

Philharmonia

2026/27 season

**Phil
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**Santtu and
Sol Gabetta**

Thursday 24 September 2026
Royal Festival Hall

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© Marc Gascoigne

In a nutshell...

Welcome to the first concert of the Philharmonia's 2026/27 season! Tonight's programme brings an energetic evening of storytelling through works by three of the greatest composers from the Romantic period: Brahms, Elgar and Dvořák.

First, we hear Brahms's Academic Festival Overture. An Overture is a short piece for orchestra that's often heard before an opera or ballet, or played on its own. Tonight's overture is full of gaiety and zest – Brahms packs it full of melodies from rowdy drinking songs he encountered during his youth.

Next, we're joined by Argentinian cellist Sol Gabetta – one of our Featured Artists this season. Elgar's Cello Concerto was largely left untouched after its disastrous premiere in 1919. It wasn't until cellist Jacqueline du Pré made her landmark recording of the piece in 1965 that it gained the attention it deserves. Today, it's regarded as one of the greatest masterpieces written for the cello.

Concluding our evening is Dvořák's 9th Symphony. Inspired by melodies from African American traditions, this work tells a wide range of stories. In fact, you might recognise the main melody of the second movement, heard on the Cor Anglais, from TV shows such as *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, *Ted Lasso* and even *Clarkson's Farm*!

Welcome to this evening's concert

Season Opening Concert: Santtu and Sol Gabetta

Thursday 24 September 2026, 7.30pm
Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall

Santtu-Matias Rouvali – conductor
Sol Gabetta – cello

BRAHMS Academic Festival Overture
(10 mins)

ELGAR Cello Concerto
(30 mins)

Interval (20 mins)

DVOŘÁK Symphony No. 9, 'From the New World'
(43 mins)

This performance finishes at approximately 9.45pm

Recommended by
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Post-Concert Jazz

Join us for our post-concert Philharmonia Jazz Band performance

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Philharmonia Social

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

Our staff, players and volunteers will be on Level 2 next to the singing lift before and after the concert.

6.30pm: a short introduction to the orchestra and this evening's performance.

6.45pm: your chance to join the conversation, ask questions and connect with your fellow audience members.



Programme notes



Johannes Brahms © C. Brasch via Wikimedia Commons

Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897)

**Academic Festival Overture,
Op. 80** (1880)
(10 mins)

Despite a brief flirtation with academia at the University of Göttingen, Johannes Brahms didn't graduate and remained a cynic when it came to academic discourse on music. But the composer enjoyed his time at Göttingen and even got to know some rowdy student songs.

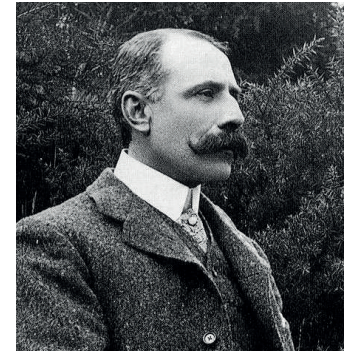
Years later, having turned down an honorary doctorate from Cambridge, Brahms was offered a similar accolade by the University of Breslau. This time he accepted, probably because his friend Bernhard Scholz had pulled the strings. On 11 March 1879, Brahms received his honorary degree and was hailed as Germany's greatest composer of 'serious music'. In return, he delivered his Academic Festival Overture.

Brahms's attitude to academia is perfectly encapsulated in the Overture, which avoids the dense and scholarly (in musical terms) and instead takes four of those student songs Brahms knew and dresses them in light academic garb.

Brahms played the Overture down, referring to it as "a pretty medley." But he knew that his treatment of those song themes – which involved traditional tools of variation and counterpoint as well as the search for common fragments that could unify all four with brevity and clarity – was not only witty, but exceptionally clever too.

Programme notes by Andrew Mellor © 2023

Andrew Mellor is freelance journalist and critic based in Copenhagen. He has written about music, architecture, design and cultural politics for publications around the world and is a critic for Gramophone and the Financial Times. He is the author of The Northern Silence – Journeys in Nordic Music and Culture (Yale University Press, 2022)



Edward Elgar via Wikimedia Commons

Edward Elgar (1857 – 1934)

**Concerto for Cello and Orchestra
in E minor, Op. 85** (1918-19)
(30 mins)

**Adagio – Moderato
Lento – Allegro molto
Adagio
Allegro – Moderato – Allegro,
ma non troppo**

Edward Elgar is often associated with the twilight of the British Empire, his music linked to patriotism and a particularly English form of restrained grandeur. But that is not the Elgar we hear in the composer's concertos and symphonies, which are altogether more fragile and yet more powerful. Far from embodying the British establishment, this music reflects Elgar's position outside it. For much of his life, Elgar was lonely, worried and depressed.

