

**80th Birthday
Season 2025/26**

**Bruce Liu plays Ravel
Sunday 12 April 2026
Royal Festival Hall**

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In a nutshell...

This afternoon's concert is a showcase of orchestral colour and virtuosity, from Britten's wild seascapes, to Tchaikovsky's passionate melodies, all via the jazz-infused rhythms of Ravel's elegant Piano Concerto.

Composed in the wake of the Second World War, Benjamin Britten's Four Sea Interludes are taken from his opera *Peter Grimes*. Rooted in place and community, Britten took inspiration from his coastal upbringing to provide different musical portraits of the elemental force of the sea, and our relationship to it. Listen for how Britten captures the swelling of the tides, the expanse of the sea, and the terrifying roar of the storm in his music.

Ravel's Piano Concerto bursts with an infectious energy; with three movements filled with colour, its jazz-influenced rhythms and orchestration form a masterpiece which, at a little under 25 minutes, can be best described as 'short and sweet', so much so that afternoon's soloist Bruce Liu, on page 8, knows a sweet treat each movement can be compared to!

Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5 brings this afternoon's concert to a close with 45 minutes of emotion and heartfelt intensity. From its opening 'fate' theme, the serenity of the second movement's famous horn solo, to its final, hard-won explosion of splendour, the Philharmonia guarantee a thrilling orchestral journey from dark, brooding melancholy to ultimate triumph at the final bar line.

Welcome to this afternoon's concert

Bruce Liu plays Ravel

Sunday 12 April, 3pm
Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall

Ryan Bancroft – conductor
Bruce Liu – piano

BRITTEN Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes
(16 mins)

RAVEL Piano Concerto in G
(23 mins)

Interval (20 mins)

TCHAIKOVSKY Symphony No. 5
(45 mins)

This performance finishes at approximately 5pm

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

Our staff, players and volunteers will be at the Level 2 Blue Side, before the concert.

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

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



Programme notes



Benjamin Britten © Public Domain

Benjamin Britten (1913 – 1976)

Four Sea Interludes from *Peter Grimes*

(1945) (16 mins)

- I. Dawn
- II. Sunday Morning
- III. Moonlight
- IV. Storm

In June 1945, shortly after the surrender of Germany, Benjamin Britten's new opera *Peter Grimes* was premiered at Sadler's Wells Theatre to universal acclaim. *The Times* reported that in honour of the occasion, "Gallery oldtimers had set up their camp stools in ticket queues 24 hours in advance. Ecstatic music-lovers kept throwing bouquets at the cast and composer until the historic old stage was carpeted with flowers." The young composer's gripping depiction of the proud, unstable and rough fisherman Peter Grimes, persecuted and driven to suicide by the vicious gossips of his native

town, secured his reputation in his home country.

For all that the vocal characterisation of Peter and the other principals was crucial to its success, Britten also took particular care over the opera's instrumental sections, which covered scene changes and depicted the shifting moods and characters of the Borough. Shortly after the premiere of *Grimes*, he extracted four of the six instrumental interludes from the opera, reordered them, and performed them as 'Four Sea Interludes' at the Cheltenham Festival. He also provided each of them with a title: 'Dawn' (from Act I), 'Sunday morning' (Act II), 'Moonlight' (Act III) and 'Storm' (a return to Act I). Annotations in Britten's manuscript suggest further details of each: the slow waves of 'Dawn'; waves, wind and spray in 'Storm'; and the specific image of "boats in river at anchor" for 'Moonlight'.

The movement sequence also bears a striking resemblance to the orchestral suite *The Sea* by Britten's teacher and friend Frank Bridge: Seascape – Sea-foam – Moonlight – Storm. Bridge had died in 1941. Perhaps these interludes were a means of Britten offering a memorial tribute to his beloved mentor.



Maurice Ravel © Public Domain

Maurice Ravel (1875 – 1937)

Piano Concerto in G
(1929-31) (23 mins)

- I. **Allegramente**
- II. **Adagio assai**
- III. **Presto**

In April 1919, the virtuoso pianist Marguerite Long gave the first performance of Ravel's elegant suite *Le tombeau de Couperin* in Paris. It was the latest of a string of vivid, virtuosic piano pieces that Ravel had composed – but ten years after this impressive new work, he still hadn't written any other big works for the keyboard. And then, all of a sudden, two came along at once.

