

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

America's Voice: Barbara Hannigan Conducts Ives, Ruggles and Gershwin

Thursday, April 8, 2027 · 19:00 · Barbican

Barbara Hannigan, conductor · Barbara Hannigan, soprano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	IVES 1874–1954 <i>At the River ('Shall We Gather at the River')</i>	4'
2	IVES 1874–1954 <i>From the Steeples and the Mountains</i>	5'
3	SEEGER 1901–1953 <i>Rissolty Rossolty</i>	5'
4	RIEGGER 1885–1961 <i>Study in Sonority, Op. 7</i>	7'
5	RUGGLES 1876–1971 <i>Sun-treader</i>	15'
6	RODGERS 1902–1979 <i>The Carousel Waltz (orch. Don Walker)</i>	8'
7	GERSHWIN 1898–1937 <i>Porgy and Bess: A Symphonic Picture (arr. Robert Russell Bennett)</i>	24'
TOTAL MUSIC		68'

Charles Ives

1874–1954

At the River ('Shall We Gather at the River')

4 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

'Shall We Gather at the River?' is one of the best-known American hymns. Robert Lowry, a Baptist minister in Brooklyn, wrote words and tune in 1864, and it was published the following year. Its picture of the saints meeting beside the river of life comes from the last chapter of the Book of Revelation.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Ives leaves the tune almost intact and changes everything around it. The harmony leans away from the melody, as if the accompanist were half remembering a different key, and the phrases stretch and hesitate the way a congregation's singing does. Listen above all to the ending.

Lowry's refrain answers its own question with a confident 'Yes, we'll gather at the river'. Ives lets the question come back once more and leaves it hanging.

Charles Ives

1874–1954

From the Steeples and the Mountains

5 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

From the Steeples and the Mountains dates from 1901, when Ives was in his mid-twenties, three years out of Yale and beginning the career in life insurance that would pay for his composing. It is one of the short experimental pieces he wrote for himself in those years.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The bells begin almost inaudibly, in pealing patterns that overlap and clash. The trumpet and trombone enter hesitantly with angular lines that copy each other at a distance, and their rhythms grow steadily more intricate as the bells grow louder. The piece is a single crescendo. After three or four minutes it reaches a clangorous peak with everything sounding at once, and then the players stop and leave the bells to ring away into silence.

Ruth Crawford Seeger

1901–1953

Rissolty Rossolty

5 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

By the late 1930s Ruth Crawford Seeger had all but stopped composing. A decade earlier she had been one of the most original of the American ‘ultramodern’ composers, and her String Quartet of 1931 is still counted among the finest American works of its kind. Then came marriage to the musicologist Charles Seeger, children, the Depression and a move to Washington, where the couple threw themselves into collecting and transcribing American folk song. After a concert of her earlier music in New York in 1938, a member of the audience asked her to write something that more people could listen to. She replied that she would.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Three tunes are packed into a few minutes. The chattering repeated-note figure at the start comes from ‘Rissolty, Rossolty’, a comic song about a newly married man and his wife’s housekeeping. A second song, ‘Phoebe’, appears in a flute solo and in plucked strings. The last section is driven by a fiddle tune, ‘The Death of Callahan’, which Crawford Seeger had transcribed from a field recording. She does not present the tunes one after another in neat

arrangements. She weaves fragments of them together, and at the climax all three are going at once in different parts of the orchestra, a moment that owes something to Ives.

The ending is the best joke. The music simply stops, and then a scrap of the opening starts up again and breaks off. Folk musicians, she observed, do not round off a tune with a formal close; they pause, ready to begin again.

Wallingford Riegger

1885–1961

Study in Sonority, Op. 7

7 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Wallingford Riegger belongs with Ives, Ruggles and Henry Cowell in the small group of American modernists who organised their own concerts between the wars. He came to that company late. Trained in New York and Berlin as a cellist and conductor, he wrote in a conservative style into his forties. *Study in Sonority*, composed in 1927, is the piece in which he changed direction, and its publisher describes it as a significant break with his classical upbringing.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The ten parts are layered. One writer on Riegger describes four players carrying the melody, four the harmony and two the lowest line, though the roles shift. The harmony is built from dense, dissonant chords that Riegger holds and re-voices so that they glow instead of grate, and the whole piece grows from a short motif of a few notes that returns in different guises.

Without violas, cellos and basses the sound has no floor, and that is the point: everything happens in the upper half of the orchestra's range. Riegger marks dynamics and tempos with great precision, sometimes giving each note of the motif its own level, so listen for how much light and shade ten identical instruments can produce.

