

The Fickle Sea: Alan Gilbert conducts Debussy, Britten, Sibelius and Clyne

Wednesday, April 21, 2027 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Alan Gilbert, conductor

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	CLYNE b. 1980 <i>Restless Oceans</i>	4'
2	SIBELIUS 1865–1957 <i>Symphony No. 7 in C major, Op. 105</i>	22'
3	BRITTEN 1913–1976 <i>Four Sea Interludes and Passacaglia from 'Peter Grimes', Op. 33a and 33b</i>	23'
4	DEBUSSY 1862–1918 <i>La Mer, Three Symphonic Sketches, L. 109</i>	24'
TOTAL MUSIC		73'

Anna Clyne

b. 1980

Restless Oceans

THE COMPOSER

Anna Clyne, born in London in 1980, is a British composer who lives in the United States. She studied music at the University of Edinburgh and at the Manhattan School of Music. She has been composer-in-residence with a number of orchestras, among them the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. She often starts from a poem or a painting, and has worked regularly with choreographers, film-makers and visual artists.

ABOUT THE WORK

‘Restless Oceans’ lasts about four minutes and was written for a particular occasion and a particular group of players. Anna Clyne composed it in 2018 for the conductor Marin Alsop and the Taki Concordia Orchestra, an ensemble made up entirely of women, to play at the

4 minutes

opening ceremony of the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2019. At that ceremony Alsop was given the Forum's Crystal Award for her work for diversity in music, and the score is dedicated to her.

The title comes from 'A Woman Speaks', a poem by the American writer and activist Audre Lorde, which ends with an image of restless oceans pounding. Clyne has said that her intention was 'to write a defiant piece that embraces the power of women', and that she had this orchestra of women in mind as she wrote. She did not set the poem or follow its shape. What she took from it is its tone, proud and unyielding, and one line, which she wrote into the score above the passage where the music gathers for its final surge.

The piece asks the players for more than their instruments. They use their voices, in song and in short shouted syllables, and they stamp their feet; at the end they rise and stand together. In a programme about the sea it is the odd one out, a piece in which the ocean is an image of human force, and it makes a brisk, bracing curtain-raiser.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The opening is marked 'with fire and drive'. The upper strings dig in with repeated, heavy down-bow strokes, and the players punch out a shouted 'Huh' between them. It is closer to a work song or a protest chant than to a seascape.

A gentler episode follows, though the pulse never slackens. The woodwinds set up overlapping, wave-like arpeggios, and the first violins, the second violins and the violas come in one after another, each section singing a melody as well as playing it, until the single lines have become a chorus. The driving music returns. Later the clarinet and bassoons begin a quieter tune that quickly speeds up, and this is where the line from Lorde's poem stands in the score: fast, repeating figures in the upper strings push the rest of the orchestra up a slowly climbing scale in ever larger swells. The winds take over the figure, and the piece ends, in the composer's words, wildly and with great force, with the orchestra on its feet.

Jean Sibelius

1865–1957

Symphony No. 7 in C major, Op. 105

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'.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Seventh was the last symphony Jean Sibelius completed, and it took him the best part of ten years. Its first idea, a slow theme, turns up in a sketchbook from the time of the Fifth Symphony, and in 1918 he described the work he had in mind as a symphony in three movements, the last of them a 'Hellenic rondo'. What he finished at Ainola, his house north of Helsinki, on the night of 2 March 1924 was something else: a single unbroken movement of little more than twenty minutes. He was so unsure what to call it that when he conducted the first performance in Stockholm on 24 March it was billed as a 'Fantasia sinfonica'. Only afterwards did he decide that it was, after all, his Symphony No. 7.

These were difficult years. By the account of the Finnish Sibelius website, he was drinking, partly to steady a tremor in his hands, and his wife Aino, frightened by an incident on a concert tour, had stopped attending concerts he conducted. None of that can be heard in the music, which is the most concentrated he ever wrote. Almost everything in it is in C major or C minor, and in place of separate movements there is a constant, seamless changing of speed, so that slow music becomes fast and fast becomes slow without the listener being able to say exactly when it happened.

After it came the tone poem 'Tapiola' and little else of any size. He worked for years on an eighth symphony that never appeared, and for the last three decades of his life he published almost nothing. In this

programme the orchestra hears the Seventh as a piece of nature: Sibelius, it says, thought of the symphony as a river flowing broadly and powerfully towards the sea.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

It begins almost with nothing: a soft drum roll and a slow scale rising through the strings, which arrives not where the ear expects but on a strange, dark chord. Out of this grows a long hymn for divided strings, one of the great slow passages in Sibelius, building patiently in many parts.

