets, whose brief fanfares give way to long melodic lines.

The climax comes in the middle, led by the trombones, in a great swell of warm orchestral sound. It clears quickly. A solo violin is left exposed, and from there the texture thins until the instruments fade into silence one by one.

Edward Elgar

1857–1934

Cello Concerto in E minor, Op. 85

THE COMPOSER

Edward Elgar (1857–1934) was the composer who, more than any other, restored England to the front rank of European music after two centuries in which it had produced no figure of international stature. Largely self-taught, the son of a Worcester music-shop owner and organist, he made his way slowly from the provinces to national and then world fame, achieving his breakthrough in 1899 with the Enigma Variations. A late Romantic to his core, steeped in Wagner, Brahms and Richard Strauss yet unmistakably English in his blend of nobility, warmth and wistful melancholy, he gave his country a body of great orchestral music: two symphonies, concertos for violin and cello, the Enigma Variations, the oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius* and the *Pomp and Circumstance* marches. Knighted and laden with honours, he became the very emblem of Edwardian Britain, though his finest music reaches far beyond pomp into a deep, often autumnal expressivity. His wife Alice's death in 1920 effectively silenced him as a composer for his last years.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Cello Concerto was Elgar's last major work, and the London Symphony Orchestra gave its first performance. Its opening idea came to him in March 1918. He had been in hospital in London for an operation to remove an infected tonsil, and on his return home he wrote down a long, swaying melody without yet knowing what it was for. Soon afterwards he and his wife Alice withdrew to Brinkwells, a secluded cottage in the Sussex woods, where in the following months he composed three chamber works: a violin sonata, a string quartet and a piano quintet. In 1919 he turned back to the tune and built a concerto around it, finishing the score that August. He described it as 'a real large work & I think good & alive'.

The music that resulted is unlike the opulent Elgar of the years before 1914. The orchestra is of normal size but is used sparingly, the movements are short, and the prevailing tone is private and autumnal. The war had just ended, and many listeners have heard the concerto as a lament for the world it destroyed. Alice Elgar's diary, in the autumn of 1918, speaks of new music with a 'lament' that 'should be in a war symphony'. Elgar himself left no programme.

The premiere, on 27 October 1919, opened the LSO's first season after the war, and it went badly. The soloist was Felix Salmond and Elgar conducted his own piece, while the rest of the concert was in the hands of the orchestra's new principal conductor, Albert Coates, who overran his rehearsal time and left Elgar almost none. Alice called

Coates a 'brutal selfish ill-mannered bounder' in her diary. The critic Ernest Newman wrote in *The Observer* that the orchestra had made a 'lamentable exhibition of itself'. It was more than a year before the concerto was played in London again.

Alice died the following spring, and in the fourteen years left to him Elgar completed nothing else on this scale. The concerto made its way slowly. Beatrice Harrison recorded it twice with the composer, and Pablo Casals took it up, but its great popularity dates from 1965, when the twenty-year-old Jacqueline du Pré recorded it with the LSO under Sir John Barbirolli. Barbirolli knew the piece from the inside: as a young cellist he had played in the orchestra at the first performance.

According to the LSO's own archive, Elgar hummed the first theme to the orchestra's leader, W. H. Reed, during his final illness and said that if Reed ever heard someone whistling it on the Malvern Hills after his death, 'don't be alarmed. It's only me.'

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

There are four movements, not the usual three, all of them concise, and the first two are joined.

The cello begins alone with a grand, declamatory flourish of full chords. This recitative is the concerto's signature and will return twice. It dies away, and the violas, unaccompanied, quietly introduce the melody Elgar wrote down in 1918. The cello takes it over and the orchestra slowly gathers behind it, but the movement ends as bare as it began.

A plucked version of the opening recitative leads to the second movement. After several hesitant false starts the cello sets off in rapid repeated notes, a quicksilver scherzo that is over in a few minutes and gives the soloist no rest.

The Adagio is the heart of the work and its simplest music: a single unbroken song for the cello over a reduced orchestra of strings, clarinets, bassoons and horns. It is brief, and it ends on an unresolved harmony, as if the thought were unfinished.