The Piano Concerto in G major is, technically, the first of these two new pieces: Ravel claimed to have been thinking about it since 1928 (the year in which he composed his famous *Boléro*), and later admitted that the theme of the

first movement had come to him when he was riding the Oxford to London train that year! But in early 1929 he was commissioned by the German pianist Paul Wittgenstein to write a Concerto for Left Hand, and put his original Concerto to one side to meet Wittgenstein's deadline. So it was only on 14 January 1932 that the Concerto in G was finally finished and premiered in Paris, conducted by Ravel and with Marguerite Long – its dedicatee – at the piano.



Marguerite Long c. 1900 © Public Domain

This is a brilliant kaleidoscope of a work, the orchestra pinging with energy in its jittery, opening bars before the languorous entry of the solo pianist. The first movement switches effortlessly from high excitement to magical moments of stillness, melancholy and lyricism, full of little stepout solos from the ensemble. Crucially, Ravel didn't believe that you could meaningfully 'blend' a piano into an orchestral texture, so he doesn't even try: this is all about the pianist stepping to the fore to showcase virtuosic writing against the rainbow of sounds provided by

other players. Mozart and Bach are in the mix here, as is Ravel's fellow countryman Camille Saint-Saëns, and – of course – jazz music. (“What is being written today without the influence of jazz?”, he told a journalist who asked him about his inspiration.) A gently pensive, singing slow movement follows, driven by the pulsing of the piano's left hand as it invites one wind player after another to join the song. And we return to high-octane scampering and witty percussive bangs for the zippy finale. “What is my opinion of the Concerto?” Ravel mused shortly after its premiere. “A rather good one... I think that I found what I was looking for. Or rather, not entirely – let's not exaggerate: you never realised exactly what you are looking for. Fortunately, by the way... If some day I think that I have succeeded, I'll be finished.”

Interval (20 mins)



Portrait of Tchaikovsky by Nikolai Kuznetsov, via Wikimedia Commons

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840 – 1893)

Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64
(1888) (45 mins)

- I. Andante – Allegro con anima**
- II. Andante cantabile, con alcuna
licenza**
- III. Valse. Allegro moderato**
- IV. Finale. Andante maestoso – Allegro
vivace – Meno mosso**

Whilst some composers (like Ravel) seem to write musical works at a kind of emotional arm's length, Tchaikovsky's music is often read as heart-on-sleeve autobiography. The turbulence of his romantic life (a doomed marriage in 1877 as an attempt to curb gossip about his homosexuality) and his endless poor health is seemingly depicted in works such as the Fifth Symphony, which Tchaikovsky once described as “a complete resignation before fate”.

For some years from about 1885, if not earlier, Tchaikovsky had been grappling with the idea of writing an orchestral piece on the subject of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Although this did eventually bear fruit in late 1888, sketches from a year earlier suggest the first thoughts that the composer had about his new symphony were intimately tied up with the Hamlet story, even though the two eventually emerged as separate works.

He composed the majority of the Symphony between May and August 1888, and a partial (private) programme survives for the first movement. In it, he describes the mournful opening clarinet motto as "Total submission before Fate – or, what is the same thing, the inscrutable design of Providence". The faster section falls into two parts, briefly explained: "1. Murmurs, doubts, laments, reproaches against... XXX" and "2. Shall I cast myself into the embrace of faith?".

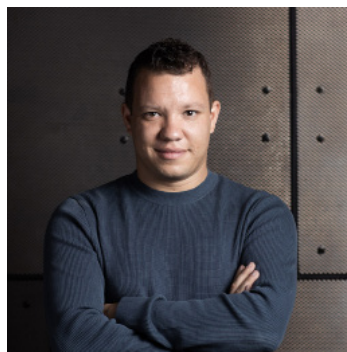
It is certainly possible to map this onto the restless urgency and later, tender lyricism of this opening Allegro, although the composer gives us no more specific details as to how the scenario might end: the grumbling descent into stillness at the close of the movement suggests only continued uncertainty. There is some consolation in the lush Andante which follows, leading us gently to major keys and soaring strings, but these are brutally interrupted by the fate motto from the Symphony's opening, now raucous on trumpets. A lilting waltz comes next, the motto creeping in at the very close; and only in the finale do we finally reach a hard-won sense of closure, fate reworked in

a major key with a new sense of nobility and purpose.

