

ROYAL CONCERTGEBOUW ORCHESTRA

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

4 minutes

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 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.

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 be-

come 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

22 minutes

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.

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

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

23 minutes

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.

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

La Mer, Three Symphonic Sketches, L. 109

24 minutes

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.

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.

CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2027-04-21-gilbert>

Version 1, 8 October 2026