

**80th Birthday
Season 2025/26**

**Santtu and
Vikigur Ólafsson
Thursday 25 September 2025
Royal Festival Hall**

Phil har mo- nia



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In a nutshell...

This evening's concert marks the opening of the Philharmonia's 80th birthday season. We commissioned the first piece as a birthday present to ourselves.

There's a big percussion section in Ortiz's piece. Listen out for the tam tam (large gong), mark tree (like a wind chime), güiro (hollow instrument played with a scraper) crotales (a set of small tuned cymbals), and more.

Gabriela Ortiz is our Featured Composer this season – you can also hear her Trumpet Concerto on 27 November, her Cello Concerto and other works on 12 March, and *Tzam* on 29 March.

Our Featured Artist, Icelandic pianist Víkingur Ólafsson, is the soloist in the second piece, Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3. He's back later in the season too, with music by John Adams on 25 February, and and György Kurtág on 1 March.

In the final piece, you'll hear the organ, played by Olivier Latry, adding its voice to the orchestra. The magnificent Royal Festival Hall organ has 7,866 sounding pipes, but the central arrangement of silver and copper pipes, designed to evoke the Union Jack, is purely decorative.

Welcome to this evening's concert

Philharmonia 80

Santtu and Víkingur Ólafsson

Thursday 25 September 2025
Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall

Santtu-Matias Rouvali – conductor
Víkingur Ólafsson – piano
Olivier Latry – organ

ORTIZ Si el oxígeno fuera verde
(UK premiere, Philharmonia commission)
(13 mins)
BEETHOVEN Piano Concerto No. 3
(35 mins)

Interval (20 mins)

SAINT-SAËNS Symphony No. 3, 'Organ'
(38 mins)

This performance finishes at approximately 9.50pm

This concert is generously supported by the Kosta family in loving memory of Aboudi Kosta.

Gabriela Ortiz's new work was commissioned by the Philharmonia Orchestra with the generous support of Manuela Ribadeneira and the Philharmonia Foundation, USA.

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This concert is being recorded for broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on Monday 29 September. It will be available on BBC Sounds for 30 days.



Gabriela Ortiz © Mara Arteaga

Gabriela Ortiz (b. 1964)

Si el oxígeno fuera verde (2025)

UK premiere, Philharmonia commission
(13 mins)

Si el oxígeno fuera verde (If Oxygen Were Green) is dedicated to the memory of my friend and fellow Mexican musician Jorge Verdín, known by his artist name Clorofila (chlorophyll). Although I never had the chance to ask him why he chose this name, I decided to take the meaning and implications of that word as a starting point for this piece.

Chlorophyll is a biomolecule of vital importance to life on our planet. Without it, the process of photosynthesis – carried out by plants and other organisms – would not be possible, and without photosynthesis, oxygen would not be present in our atmosphere.

Nature is made up of numerous interdependent cycles that are fundamental to the maintenance of life on Earth. They form a complex network that keeps our environment in balance. With this in mind, I began to imagine particles of oxygen as sonic fractals ringing in the atmosphere, celebrating life in its purest, most essential form.

Just as fractal geometry features self-replicating patterns on different scales, in this piece I use rhythmic patterns and melodies that develop and transform independently. These patterns evolve through subtle variations, creating a sense of continuity and growth – forming diverse, intricate musical structures.

Si el oxígeno fuera verde is structured in four main sections:

1. Fractal structures and sound particles floating in the atmosphere
2. A nocturnal song nourished by the soul of a forest
3. The dawn of plants transforming light into oxygen
4. The dance of chlorophyll begins

The title suggests the fragile green murmur of life. The piece concludes with a final dance, becoming a symbol of the interdependence of all living beings – a reminder that each of us holds an urgent responsibility to help build a future that is more balanced and harmonious with the natural world.

Programme note © Gabriela Ortiz

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827)

Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37

(c. 1800) (35 mins)

I. Allegro con brio

II. Largo

III. Rondo. Allegro – Presto

This concerto represents a major turning point in Beethoven's career. Some of its material dates from the late 1790s. Otherwise, it was effectively the composer's first large-scale orchestral creation of the nineteenth century.

More significant than the date is the concerto's pivotal position in the composer's own life story. Beethoven was at work on the piece as he began to realise that his hearing problems weren't going to

improve – that they were, in fact, likely to lead to complete deafness.

That realisation had a cataclysmic effect on Beethoven, and shot entirely new sentiments and concepts into his music, starting with this piece. One of the most obvious implications of his impending deafness was his potential inability to perform and improvise on stage, as a pianist, with an orchestra.

