

**80th Birthday
Season 2025/26**

**Marin Alsop conducts
Star Wars and The Planets
Sunday 8 February 2026
Royal Festival Hall**

Philharmonia

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Philharmonia 80

Welcome to this afternoon's concert

Marin Alsop conducts Star Wars and The Planets

Sunday 8 February 2026, 3pm
Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall

Marin Alsop – conductor

Sean Shibe – guitar

Philharmonia Chorus

WILLIAMS Star Wars Suite

(25 mins)

RODRIGO Guitar Concerto,
'Concierto de Aranjuez'

(25 mins)

Interval (20 mins)

HOLST The Planets

(50 mins)

This performance finishes at approximately 5.10pm

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Principal Conductor

Marin Alsop
Principal Guest Conductor

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Concertmaster

In a nutshell...

This afternoon's concert takes you on a musical journey to infinity and beyond!

Under the baton of our Principal Guest Conductor Marin Alsop, we explore space, storytelling and imagination through some of the most loved music ever written for orchestra. You'll hear the instantly recognisable themes of *Star Wars*, full of heroes, villains and swashbuckling adventure, alongside Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*, with brilliant guitarist Sean Shibe as soloist, offering a moment of warmth and reflection inspired by the gardens of a Spanish palace.

The journey continues with Holst's *The Planets*, a work that helped shape the sound of modern film music. From the pounding rhythms of Mars to the joyful sweep of Jupiter and the mysterious, fading voices of Neptune, Holst paints vivid musical pictures of worlds far beyond our own.

Whether you're hearing this music for the first time or returning to old favourites, sit back, listen out for the stories in the sound, and enjoy an orchestral adventure that's truly out of this world.



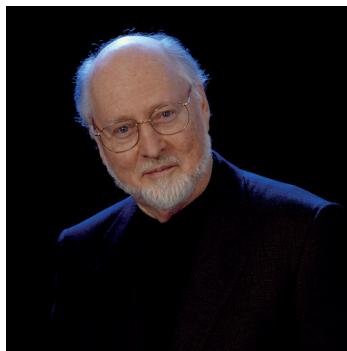
Philharmonia Social

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

Our staff, players and volunteers will be on Level 2 blue side before the concert and during the interval.

2pm: a short introduction to the orchestra and this afternoon's performance

2.15pm: your chance to join the conversation, ask questions and connect with your fellow audience members



John Williams © Public Domain

John Williams (b. 1932)

Star Wars Suite

(1977) (25 mins)

Main Title

Princess Leia's Theme

The Imperial March (Darth Vader's Theme)

Yoda's Theme

Throne Room & End Title

Picture the scene. On 25 May 1977, audiences in cinemas across America are taking their seats. As the trailers finish, a mysterious, and not particularly exciting sentence appears in the darkness:

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away....

Then, out of nowhere (without even a countdown): it's blast-off! The yellow 'STAR WARS' logo explodes across the screen, and with a crash of cymbals, a blast of trumpets, an army of strings and a thundering brass fanfare, the orchestra launches us into space.

It's no surprise that the *Main Title* music from *Star Wars* has become one of John Williams's most popular film themes. The main trumpet melody, with its leaping, triumphant tune, conjures a world of heroic adventure. Soaring strings, rumbling timpani (those enormous, deep drums), and mysterious piccolo interjections evoke a sense of intergalactic wonder. Look out for the strings playing using 'tremolo' – where they rapidly move the bow to create a shimmering sound. And notice how the cymbal player has to prepare the cymbals, lifting them silently from the holders without letting out an accidental crash!

The dreamlike melody of *Princess Leia's Theme* is a beautiful, swooning love song, first carried by the horn in a halo of strings and harp, before the oboe and other woodwinds take over. In *The Imperial March*, the villain Darth Vader gets what might be the most terrifying motif in all cinematic music: an 'evil laugh' cackled by the brass section over pulsating triplets in the strings and snare drum – you can almost feel the Storm Troopers approaching!