The finale starts with another recitative and then strides out in a robust, march-like main theme, the nearest the concerto comes to the confident Elgar of earlier years. That confidence does not last. Towards the end the pace slackens, the harmony grows more painful, and the cello recalls a phrase from the

Adagio. Then the opening recitative of the whole concerto returns in full, and a brusque few bars from the orchestra bring the end.

Richard Strauss

45 minutes

1864–1949

Ein Heldenleben, Op. 40

THE COMPOSER

Richard Strauss was the heir to Wagner and Liszt, the composer who carried the late Romantic tradition into the twentieth century. Born in Munich in 1864, the son of the principal horn player of the Munich Court Orchestra, he received a conservative musical education before an encounter with Alexander Ritter, a violinist married to one of Wagner's nieces, converted him to the "music of the future."

Between 1889 and 1898, Strauss composed a series of tone poems that made him the most famous composer in Germany: *Don Juan*, *Death and Transfiguration*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, *Don Quixote*, and *Ein Heldenleben*. Each pushed the orchestra to new extremes of virtuosity and expression. Then he turned to opera, creating the scandalous *Salome* (1905), the shattering *Elektra* (1909), and the nostalgic masterpiece *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911).

Strauss lived long: through two world wars, the Nazi era, and the destruction of the German musical culture he had embodied. His late works, including the *Metamorphosen* for strings and the *Four Last Songs*, are elegies for a lost world. He died in 1949, shortly after completing those final songs.

ABOUT THE WORK

Ein Heldenleben ('A Hero's Life') is the largest of the tone poems Richard Strauss wrote in the 1890s, and he was 34 when he finished it. In July 1898 he wrote from a Bavarian mountain resort that, since Beethoven's 'Eroica' was so unpopular with conductors and so rarely played, he was filling the gap with a long tone poem on a similar subject: 'It is entitled A Hero's Life, and while it has no funeral march, it does have lots of horns, horns being quite the thing to express heroism.' The joke tells you a good deal about the tone of what followed. He completed the score at the end of December and conducted the first performance himself in Frankfurt on 3 March 1899. The dedication went to the young Willem Mengelberg and the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam.

Strauss worked on the piece alongside *Don Quixote* and thought of the two as companions: one a comic study of a deluded knight, the other a portrait of a hero taken, at least on the surface, at his own valuation. Who that hero is has been argued over ever since. Strauss

gave no programme beyond titles for the six sections, and he was evasive when asked whether he had painted himself. The music is less discreet. The hero's companion is a portrait of the composer's wife, Pauline; his adversaries are plainly the critics; and when the hero looks back on his 'works of peace', what we hear are themes from Strauss's own earlier scores. Early reviewers took the point and some were furious, one calling the piece 'as revolting a picture of this revolting man as one might ever encounter'. Later writers have been more inclined to hear irony in it, and to notice that this hero ends by turning away from the world towards private life.

It asks for an enormous orchestra, with eight horns, five trumpets, two tubas and two harps, and it plays without a break for about three quarters of an hour.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The six sections run into one another, but each has a clear character.

The Hero. The piece opens with its main theme, a long, striding melody for horns and cellos that climbs through nearly three octaves in E flat major, the key of the 'Eroica'. Other ideas pile up around it until the whole orchestra stops on an expectant, unresolved chord, followed by silence.

The Hero's Adversaries. Into the silence come the critics: thin, chattering woodwind, each instrument carping in its own register, with two tubas grumbling in the parallel fifths that students of harmony are taught to avoid. The hero's theme sinks into the minor before he shakes them off.

The Hero's Companion. A solo violin, played by the orchestra's leader, enters with a long sequence of cadenzas, by turns flirtatious, tender, sulky and scolding. The hero answers in the low strings and horns. Eventually the two come together in a broad love scene, the most richly scored music in the work, with the critics briefly audible in the distance.

The Hero's Deeds of War. Trumpets sound from offstage and the battle begins. Percussion drives the music on, and the hero's theme fights its way through against the adversaries' music, with the companion's at his side. It ends with the opening theme returning in triumph.

The Hero's Works of Peace. Here Strauss quotes himself. Fragments of Don Juan, Also sprach Zarathustra, Death and Transfiguration, Don Quixote and Till Eulenspiegel, among others, drift past, woven together so smoothly that they can be hard to pick out one by one.

