80th Birthday Season 2025/26

Gilbert & George: Sex, Money, Race, Religion Sunday 5 October 2025 Royal Festival Hall



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## In a nutshell...

Gilbert & George met at art college in London in 1967 and 'it was love at first sight'. They have been partners and collaborators, and a fixture of the UK art scene, ever since.

Their subject is all of modern life, and their life is their art – not just their pictures and performances, but their clothes, their home, their meals and their walks around East London.

The duo have said in several interviews that 'music is the enemy'. The Philharmonia took that as a challenge, and worked with them to programme this concert to accompany the Hayward

Gallery's exhibition *Gilbert & George: 21st Century Pictures*. Both visual art and music can give us ways to explore, experience and express our thoughts and feelings about life's big topics.

One of the works in the Hayward Gallery exhibition is called Sex, Money, Race, Religion. This evening's programme features pictures and music that embody each of these topics, along with what Gilbert & George call 'just some silly songs that we like'.

As well as music and pictures, the evening features interview footage filmed at Gilbert & George's home in Spitalfields.

# Welcome to this evening's concert



### Gilbert & George: Sex, Money, Race, Religion

Sunday 5 October 2025 Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall

Jessica Cottis – conductor Toby Chadd – director / excutive producer

ELGAR Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1 (Land of Hope and Glory) (5 mins) WAGNER Liebestod from Tristan and Isolde (8 mins)

DUKAS The Sorcerer's Apprentice (11 mins)
ELLINGTON (arr. Peress) Black, Brown
and Beige: I. Black (8 mins)

XENAKIS Tracées (5 mins)

**BACH (arr. Reger) O Mensch bewein** (6 mins)

Medley of songs chosen by Gilbert & George (4 mins)

FLANAGAN / CONNELLY (arr. Farrington)
Underneath the Arches (5 mins)

The music is interspersed with interview footage, and accompanies projections of Gilbert & George's pictures.

There is no interval, and the performance finishes at approximately 8.15pm.

## Philharmonia debates... Music & Identity

5.15pm, Royal Festival Hall

Does who we are inevitably become part of how we make and listen to music?

Join us for the first of a series of debates running through our 80th birthday season.

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### Philharmonia Social

Philharmonia Social is our new initiative to help everyone feel welcome at our concerts.

Our staff, players and volunteers will be in the bar on Level 2 before and after the concert.

6.15pm: a short introduction to the orchestra and this evening's performance

6.30pm: your chance to join the conversation, ask questions and connect with your fellow audience members

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## **Programme notes**



Many artists have been inspired by music, and composers by art. Visual art and music can therefore seem a natural pairing. In cinema and opera, what the eye sees can deepen and inflect what the ear hears, and vice versa. In the case of Gilbert & George, some of the key concerns of their work – and particularly the central themes of sex, money, race and religion – have been the inspiration for many composers over the centuries.

But there's a rub. "Music", the pair have famously declared, "is the enemy."

And so at the heart of this evening is either an insurmountable problem or a stimulating creative tension, depending on your perspective. Fortunately, Gilbert & George are in the latter camp, and they embarked on this project with a curiosity about what might emerge when their art is set to music.

The backbone of the project is the pairing of their artwork with orchestral music that explores the same themes. The music is deliberately drawn from very different eras and cultural backgrounds; the resonances that emerge – thematic and aesthetic – were often unexpected. Interspersing these chapters are brief interviews in which Gilbert & George discuss their creative process, their attitude to music (and their reaction to the music in this programme), and how our identities and societies are shaped by sex, money, race and religion.

Gilbert and George have been a fixture in our national cultural consciousness for as long as most of us can remember. Perhaps music, rather than being the enemy, might help us to find a new perspective on their art – and vice versa.



### Introduction

## **Edward Elgar** (1857 - 1934)

Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1 (1901) (5 mins)

Images:

They Shot Them (2014)
Was Jesus Heterosexual? (2005)
Frigidarium (2008)
Tell Your Children (2014)
Sex Money Race Religion (2016)

There are few more quintessentially English pieces of music than the first of Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance* Marches. Premiered to great acclaim in 1901, the famous tune was re-used the following year in Elgar's Coronation Ode for King Edward VII, set to the words 'Land of Hope and Glory'. In this form, it has been a fixture of the BBC's Last Night of the Proms for a century.

'Land of Hope and Glory' was cited by Gilbert & George as one of their favourite tunes. Its sense of traditional patriotism chimes with the image of the pair in their tweed suits, living in a beautifully restored 18th-century townhouse. But what of this tradition in the 21st century? Is Britain now a 'Land of Hope and Glory'? And is there a paradox between the artists' tweedy personal brand and their technicolour, provocative artwork?