Meanwhile in 1887, Tchaikovsky had been on his first major conducting tour around Europe. In early 1888 he performed in Hamburg, and was approached by the 81-year-old Theodor Avé-Lallement, a vigorous and influential figure in the city's musical life who numbered Brahms among his earlier protégés. Avé-Lallement was delighted to meet Tchaikovsky but told him without embarrassment that he thought the Russian's music was too noisy and used too much percussion. He begged Tchaikovsky to move to Germany, "where classical tradition and conditions of the highest culture would quite certainly free me from my shortcomings," as Tchaikovsky later recorded. He subsequently dedicated the Fifth Symphony to Avé-Lallement, as a mark of respect and friendship despite their aesthetic differences, though it's perhaps not an accident that this piece involves only a single percussionist, playing timpani and nothing else.

Programme notes by Katy Hamilton
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Ryan Bancroft – conductor



Ryan Bancroft © B. Ealovega

Raised in Los Angeles, conductor Ryan Bancroft regularly appears with many of the world's leading orchestras. Since 2021 Bancroft has been Principal Conductor of the BBC National Orchestra of Wales. In 2023 he became Chief Conductor of the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic. He also holds the position of Artist-in-Association with the Tapiola Sinfonietta in Finland.

After opening his tenure in Stockholm with the orchestra's first performance of Sven-David Sandström's *The High Mass* in 2023, Bancroft's first two seasons have included Mahler and Bruckner symphonies alongside world premieres by Chrichan Larson and Zacharias Wolfe, whilst working with soloists including Emmanuel Ax, Leif Ove Andsnes, Maxim Vengerov and Víkingur Ólafsson.

Bancroft returned to Los Angeles to make his debut at the Hollywood Bowl Festival in August 2023, and has since become a regular with the LA Philharmonic. The 2025/26 season sees him to the Walt Disney Concert Hall in their subscription series, to follow on from his acclaimed 2025

debut. Recent debuts include the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, San Francisco and Dallas Symphony Orchestras. He has close relationships with the Toronto Symphony and National Arts Centre, Ottawa.

2025/26 sees Bancroft make major debuts with the London Symphony Orchestra at the Barbican with Clara-Jumi Kang, and with the NHK Symphony Orchestra with Thomas Hampson. He also continues relationships with orchestras such as the Philharmonia, who he appears with each season at the Royal Festival Hall, the NDR Elbphilharmonieorchester, and the Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse. He has led the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, London Philharmonic, Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Orquesta Sinfónica Castilla y León. Since his 2018 success at the Malko Competition for Young Conductors, where he won both First Prize and Audience Prize, Bancroft has conducted a number of leading European orchestras including the BBC Symphony, Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra and Danish National Symphony.

He studied trumpet at the California Institute of the Arts, and received an MMus in orchestral conducting from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. He continued conducting studies in the Netherlands and is a graduate of the prestigious Nationale Master Orkestdirectie run by the Conservatorium van Amsterdam and the Royal Conservatoire of The Hague.

Bruce Liu – piano



Bruce Liu © Sonja Mueller

First Prize winner of the 18th International Chopin Piano Competition 2021 in Warsaw, Bruce Liu has emerged as one of the most compelling pianists of his generation – a musician praised not only for his dazzling technique, but for his curiosity and artistry that combines “nimble versatility” (*New York Times*) and “playing of breathtaking beauty” (*BBC Music Magazine*).

High in demand, he performs with many of the world’s finest ensembles including the London Symphony Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, and Wiener Symphoniker, with Manfred Honeck, Paavo Järvi, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Sir Antonio Pappano, Lahav Shani, and Dalia Stasevska.