Elgar's Cello Concerto was disliked when it was first performed at the Queen's Hall in London on 27 October 1919. The performance was under-rehearsed, the orchestra seeming "as if it seemed not to have any idea of what the composer wanted", in the words of the critic Ernest Newman.

The poor reception can't be blamed entirely on the performance. Elgar's symphonies were turbulent and emotionally wrung-out, but at least they expressed optimism. His Violin Concerto was lined with melancholy, but was deeply rhapsodic. In Elgar's Cello Concerto, the audience heard a coy, strained conversation between cello and orchestra. Any virtuosity in the piece speaks more of reactive anger and bitterness than of romance and heroism.

The impact of the First World War may lie behind that shift in mood. But any cello concerto is also bound by science: the instrument's range and volume mean it's inaudible against a full-blown orchestra, giving Elgar no choice but to write sparse textures. Even so, the concerto encompasses a great deal in its emotional range. Beautiful orchestral colours are achieved by simple means.

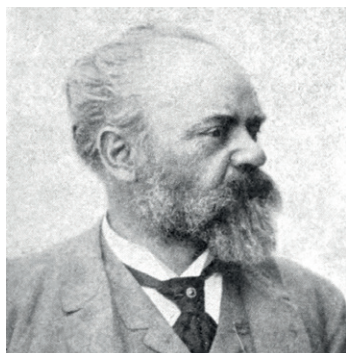
The concerto opens with a brave, angry statement from the soloist, an idea referenced again at the end of the movement and again the end of the concerto. Elgar instructs it to be played 'nobly', but it often sounds like an outburst. Deep-toned violas then introduce the rocking, world-weary second melody.

The soloist recounts the up-down fluttering motif that opens the second movement five times; each time Elgar asks for different expression. That sort of quick wit continues until a beautifully distilled Adagio, a soliloquy with a broad, elegiac theme.

We glimpse a more optimistic Elgar in the main theme of the last movement. But the music is troubled as well as joyous, the cello frequently left in isolation by an orchestra that offers it redemption but snarls with anger too. If there is any optimism, it's quashed: just after the reprise of the concerto's opening statement, Elgar slams the door of his concerto shut.

Programme notes by Andrew Mellor © 2026

Interval (20 mins)



Antonín Dvořák © J.E. Vojan via Wikimedia Commons

Antonín Dvořák (1841 – 1904)

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, 'From the New World', Op. 95, B. 178 (1893)
(43 mins)

Adagio – Allegro molto
Largo
Molto vivace
Allegro con fuoco

Few topics spark a more spirited discussion in the United States than trying to define what it means to be American. The great Bohemian composer Antonín Dvořák found that out the hard way in May 1893, when he told a New York reporter that he believed a truly American classical style should be built on African American folk music. Dvořák had arrived in the United States only a few months earlier to take over as director of a conservatory in New York. Upon encountering the multicultural musical soundscape of New York, he became

convinced that the repertoire of spirituals, sorrow songs, Creole songs, and other styles of the African diaspora would prove to be the greatest source of inspiration for the next generation of American composers. Over the next several months, musicians from all over the country wrote letters to their local newspapers expressing their disagreement.

Despite the resistance Dvořák faced, the Ninth Symphony is one of the most frequently performed orchestral pieces ever written. Its direct emotional expression makes it immediately accessible, while its sonic breadth aligns with the composer's kaleidoscope of influences.

A theme sounded by the flute in the first movement echoes the spiritual *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, a song Dvořák learned from the African American baritone vocalist Harry Burleigh, a conservatory student and his one-time assistant. It's possible that the famous cor anglais melody of the Largo movement, later set to the song *Goin' Home*, evokes the timbre of Burleigh's voice. Dvořák was also deeply inspired by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha*, a subject he wanted to transform into an opera. The musicologist Michael Beckerman has shown that the Largo movement corresponds to 'Hiawatha's wooing', while the scherzo depicts 'Hiawatha's wedding feast', including the whirling dance of Pau-Puk Keewis. Beckerman thinks that we might hear the finale as the great battle between Pau-Puk Keewis and Hiawatha.