The Hero's Retreat from the World and Fulfilment. After a last outburst of anger the music settles. The hero's rising theme is reshaped into a slow, falling melody for the strings, the most touching passage in the score, and the work closes quietly in E flat major, a long way from the swagger with which it began.

Tonight's artists

Alisa Weilerstein *cello*

This is the second of the LSO's two evenings at Hill Auditorium, the centre of an Ann Arbor residency built around music and health, with players also working on hospital wards and in the community. Alisa Weilerstein has been playing the Elgar concerto with Sir Antonio Pappano and the orchestra since the Barbican performance in February; here Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben* replaces Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony as the second half, so a concerto of withdrawal and regret is answered by a work that begins in swagger and ends, in its own way, by retreating from the world too. The same programme is repeated as a matinee at the Kravis Center in West Palm Beach on 7 March.

Alisa Weilerstein, born in Rochester, New York, in 1982, is an American cellist. She grew up in a family of musicians: her father, Donald Weilerstein, is a violinist, her mother, Vivian Hornik Weilerstein, a pianist, and her brother Joshua a conductor. She took up the cello at four and at thirteen made her professional debut with the Cleveland Orchestra in Tchaikovsky's *Rococo Variations*. She studied at the Cleveland Institute of Music and, unusually for a touring soloist, also took a degree in history at Columbia University, graduating in 2004. In 2011 she was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship. Her recordings include the Elgar and Elliott Carter concertos with Daniel Barenboim and the Staatskapelle Berlin and Bach's six solo suites. She is a committed advocate of new music and has given the first performances of concertos written for her by Pascal Dusapin, Matthias Pintscher, Joan Tower and others. Her solo project *Fragments* interleaves the movements of the Bach suites with newly commissioned pieces. She is married to the conductor Rafael Payare.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Portrait of Elgar**

Michael Kennedy, Oxford University Press 1987

Kennedy's portrait of Elgar the man, sympathetic and unsentimental, is especially good on the wartime disillusion that lies behind the Cello Concerto.

ACCESSIBLE **Richard Strauss: Man, Musician, Enigma**

Michael Kennedy, Cambridge University Press 2006

A warm and readable life of Strauss by a writer who knew the music from the inside, with a full account of Ein Heldenleben and of the marriage to Pauline that it portrays.

DEEPER **The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss**

Charles Youmans (ed.), Cambridge University Press 2010

Essays by leading Strauss scholars, including chapters on the tone poems that set Ein Heldenleben beside Don Quixote and take the question of its irony seriously.

SOURCES

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3. Press Release: The LSO announces its 2026/27 season, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/press-release-the-lso-announces-its-2026-27-season/>
4. Elgar and Tchaikovsky: Sir Antonio Pappano and Alisa Weilerstein, 18 February 2027, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/elgar-and-tchaikovsky-18-feb-27/>
5. Elizabeth Maconchy 'Nocturne for Orchestra': Amidst the Nighttime, Classicalexburns. <https://classicallexburns.com/2019/10/30/elizabeth-maconchy-nocturne-for-orchestra-amidst-the-nighttime/>
6. Elizabeth Maconchy (1907-1994): Nocturne, Symphony Nova Scotia. <https://audienceaccess.co/bio/OYN-44566>
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8. Elizabeth Maconchy, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Maconchy
9. Cello Concerto (Elgar), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cello_Concerto_\(Elgar\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cello_Concerto_(Elgar))
10. From the Archive: Elgar's Cello Concerto, 100 Year Anniversary, London Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.lso.co.uk/from-the-archive-elgars-cello-concerto-100-year-anniversary/>
11. Elgar: Cello Concerto, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/elgar-cello-concerto>
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13. Strauss: Ein Heldenleben, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/strauss-ein-heldenleben>
14. Ein Heldenleben, Op. 40, Hollywood Bowl. <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/323/ein-heldenleben-op-40>
15. Portrait of Elgar, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780192840172>
16. Richard Strauss: Man, Musician, Enigma, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521027748>
17. The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521728157>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2027-03-04-pappano>

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