#### Sex

## **Richard Wagner** (1813 - 1883)

**Liebestod from Tristan and Isolde** (1859) (8 mins)

Images:

Sex from Sex Money Race Religion (2016) This is a Good Kiss Spot (2014) Ages (2001) Sleepover (2022)

Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* is an epic achievement, by any definition of that over-used adjective. Its musical innovations changed the course of music history, and at four hours long it places significant demands on both audience and singers.

The opera tells of the title characters' doomed love, which can only be fulfilled in death. That fulfilment comes in the very final scene of the opera, the Liebestod,

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literally 'love in death', in which Isolde finds Tristan's lifeless body and so gladly welcomes death herself. The movement grows towards an irresistible climax (many audiences and critics have noted the unavoidably orgiastic nature of the music), before resolving in quiet contentment. The scene also includes the resolution of the 'Tristan chord', a musical cliffhanger that hovers over the opera from the start.

Wagner's reflection on forbidden love and the love-death duality resonate with concerns central to Gilbert & George's work, with particular parallels in 20th-century legal and societal attitudes towards homosexuality. The chapter concludes with their own deeply touching Liebestod moment.



## **Money**

## **Paul Dukas** (1865 - 1935)

The Sorcerer's Apprentice (1897) (11 mins)

Images:

Money from Sex Money Race Religion (2016) Money City (1998)

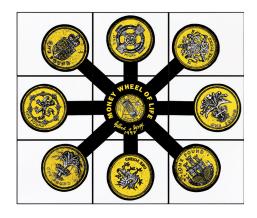
Money (1998)

Money Wheel of Life (1997)

Paul Dukas belongs to a small group of composers who have achieved renown through just one piece of music (Pachelbel with his Canon, and Orff with *Carmina Burana*, are two other examples). Dukas' one-hit wonder tells a story originally by the German poet Goethe: a lazy sorcerer's apprentice learns enough of his master's magic to bring a broom to life to do his chores for him, but his greed for magical knowledge almost proves his downfall when the broom takes on a life of its own and causes a flood. His master returns in the nick of time to save the day.

The piece was hugely popular in its own right, but gained a mass audience when it was used in the Disney film *Fantasia*.

A story of the dangers of greed, and a piece of music that has achieved astonishing commercial success, serve as a fitting backdrop to a meditation on money, and the ways in which it permeates our lives and our cities.



#### Race

## **Duke Ellington** (1899 - 1974)

**Black, Brown and Beige** (1943), arr. Maurice Peress (8 mins)

Images:

Race from Sex Money Race Religion (2016) White Bastards (2004)

**Fates** (2005)

**Gents** (2014)

By the early 1940s, Duke Ellington was a household name in the states. As his fame grew, he became increasingly occupied with how his work could reclaim Black history and culture, and recast it in the mainstream artistic forms of the day.

And so, at his hotly anticipated Carnegie Hall debut, he chose to premiere a new symphonic work with extensive social and musical ambitions. Frank Sinatra and Eleanor Roosevelt were in the audience as he unveiled *Black*, *Brown and Beige*. Ellington introduced it on the night as "a parallel to the history of the American Negro. And of course, it tells a long story."

Ellington tells this story with a full orchestra augmented with instruments from the jazz big band, creating a synthesis of European and African-American musical cultures. Tonight we hear the first movement, 'Black'. It starts with an evocation of African drumming before a weighty 'Work Song' is lightened by swing, ending with a moment of rest and faith in 'Church Sunday'.

Black, Brown and Beige bewildered its first audience, but found widespread fame in Ellington's own reworking for Mahalia Jackson, and continues to influence jazz and classical artists to this day. This proud and brilliant integration of different musical traditions provides a bold counterpoint to Gilbert & George's own reflections on race and multiculturalism.



### Religion

### lannis Xenakis (1922 - 2001)

**Tracées** (1987) (5 mins)

## Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 - 1750)

Chorale Prelude 'O Mensch, bewein' dein' Sünde groß', BWV. 622 (c.1713), arr. Max Reger (6 mins)

Images:

Religion from Sex Money Race Religion (2016) Pixie Hill (2005)

**Akimbo** (2005)

Gilbert & George are outspoken in their opposition to religion, but their art is full of religious iconography. To explore this theme, we set two of their artworks alongside the music of two men with very different approaches to the concepts of God and faith.