At its crest a solo trombone enters with a broad, noble theme. This is the pillar of the symphony, and it is heard three times. The second time, in the middle of the work, it comes in the minor over swirling, storm-tossed strings; the third, near the end, it returns in the major with the weight of the whole orchestra behind it. In his sketches the theme is said to carry the name of his wife, Aino.

Between these pillars the music quickens by degrees into scherzo-like stretches, light and darting, with woodwind phrases tossed back and forth over running strings. Try to notice the joins, which is almost impossible: the tempo is always slipping from one state into another.

The ending is unlike any other. After the last appearance of the trombone theme the music climbs to a climax of great strain, the strings hold on alone, and the symphony closes on a long, swelling C major chord, reached by the violins from the note just below. It sounds less like a triumph than like an arrival after a hard journey.

Benjamin Britten

1913–1976

23 minutes

Four Sea Interludes and Passacaglia from 'Peter Grimes', Op. 33a and 33b

THE COMPOSER

Benjamin Britten, born in Lowestoft on the Suffolk coast in 1913, was the most important English composer since Purcell and the figure who, more than any other, restored opera to the centre of British musical life. A precocious talent who studied at the Royal College of Music, he found his early voice in collaboration with the poet W. H. Auden, and a lifelong subject in the loss of innocence. A committed pacifist and conscientious objector, he spent the first years of the Second World War in the United States before re-

turning home in 1942 and seeking recognition as a conscientious objector, which he won on appeal; his convictions run like a thread through his music, from the early settings to the War Requiem. His breakthrough came in 1945 with the opera *Peter Grimes*, whose outsider hero and surging sea interludes made Britten's name overnight and announced a new era for English opera. To stage his subsequent works he and Pears set up what became the English Opera Group, and in 1948, with Pears and Eric Crozier, he founded the Aldeburgh Festival, which turned his small Suffolk town into one of the world's notable musical centres. His partnership with Pears, both personal and artistic and lasting nearly forty years, shaped a vast body of song, opera, and concert music written for that singular voice. In 1976 he became the first composer to be made a life peer, and he died at Aldeburgh that December.

ABOUT THE WORK

In 1941 Benjamin Britten was living in the United States, homesick, when he came across an article by E. M. Forster about the Suffolk poet George Crabbe. He sought out Crabbe's long poem 'The Borough', with its story of the brutal fisherman Peter Grimes, and recognised the coast he had grown up on. The conductor Serge Koussevitzky arranged a commission from his new foundation, Britten sailed home, and 'Peter Grimes' opened at Sadler's Wells in London on 7 June 1945, a few weeks after the end of the war in Europe. Its success was immediate, and it is usually taken as the starting point of modern British opera.

In the libretto by Montagu Slater, Crabbe's villain becomes something more troubling: an outsider and a dreamer, rough and violent, hounded by the gossip of a fishing town much like Aldeburgh after his apprentice dies at sea. The sea is present in every scene. It gives the town its living and takes its men, and Britten put it into the orchestra, above all in the interludes that are played while the scenery is changed. There are six of them. He published four as a concert suite, the 'Four Sea Interludes', Op. 33a, and a fifth, the Passacaglia, separately as Op. 33b. This concert brings the five together.

The Passacaglia is the one interlude that is not about the sea. It comes at the centre of the opera, in the second act, as Grimes drives his new apprentice up to his hut on the cliff, and it is a portrait of the man himself and of what is closing in on him.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

'Dawn' follows the opening inquest in the opera. Three ideas alternate and never blend: a high, cold line for flutes and violins in unison, a ripple of clarinets, harp and violas like light catching the water, and slow, heavy brass chords that swell from underneath like the tide.

‘Sunday Morning’ is bright and brittle. The horns hold overlapping notes that clang like church bells, the woodwinds chatter above them, and a broad tune for violas and cellos is the one that Ellen Orford sings in the opera as she greets the day. Real bells join in towards the end.

‘Moonlight’ is the still point: soft, breathing chords for low strings and bassoons, in a rhythm that never quite settles, pricked by flashes from flute, harp and xylophone. It is a summer night with nothing peaceful about it.

‘Storm’ breaks out between the two scenes of the first act. It is a rondo of great violence for the whole orchestra, and in the middle of it the gale drops for a soaring, yearning melody, the music of Grimes’s question in the opera about what harbour can shelter peace.

The Passacaglia is built on a short figure in the bass, plucked by the cellos and double basses and repeated without change from beginning to end, taken from the phrase to which Grimes has just sung in his despair. Over it a solo viola begins a lonely, wandering tune, often heard as the voice of the silent apprentice boy, and a set of variations grows from it, increasingly agitated, before the viola returns alone at the close. The conductor decides where among the sea pieces the Passacaglia is placed.