Beethoven got wise to that new reality in this piece. The solo piano part is more clearly defined, on the page, than in its predecessors. The soloist takes on a more individual, imposing and energetic role. Cadenzas – the passages in which the soloist would traditionally improvise to demonstrate their prowess – are written out in full, instructions for future pianists to obey to the letter long after Beethoven himself could no longer provide demonstrations.

The pianist's more controlling role is also felt in the first movement's coda - its last word. Here, the soloist plays along with the orchestra, a strikingly presumptuous act with only one tentative precedent in a concerto by Mozart. That Mozart concerto (No. 24, K. 491) looms over many aspects of Beethoven's No. 3. Both use the tempestuous key of C minor; both use a principal tune based on the interval of a third. Still, the heroic levels of conflict and tension in Beethoven's score - between soloist and orchestra, and between major and minor keys – were entirely new.



Beethoven portrait by Christian Horneman

In the slow middle movement, Beethoven reaches for expressive tools that look forward to the full flowering of Romanticism. The music's meditative qualities conjure a picture of the composer clinging on to music's beauty, knowing he'd soon be unable to hear it.

Beethoven certainly knew that his audience in 1803 Vienna expected a memorable final flourish. The main tune of the finale – heard initially on the piano, before transferring immediately to the oboe – sounds impish and witty but actually stretches over a whole 8 bars. It is the longest tune in any Beethoven concerto – fitting for a score that changed the dimensions of the genre.

Programme note © Andrew Mellor

Interval (20 mins)



Camille Saint-Saëns portrait by Gustave Boulenger

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835 – 1921)

**Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Op. 78,
'Organ' (1886) (38 mins)**

**I. Adagio – Allegro moderato
– Poco adagio**

**II. Allegro moderato – Presto –
Maestoso – Allegro**

In August 1885, London's Philharmonic Society (now the Royal Philharmonic Society) invited Camille Saint-Saëns to come to the city 'either to play one of your concertos, or to compose a new one and play it'. They added enticingly that 'we have the finest Orchestra in England.' After further correspondence, it was agreed that the new work would not be a concerto but a symphony. This was a brave move. In France, the symphony was regarded as essentially Austro-German, despite Berlioz's valiant efforts to prove otherwise, and Saint-Saëns' 1850s efforts in the genre had been coolly received. Small wonder,

then, that he found the early stages of writing his new work 'terrifying', and composed *The Carnival of the Animals* alongside it for light relief.

Nevertheless, he made good progress, and completed the symphony at the end of April 1886. Its premiere took place on 19 May at St James's Hall in London. Saint-Saëns conducted, and demonstrated his virtuoso piano skills by playing Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto in the same concert. The reception was muted; by contrast, the symphony's Paris premiere in January 1887 was a great triumph, one that led composer Charles Gounod to dub his friend and peer 'the French Beethoven'. Saint-Saëns, however, never wrote another symphony, stating that 'I have given all that I had to give.'

The composer wrote of his two-movement symphony that 'it embraces in principle the four traditional movements, but the first is altered in its development to serve as the introduction to the Adagio, and the Scherzo is connected by the same process to the finale.' His other innovation was to include prominent parts for piano (with two players), and pipe organ, which gives the symphony its nickname.

The work employs Franz Liszt's technique of thematic transformation, whereby a relatively simple theme is developed in various ways across a large-scale composition. Indeed, Saint-Saëns conceived the piece as a homage to his

friend, and following Liszt's death in July 1886, dedicated it to his memory.

The Symphony's brooding introduction is followed by an Allegro moderato, notable for its dramatic changes in textures and dynamics. Here we first encounter the work's main theme: it bears a distinct resemblance to the medieval 'Dies irae' plainchant from the Mass for the Dead, a source of fascination for composers including Liszt. Saint-Saëns described the ensuing Adagio as 'very quiet and contemplative'. It begins with a solemn dialogue between strings and organ, but becomes increasingly sensual and romantic.

The second movement's opening Scherzo is a wild, almost demonic dance. Its central Trio section is more playful, and features cascading figures in the piano. A restless fugal passage for brass (fugues feature a recurring theme accompanied by increasingly elaborate counter-melodies) leads to a plangent string episode. A blazing C major organ chord then announces the work's final section. The sombre minor-key 'Dies irae' theme is transformed into a gloriously affirmative major-key chorale for organ and strings, with accompanying piano and brass fanfares. From here on the music becomes increasingly elaborate and exuberant, bringing the symphony to a triumphant close.