Greek-French composer Iannis Xenakis entirely rejected spirituality in his life and work. He was a computer scientist and mathematician as well as a composer, and the inspiration for his compositions came squarely from the world of logic. The musicologist Zbigniew Skowron writes that "in accordance with his atheist views, Xenakis emphasises the finality of death as the ultimate event of human life, and this is probably why wild shrieks and

moans punctuate his score" – an insight that will resonate with anyone who has experienced Xenakis' masterpiece for large orchestra, *Tracées*. The music is made up of a sequence of colliding, overlapping blocks, creating an overwhelming sonic experience.

Bach's approach to religion was quite different. He believed that music was both the manifestation of God on earth and a way to elevate our souls towards the divine, and he inscribed 'Soli Dei Gloria' (To the Glory of God Alone) at the foot of his manuscripts. *O Mensch, bewein* (O man, bewail thy sins so great) was originally a Lutheran hymn tune. Its irresistible melody caught Bach's ear, and he set it as an organ prelude as well as featuring it in both the St John and St Matthew Passions. We hear it tonight in an orchestration by 19th-century German composer Max Reger.

## Gilbert & George's Medley

## Richard Jones (1500s)

Greensleeves (c.1580)

## **Leon René** (1902 - 1982)

When the Swallows Come Back to Capistrano (1940)

## Vincent Youmans (1898 - 1946)

**Tea for Two** (1924)

Medley (4 mins) arranged by lain Farrington for this performance

Gilbert & George haven't always seen music as the enemy: Gilbert was a chorister in the famous Munich Bach Choir as a boy. When I asked them about the music closest to their heart, they produced a long list of works, many of them redolent of popular culture immediately after the Second World War.

We worked with them to whittle the list down to three, to feature as a medley within tonight's programme. *Greensleeves* has long been associated with King Henry VIII, but the tune is likely to have reached England from Italy several decades after the monarch's death. Richard Jones was the first to register it with a publisher in this country in 1580.

When the Swallows Come Back to Capistrano was made famous through chart-topping recordings by both The Ink Spots and Glenn Miller in the same year, although it is the former's performance that is a particular favourite of George's. The song pays tribute to the annual return of migrating cliff swallows to San Juan Capistrano, California.

The melody of *Tea for Two* was dreamt up when American composer Vincent Youmans was serving in the navy during the First World War; it was continually recorded until the 1950s, ensuring its enduring popularity.

## **The Singing Sculptures**

## **Bud Flanagan** (1896 - 1968)

Underneath the Arches (1932) (5 mins)

Orchestrated by Iain Farrington for this performance

The music hall double act Flanagan and Allen premiered *Underneath the Arches* in 1932. The lyrics refer to rough sleepers under railway arches in Derby. In 1969, Gilbert & George used the song as part of their new Singing Sculptures, which they performed around the world, and which helped to forge their artistic reputation. Perhaps most evocative were the performances in East London's railway arches, in ruins after the Blitz: the song had particular resonance in a London where homelessness was an ongoing crisis, and it still resonates today.

Programme notes by Toby Chadd All images © Gilbert & George

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## **About the Philharmonia**

Founded in 1945, the Philharmonia Orchestra celebrates its 80th birthday in the 2025/26 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.



## Jessica Cottis - conductor



Conductor Jessica Cottis has earned widespread recognition for her inventive, thought-provoking programming and inspiring musical leadership. A gifted communicator described as 'cool, contained, super-articulate and engaging' (*The Scotsman*), she is one of the top Australian conductors working today, in high demand from orchestras around the world.

Cottis begins her third season as Artistic Partner of the Västerås Sinfonietta in Sweden and continues her fifth season as Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Canberra Symphony Orchestra. Under her visionary leadership, the CSO has pioneered several important and award-winning initiatives, including a significant commissioning output, collaborations with indigenous creators, and championing Australian composers.

Cottis' recent highlights include two consecutive years opening the Aldeburgh Festival (in 2025 with the world premiere of Colin Matthews'

opera A Visit to Friends), and guest engagements with orchestras across the globe including the Real Filarmonica de Galicia, Queensland Symphony, Edmonton Symphony, National Radio Orchestra of Romania. Turku Philharmonic, Gavle Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre Philharmonique du Luxembourg, the National Arts Centre Orchestra, Ottawa and the National Youth Orchestra of Ireland. She has recorded for the BBC, ABC, and Decca Classics labels.

In the 2025/2026 season. Cottis will appear with the Malmö Symphony Orchestra, Belgian National Orchestra, Adelaide Symphony, Danish Philharmonic and Calgary Philharmonic, and will conduct three programmes with the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland, including a concert performance of Bizet's Carmen.

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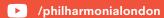
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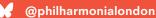
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