Claude Debussy

1862–1918

24 minutes

La Mer, Three Symphonic Sketches, L. 109

THE COMPOSER

Claude Debussy, born in Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1862 to a family of modest means, entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of ten and spent the next decade exasperating his professors with chords that broke every rule. He won the Prix de Rome in 1884, endured (resentfully) the obligatory residence at the Villa Medici in Rome, and then set about quietly dismantling the foundations of nineteenth-century music. With the *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (1894), the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902), and *La Mer* (1905), he created a new musical language, built on colour, atmosphere, and suggestion rather than Germanic development, that made him the single most influential composer of the early twentieth century. Critics called the style ‘impressionism,’ borrowing the term from painting; Debussy himself detested the label, insisting he was striving for precision, not haze. He died in Paris in March 1918, while the city was under German bombardment in the final year of the First World War.

ABOUT THE WORK

Claude Debussy began ‘*La Mer*’ in the summer of 1903 a long way from any coast, while staying with his wife’s parents in Burgundy. He was working, as he put it, from an endless store of memories. The score was finished in March 1905, and he corrected the proofs that summer in a hotel at Eastbourne, on the English side of the Channel. In the two years between, his life had been turned upside down: he had left his wife for Emma Bardac, a singer and the wife of a banker, and much of Paris had taken sides against him.

That scandal hung over the first performance, which Camille Chevillard conducted with the *Lamoureux Orchestra* in Paris on 15 October 1905. Chevillard was not at ease in new music and the playing was by most accounts poor; the reception was cool. The critic Pierre Lalo, until then an admirer, wrote that he could neither hear nor see nor smell the sea. Within a few years the piece had won its place, and it is now among the most admired and most often played of Debussy’s orchestral works.

He called it ‘three symphonic sketches’, a careful title. It is as near as he came to writing a symphony, with a weighty first movement, a scherzo and a finale that brings back themes from the beginning. But it tells no story and paints no single scene. For the cover of the printed score Debussy chose a detail of Hokusai’s woodblock print of a great wave, and the Japanese artist’s flat, stylised sea, like the seascapes of Turner that he is known to have admired, says a good deal about what he was after: not a description of water but the play of light, weight and motion.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

‘From dawn to noon on the sea’ begins in darkness, with low strings, harp and a soft drum roll. A rising figure in the cellos stirs, and a muted trumpet with *cor anglais* plays a short, questioning call that will come back in the finale. As the light grows the texture fills with rocking figures. Midway there is a famous passage for the cellos alone, divided into many parts, like a swell lifting the whole orchestra. The movement ends at midday with a broad chorale for the brass. Erik Satie joked that he particularly liked the bit at a quarter to eleven.

‘Play of the waves’ is the scherzo, and one of the most elusive things Debussy wrote. Nothing lasts more than a few seconds: a flick of the harp, a trill in the flutes, a splash from the *glockenspiel* or the cymbal, a snatch of waltz. It seems to improvise itself, and it ends by simply evaporating.

‘Dialogue of the wind and the sea’ starts with a menacing rumble in the cellos and basses. The trumpet call from the first movement returns, and then, over a hushed, trembling background, the woodwinds sing a long plaintive melody that will become the main theme. The movement builds in waves, drops back to a moment of eerie calm with the violins holding a note at the very top of their range, and then drives to a close in which the brass chorale from the end of the first movement blazes out again.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Debussy: A Painter in Sound**

Stephen Walsh, Vintage 2019

A life of Debussy told through the music, with a fine chapter on ‘La Mer’ and the upheaval in his private life while he wrote it.

ACCESSIBLE **Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century**

Paul Kildea, Allen Lane 2013

The fullest recent biography of Britten, which sets ‘Peter Grimes’ against the Suffolk coast he came from and his return to England in wartime.

DEEPER **Debussy: La Mer**

Simon Trezise, Cambridge University Press 1994

A Cambridge Music Handbook devoted to ‘La Mer’: how it was written, how it was first received, and a close reading of each of the three movements.

SOURCES

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13. The Story Behind: Britten's Four Sea Interludes from 'Peter Grimes', Rhode Island Philharmonic. <https://www.riphil.org/blog/the-story-behind-britten-s-four-sea-interludes-from-peter-grimes>
14. Four Sea Interludes, Op. 33a, from Peter Grimes, Runyan Program Notes. https://www.runyan-programnotes.com/program_note/four-sea-interludes-op-33a-peter-grimes/
15. La mer (Debussy), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_mer_\(Debussy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_mer_(Debussy))
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