Programme note © Kate Hopkins

Philharmonia Social

We're launching Philharmonia Social today as part of our 80th birthday celebrations, to help everyone feel welcome at our concerts. It's a chance to find out more about the orchestra and the programme, and connect with other music lovers. Whether you're new to live orchestral music or a longstanding fan, Philharmonia Social is for you.

All this evening's Philharmonia Social events take place on the Clore Ballroom on Level 2.

6.30pm:

Find out about the highlights of our 80th birthday season, and our exploration of how music shapes our identity

6.45pm:

If you're curious about the terminology and traditions of the concert hall, or not sure who's who on stage, our players are here to explain

7pm, interval and post-concert:

Come and chat to our Philharmonia Social volunteers, ask questions and meet some of your fellow concert-goers

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About the Philharmonia

Founded in 1945, the Philharmonia Orchestra celebrates its 80th birthday in the 2025-2026 season.

Conductor Santtu-Matias Rouvali took up the baton as Principal Conductor in 2021, and Marin Alsop joined him as Principal Guest Conductor in 2023.

They follow in illustrious footsteps: Herbert von Karajan, Otto Klemperer, Ricardo Muti, Giuseppe Sinopoli, Christoph von Dohnányi, Vladimir Ashkenazy and Esa-Pekka Salonen are some of the key conductors who have shaped the Philharmonia's reputation as one of the world's great orchestras.

The Philharmonia has premiered music by composers including Richard Strauss, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies and Errollyn Wallen and performs with many of the world's most admired soloists. Víkingur Ólafsson is this season's Featured Artist, and Gabriela Ortiz is Featured Composer.

Resident at the Southbank Centre since 1995, the Philharmonia also holds residencies in Basingstoke, Bedford, Canterbury and Leicester, and tours extensively worldwide. A major US tour this autumn culminates in two concerts at Carnegie Hall.

The Philharmonia's 80-year recording history includes many benchmark LP's and more than 150 film and videogame soundtracks. The Orchestra's recording of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 is travelling through interstellar space on board the Voyager spacecraft, and immersive installations and virtual reality experiences introduce orchestral music to new audiences.

The Philharmonia is committed to nurturing and developing the next generation of instrumentalists and composers, with a focus on increasing diversity within the classical music industry.



Santtu-Matias Rouvali and the Philharmonia © Mark Allan

Santtu-Matias Rouvali – Principal Conductor



Santtu-Matias Rouvali © Marco Borggreve

Santtu-Matias Rouvali took up the baton as Principal Conductor of the Philharmonia Orchestra in September 2021. In October 2025, as the Philharmonia turns 80, Santtu conducts on a major tour to the US, culminating at Carnegie Hall. In the London season, he conducts music from Beethoven to Bernstein, and recreates an epic all-Strauss concert originally conducted in 1947 by Richard Strauss himself.

Santtu's live recordings on the Philharmonia Records label feature music by Strauss, Shostakovich, Mahler and Stravinsky.

Santtu began his musical career as a percussionist. From 2017 – 2025 he was Chief Conductor of Gothenburg Symphony. He is Honorary Conductor of Tampere Philharmonic Orchestra, and performs regularly with top international orchestras.

When he's not conducting, Santtu loves to spend time meditating, hunting and foraging in the forest around his home in Finland.

Víkingur Ólafsson – piano



Víkingur Ólafsson © Ari Mägi / Deutsche Grammophon

Víkingur Ólafsson is a visionary musician. His recordings have reached over one billion streams, and his honours and awards include a GRAMMY for his recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, *BBC Music Magazine's* Album of the Year, *Gramophone's* Artist of the Year, and the Order of the Falcon, Iceland's order of chivalry.

Ólafsson's latest album, *Opus 109*, is due for release in November. It places Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 30 at its heart, in an illuminating dialogue with music by Schubert and Bach, and other works by Beethoven.

His season as Featured Artist with the Philharmonia includes an extensive US tour, the second performance of *After the Fall*, a concerto written for him by John Adams, and a homage to György Kurtág celebrating the composer's 100th birthday.

During the 2025/26 season he will also reunite with the Berlin Philharmonic and the LA Philharmonic.

Olivier Latry – organ



Olivier Latry © Henry Buffeau

Established as the leading ambassador for his instrument, French organist Olivier Latry has performed in the

world's most prestigious venues, been the guest of top orchestras throughout Europe, the US and East Asia, worked with renowned conductors, recorded with major labels, and premiered an impressive number of works. Appointed as titular organist at Notre-Dame in Paris at the age of 23, and Organist Emeritus at Orchestre National de Montréal since 2012, Olivier Latry is an accomplished, thoughtful and adventurous musician, exploring all possible fields of organ music, with an exceptional talent as an improviser.

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