Yoda's Theme evokes the hero's quest for spiritual awakening, as a radiant string theme ascends through the strings. Listen out for the tinkling tones of the glockenspiel and the harp glissandi (those rippling chords), which add a sprinkling of gravity-defying musical magic. In the *Throne Room*, the brass section takes centre stage again for this majestic,

thunderous theme. Finally, with a dizzying flurry of semiquavers in the strings, we launch into orbit once more, with a reprise of the opening tune for the end credits. May the Force be with you!



Joaquín Rodrigo © Public Domain

Joaquín Rodrigo (1901 – 1999)

Concierto de Aranjuez (Guitar Concerto)

(1939) (25 mins)

Allegro con spirito

Adagio

Allegro gentile

Joaquín Rodrigo's story is a remarkable tale of triumph over adversity. He was born in Spain in 1901, but at the age of three, he was blinded by diphtheria during an epidemic of the disease. That didn't stop him pursuing his musical dreams. He became a gifted pianist, and when he later turned to composing, he produced his entire musical output in Braille, working with a copyist to dictate his music.

He studied musicology in Paris, although his scholarship was withdrawn in 1936 when the Spanish Civil War broke out, leaving Rodrigo and his wife in poverty. Yet by the time of his death (aged 98!), he had become a celebrated national figure, (in large part thanks to this concerto), and had even been awarded an honorary title by the King of Spain: First Marquess of the Gardens of – you guessed it – Aranjuez.

The concerto, which Rodrigo completed in 1939, is a dazzling showcase for the guitar. In 1938, on his return to Paris from Spain, the Rodrigos were having dinner with friends. Seated at the table was the guitarist Regino Sainz de la Maza, who turned to Joaquín and demanded he write him a concerto for guitar and orchestra. Rodrigo's response? "I quickly swallowed two glasses of the best Rioja [a tasty Spanish wine], and exclaimed in a most convincing tone: 'All right, it's a deal!'"

The city of Aranjuez (today, a 40-minute train ride from the capital, Madrid) provided the inspiration for the piece – in particular the gardens of its famous Palacio Real (Royal Palace), with its fragrant gardens and peaceful fountains. The first movement is lively and uplifting: listen out for the short cello solo in the first movement, which is performed over an accompaniment of strings using ricochet bowing (a technique where the bow bounces on the string, creating a sharp, snappy sound, reminiscent of guitar chords).

The melancholy second movement opens with a poignant exchange between the guitar and cor anglais – a reed instrument similar to the oboe. There is a sense of grief and sorrow to the music. Rodrigo and his wife later revealed that this was connected to a miscarriage that his wife, the pianist Victoria Kamhi, had recently suffered. Muted strings add to the sombre atmosphere. Yet out of darkness comes light: the final movement is a lilting dance, a waltz-like, choppy tune that never quite settles in 3/4 time – keeping the audience (and the orchestra) on their toes throughout.

Interval (20 mins)



Gustav Holst © Public Domain

Gustav Holst (1874 – 1934)

The Planets

(1917) (50 mins)

Mars, the Bringer of War

Venus, the Bringer of Peace

Mercury, the Winged Messenger

Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity

Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age

Uranus, the Magician

Neptune, the Mystic

British composer Gustav Holst first became interested in astrology when a friend introduced him to the subject on a holiday to Mallorca in 1914. From there, he began writing his own horoscopes, and turned to the stars for inspiration for his next musical creation.

His goal was to capture the spirit of each planet, or rather, the ‘character traits’ astrologers gave to people born under their influence. Perhaps this human perspective explains the lack of an ‘Earth’ movement.

In any case, no amount of horoscope reading could have prepared Holst for the immense popularity of *The Planets* at their first public performance in 1920. Their cultural influence remains huge, not least for a certain John Williams some five decades later...

In *Mars, the Bringer of War*, the orchestra is transformed into a mighty, marching army. But this is no ordinary march: there are not four, but five beats in a bar. The effect, as the strings hammer out their repeating theme using the wood of the bow (an effect called ‘col legno’), is of a mechanical, inhuman force advancing with merciless intent. Snarling brass and an uneasy, swirling chromatic theme build to a shattering conclusion, complete with gong and full organ.