In Summer 2025, Liu made his BBC Proms debut with the Philharmonia and Santtu-Matias Rouvali, Chicago Symphony Orchestra with Marin Alsop at Ravinia, and goes on European tours with the NCPA Orchestra and Myung-Whun Chung, and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra with Vasily Petrenko.

Highlights of Liu’s 2025/2026 season include major international tours including Japan with Bayreische Staatsorchester and Vladimir Jurowski, China with the Staatskapelle Dresden and Daniele Gatti, and Germany, Austria, Belgium and Paris with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Kazuki Yamada. As a spotlight artist with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Liu appears multiple times in the season to collaborate with Franz Welser-Möst and Gustavo Gimeno.

As an active recitalist, Liu has performed at major concert halls such as the Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Wigmore Hall, and Philharmonie de Paris. In 2025/26, he gives recital debuts at the Berlin Philharmonie and Lyon Opera House, and returns to Carnegie Hall, Wiener Musikverein and major venues in Italy and Japan. He appears at international festivals including Edinburgh, Klavier-Festival Ruhr, Verbier, La Roque-d’Anthéron, Rheingau, Aspen and Tanglewood Music Festivals.

An exclusive recording artist with Deutsche Grammophon, Liu was awarded Opus Klassik’s ‘Young Talent of the Year’ prize 2024 for his debut studio album *Waves*. His second studio album, featuring Tchaikovsky’s *Seasons*, received rave reviews.

Born in Paris and raised in Montréal, Bruce Liu’s artistry reflects his multicultural heritage, blending European refinement, North American dynamism, and the long tradition of Chinese culture. He studied with Richard Raymond and Dang Thai Son.

Get to know Bruce Liu



You've performed with the Philharmonia many times, and we were last together in the UK for your BBC Proms debut in 2025. What do you enjoy about working with the Philharmonia, and how does it feel to return?

Returning to this orchestra always feels very natural and inspiring for me. From the first time we played together I felt a real sense of curiosity and openness from the musicians. They listen very deeply to each other, and to the soloist, which creates a wonderful environment where the music can breathe. What I most enjoy about working with them is their flexibility and colour; the orchestra can move so easily between power and delicacy, which allows a lot of freedom in shaping the interpretation.

Coming back to work with the Philharmonia feels like returning to friends; there is already an understanding between us which allows us to go deeper into the music together each time we meet.

How would you describe Ravel's Piano Concerto to someone who has never heard it before?

I like to think of the three movements as desserts! The first movement is like a lemon tart: bright and zesty, and a little playful! The second is more like a vanilla cranberry cake, very smooth and delicate, with a long line that slowly melts... and the last movement is perhaps an espresso chocolate cake! Small, intense and full of energy, it arrives very fast and leaves you a little breathless...

How do you think Ravel fits in this programme? What new insights might listeners hear?

It's a really fun contrast because Ravel brings colour and a bit of jazz, while Britten and Tchaikovsky show very different sides of orchestral drama and emotion. Listeners might notice how Ravel's clarity and elegance highlight the richness of the other works, enabling Tchaikovsky's music to feel even more passionate and expansive. It's like hearing three completely different musical languages in one evening!

What is your favourite thing about life as a pianist?

I get to spend my life doing something I love, which is an amazing privilege. I get to travel the world and communicate without words; music is a universal language, meaning that wherever I go, I can communicate something very personal with the audience.

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, Riccardo 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 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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**Music is
not what
we do.
It's what
we are.**

Phil har mo nia

Come back for more

**Nicola Benedetti plays
Elgar**

*Plus Debussy's mesmerising
seascape, La Mer*

Sun 19 Apr, 3pm

**Forged in Sound:
Heavy Metal
Orchestrated**

*Epic orchestral classics meet
heavy metal anthems*

Wed 22 Apr, 7.30pm

**Kavakos conducts
Dvořák, Schumann and
Brahms**

Featuring cellist Kian Soltani

Thu 7 May, 7.30pm

**Santtu conducts a
Strauss extravaganza**

*A recreation of a 1947 concert
originally conducted by Strauss
himself*

Thu 4 Jun, 7.30pm

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