Carl Ruggles

1876–1971

Sun-treader

15 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Carl Ruggles finished about ten pieces in a life of ninety-five years, and *Sun-treader* is the biggest of them. He worked on it from 1926 to 1931, revising constantly. According to one account it was meant for a New York concert that Edgard Varèse

was to conduct in the autumn of 1926, and missed its deadline by nearly five years. When Ruggles met Charles Ives in 1929 the two became close friends, and Ives had his best copyist prepare a clean score, which Ruggles promptly covered in corrections.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The opening is the image of the title. Timpani pound out heavy, even strokes and the brass stride upward over them in huge intervals. This music returns several times as a pillar holding up the structure, and it invites comparison with the drumbeats at the start of Brahms's First Symphony.

Between the pillars the music moves in waves. A line starts low, climbs through the orchestra to a peak and falls back, and inside each large wave are smaller ones, so that the piece seems always to be straining upward. Quieter passages for strings and woodwind, where the lines turn lyrical, alternate with sudden accelerations. The work is in a single movement of about a quarter of an hour.

Richard Rodgers

1902–1979

The Carousel Waltz (orch. Don Walker)

8 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Carousel opened at the Majestic Theatre on Broadway on 19 April 1945, two years after Oklahoma! and with the same team: music by Richard Rodgers, book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II. Its source was Liliom, a 1909 play by the Hungarian writer Ferenc Molnár about a fairground barker and the servant girl who loves him, which they moved from Budapest to the coast of Maine.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The piece starts with a fairground organ slightly out of tune with itself: woodwind chords that wheeze and slide, a few halting attempts at a rhythm, as if the machinery were being cranked into motion. Then the main waltz arrives, a broad, swinging tune.

It is a chain of waltzes more than a single one, in the Viennese manner, and each new strain is a little louder and faster than the last. Listen for the way Rodgers keeps pulling the harmony sideways when a cadence seems cer-

tain. The ending whirls the first waltz round at full tilt, with the whole orchestra and cymbals, as the carousel reaches top speed.

George Gershwin

1898–1937

Porgy and Bess: A Symphonic Picture (arr. Robert Russell Bennett)

24 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

George Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess* opened in Boston in September 1935 and moved to Broadway, where it ran for sixteen weeks. Gershwin made a concert suite from it himself the following year, which he called *Catfish Row*, and died in 1937.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Bennett's sequence runs without a break. It opens on *Catfish Row* at daybreak, with the street cries of the Strawberry Woman and the Crab Man, almost the only passages in the opera that Gershwin took from what he had heard in Charleston. Clara's music and the bustling introduction to Act One follow, and only then, several minutes in, comes 'Summertime'.

After it the banjo strums in for ‘I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin’’. The hurricane music supplies the one stretch of real violence, with the full brass and percussion. Out of it rises ‘Bess, You Is My Woman Now’, the love duet. The picnic music ‘Oh, I Can’t Sit Down’ restores the high spirits; Sportin’ Life’s two numbers, ‘There’s a Boat Dat’s Leavin’ Soon for New York’ and ‘It Ain’t Necessarily So’, follow; and the piece ends as the opera does, with the spiritual-like ‘Oh Lawd, I’m on My Way’.

Tonight's artists

Barbara Hannigan *soprano*

Barbara Hannigan, an LSO Associate Artist, put this all-American programme together herself and appears as both conductor and soprano. The first half follows the experimental line, from Ives's hymn setting through Crawford Seeger and Riegger to Ruggles's Sun-treader; after the interval come Rodgers and Gershwin, the popular tradition that grew up alongside it. The evening before, she introduces a shorter version in the LSO's Half Six Fix series, with the two Ives pieces and the Gershwin.

Barbara Hannigan, born in Nova Scotia, Canada, in 1971, is one of the most extraordinary musicians of our time: a world-renowned soprano who is also, increasingly, a celebrated conductor, often doing both at once. As a singer she is the foremost interpreter of contemporary vocal music of her generation, having premiered more than eighty new works and become especially associated with composers such as Ligeti, Boulez, Dutilleux, Hans Abrahamsen and George Benjamin (she created the role of Agnès in his *Written on Skin*). She later added conducting to her career, making a sensational impact with programmes in which she directs the orchestra and sings simultaneously, and she now holds major podium positions including Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Iceland Symphony Orchestra and Principal Guest Conductor of the Gothenburg Symphony. Fearless, charismatic and a tireless

champion of new music, she is the perfect guiding spirit for this adventurous programme, singing in Laura Bowler's new work and conducting the Ligeti and Strauss.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/lso-2027-04-08-hannigan>

Version 1, 7 October 2026