Venus, the Bringer of Peace brings some welcome tranquillity, with an ethereal horn solo answered by high, lilting woodwinds, and a tender violin solo, perhaps evoking the feminine goddess with whom the planet shares its name.

The skipping, lively *Mercury, the Winged Messenger* exudes a sense of mischief, helped by the twinkling tones of the celesta – a unique keyboard instrument whose felt-covered hammers hit metal plates, creating a lovely ringing sound (think of the *Harry Potter* theme tune!).

In *Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity* a clamour of strings ascends to the heavens like a flock of birds taking flight, as a riotous horn melody bubbles upwards. The famous,

grand tune that follows was later arranged as a patriotic anthem by Holst, and even achieved fame (with new lyrics) as a rugby anthem.

Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age begins with a slow, ceremonial march that steadily builds to a huge climax (complete with tubular bells), before subsiding into tranquillity.

In *Uranus, the Magician*, Holst depicts a wicked sorcerer, intent on conjuring up all manner of mischief. Listen out for cymbal crashes, and the clattering cacophony of the xylophone, before the magician vanishes, leaving chaos in his wake.

From its opening flute duet, *Neptune, the Mystic* evokes a sense of beauty and serenity, with its shimmering celesta and other-worldly voices transporting us into weightless space.

© Sophie Rashbrook

Marin Alsop – Principal Guest Conductor



Marin Alsop © Nancy Horowitz

Marin Alsop was chosen by the players of the Philharmonia as Principal Guest Conductor in 2023, in recognition of her exceptional musicianship, her commitment to diversity and education, and the breadth of her repertoire. She has since conducted the Philharmonia in collaborations featuring the Marcus Roberts Trio, world champion tango dancers, and an animated film by artist William Kentridge, as well as music by Bernstein and Gustav and Alma Mahler.

One of the foremost conductors of our time, Marin Alsop is the first woman to serve as the head of major orchestras in the United States, South America, Austria, and Great Britain, she is, as *The New York Times* put it, “a formidable musician and a powerful communicator” and “a conductor with a vision.”

The 2024-25 season marks Alsop’s sixth as Chief Conductor of the ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra; her second as Artistic Director & Chief Conductor of the Polish National Radio Symphony; her second as Principal Guest Conductor of

London’s Philharmonia Orchestra; and her first as Principal Guest Conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra. She is also Chief Conductor of the Ravinia Festival and Music Director of the National Orchestral Institute + Festival (NOI+F) at the University of Maryland.

Alsop becomes the first U.S.-born woman to conduct the Berlin Philharmonic in February 2025, leading the world premiere of a new commission from Outi Tarkiainen. Other highlights include premieres with the New York Philharmonic and returns to major U.S. orchestras.

In 2021, Alsop assumed the title of Music Director Laureate and OrchKids Founder of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, where she served for 14 years. She also became Conductor of Honour of Brazil’s São Paulo Symphony Orchestra after seven years as Music Director. Deeply committed to new music, she led California’s Cabrillo Festival for 25 years.

Alsop has guest conducted leading orchestras worldwide and spearheaded the ‘Global Ode to Joy’ project for Beethoven’s 250th anniversary. She made her Metropolitan Opera debut in 2024. Her discography includes more than 200 titles, and she is the first and only conductor to receive a MacArthur Fellowship. In 2002, she founded the Taki Alsop Conducting Fellowship. *The Conductor*, a documentary about her life, debuted at the 2021 Tribeca Film Festival.

Sean Shibe – guitar



Sean Shibe © Kaupo Kikkas

Sean Shibe continues to prove himself a truly original mind at the frontier of contemporary classical music.

2024/25 season highlights include a residency at Wigmore Hall with four concerts, including a programme dedicated to Pierre Boulez’s centenary performing *Le Marteau sans maître*. He tours the UK with folk fiddler Aidan O’Rourke; across the UK and Europe with mezzo-soprano Ema Nikolovska, exploring the Orlando myth; and with Karim Sulayman for a US tour of their duo programme *Broken Branches*. Other engagements include debuts in Shanghai and Hong Kong, and a debut tour with the Australian Chamber Orchestra performing Cassandra Miller’s new guitar concerto *Chanter*. Shibe also premiered an electric guitar concerto by Mark Simpson at the BBC Proms and a solo work by Tyshawn Sorey.

Recent solo performances include Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, Philharmonie

de Paris, Konzerthaus Wien, Southbank Centre, and Alte Oper Frankfurt, as well as appearances at 92NY and Wigmore Hall. Festival appearances include La Jolla SummerFest, Aldeburgh Festival, BBC Proms, Heidelberger Frühling, and Schleswig-Holstein Musik Festival.

Shibe regularly collaborates with ensembles and soloists, including the Hallé, Britten Sinfonia, BBC Singers, Manchester Collective, Dunedin Consort, Danish String Quartet, and conductors Thomas Adès, Krzysztof Urbaniński, and Christoph Eschenbach. He champions contemporary music, premiering works by Thomas Adès, Oliver Leith, Cassandra Miller, Sasha Scott, Daniel Kidane, David Fennelly, Shiva Feshareki, David Lang, Julia Wolfe, and Freya Waley-Cohen, while pairing new pieces with his own transcriptions of J.S. Bach and Scottish lute manuscripts.

Recording exclusively for Pentatone, his album *Profesión* won the 2024 BBC Music Magazine Award; *Broken Branches* was nominated for a 2024 GRAMMY; and *Lost & Found* earned the OPUS Klassik 2023 Award, adding to previous Gramophone and OPUS Klassik honors.

Born in Edinburgh in 1992, Shibe studied at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and Kunsthochschule Graz. He is Guitar Professor at Guildhall School of Music and Drama and recipient of the 2022 Leonard Bernstein Award.

Get to know Tom Edwards

No. 2 Percussion



Tom Edwards © Mark Allan

There are some thrilling percussion moments in today's programme. Do you have a favourite passage to play?

I'd be lying if I didn't say that playing Mars or Jupiter from *The Planets* isn't always a thrill. It's such wonderfully written music and we're at the forefront of the landscape as it unfolds, whether enhancing the relentless menace of Mars or adding to the energy and majesty of Jupiter. In *Star Wars* I don't think anyone can deny the impact of the very opening few bars of the main titles – it's become such an iconic moment in the orchestral repertoire and never fails to raise the hairs on your neck!

Were you a *Star Wars* fan before playing the music? Does performing it change how you experience the films?

Although I was never a *Star Wars* 'super fan', I loved watching the films as I grew up, and the music had a huge impact on me. I'd say having seen the films has more of an impact on performing the music more than anything – you can envisage the sequences and story in your mind as

you play which adds another dimension of involvement and excitement for the musicians.

What's one thing audience members might not realise about the role of percussion in these pieces?

The audience might not realise just how much we're enjoying ourselves! The percussion writing in both pieces is so incredibly rewarding to play. In *The Planets* the orchestration is so masterful that every note we play has a purpose, and is so well balanced in the context of the ensemble that it's a very satisfying experience. John Williams's percussion writing is equally as enjoyable as we're always supporting or driving the heart of an emotional or dramatic context, from suspense and anticipation to majesty and triumph – the percussion are always an integral part of the story.

If you could play percussion on any planet from Holst's suite – or in the *Star Wars* galaxy – where would it be and why?

I've long been fascinated by the idea of space travel, if I had to choose any planet to visit it would likely be Mars – the possibility that life may have existed there billions of years ago is mind-blowing. I have to be honest though, if I had the chance to go there the last thing I'd pack is a pair of sticks!

About the Philharmonia

Philharmonia 80

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 in October culminated in two concerts at Carnegie Hall.

The Philharmonia's 80-year recording history includes many benchmark LPs 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 Orchestra

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