In an age of ubiquitous cinematic media, it is easy to 'hear' vivid stories in Dvořák's symphony – either those from Longfellow's poem or one of our own creation. The work's original audiences had a far more difficult time. No one could decide if the music sounded truly American, or if it belonged to some other place altogether. For Dvořák, however, the piece was the beginning of something new, not the final word. It opened the door to fresh channels of creative expression.

Dvořák's student, the African American composer Will Marion Cook, once explained that although the symphony was moving, it could not adequately capture the inner emotion of Black music. "Soon, perhaps," Cook wrote, "will some native composer, hopefully of the future, take the pen, inspired by long repressed imagination, and paint glowing tone pictures of a radiant dawn – a dawn without passing – a day without a night." And so the 'New World' Symphony, like America itself, lives in a constant state of becoming. Both point continually toward new visions, toward a dawn without passing, and a day without a night.

Programme notes by Douglas W. Shadle

Douglas W. Shadle is an Associate Professor of Musicology at Vanderbilt University. An award-winning scholar and writer, he has published two books on American orchestras and orchestral music with Oxford University Press and is currently co-authoring a biography of composer Florence B. Price for Oxford's Master Musicians Series.



About the Philharmonia

Founded in 1945, the Philharmonia Orchestra is one of the world's great orchestras.

Finnish 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 figures who have shaped the renowned Philharmonia sound over eight decades.

The Orchestra has premiered works by Richard Strauss, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, Kaija Saariaho, Errollyn Wallen, Laufey and many others, and performs with many of the world's most admired soloists. The Philharmonia thrives on creative collaborations: in the 2026/27 season, pianist Nobuyuki Tsujii and cellist Sol Gabetta are Featured Artists. The Philharmonia's Emerging Artists Programme nurtures and develops the next generation of instrumentalists and composers, with a focus on increasing diversity within the classical music industry.

The Philharmonia is resident at the Southbank Centre in the heart of London, and also holds residencies in Basingstoke, Bedford, Canterbury and Leicester, at Garsington Opera and at the Three Choirs Festival. In each of these residencies, the Orchestra is deeply embedded in the community. Projects with primary and secondary schools, children in foster care,

people living with dementia and their carers, young people learning instruments, and adults who face barriers to experiencing the arts, all testify to the many ways music enriches our lives.

The Philharmonia tours extensively throughout Europe and has performed in China, Colombia, Japan and the United States. In October 2025 the Orchestra celebrated its 80th birthday with a major US tour culminating in two performances at Carnegie Hall. In 2024, the Philharmonia became the first major international symphony orchestra to perform in Mauritius.

The Philharmonia is known for embracing innovative technology. The Orchestra's recordings include benchmark LPs, more than 150 film and videogame soundtracks, and streamed performances. The Philharmonia Records label was established in 2023 and has released live recordings of major works by Strauss, Mahler, Stravinsky and Shostakovich, with Santtu at the helm. Its recording of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 is travelling through interstellar space on board the Voyager spacecraft, and its immersive installations and virtual reality (VR) experiences have introduced many thousands of people to orchestral music.

The Philharmonia is a registered charity. It is proud to be supported by Arts Council England and grateful to the many generous individuals, businesses, trusts and foundations who make up its family of supporters.

Santtu-Matias Rouvali – Principal Conductor



Santtu-Matias Rouvali © Marco Borggreve

The 2026/27 season continues Santtu Matias Rouvali's tenures as Principal Conductor of the Philharmonia Orchestra and Honorary Conductor of the Tampere Philharmonic Orchestra, close to his home in Finland.

Rouvali maintains a strong presence in North America, returning to major US orchestras including The Cleveland Orchestra and New York Philharmonic, and making his long-awaited San Francisco Symphony debut, further strengthening long standing relationships built over recent seasons. In addition to his work in the United States, he appears widely across Europe, with engagements including the Royal Concertgebouw Orkest, Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, Orchestra Filarmonica della Scala, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, and Tonhalle Orchester Zürich, alongside continued collaborations with other leading orchestras across the continent.

Rouvali collaborates with a wide range of internationally renowned soloists, including Víkingur Ólafsson, Sol Gabetta, Hilary Hahn, Bruce Liu, Lisa Batiashvili, Seong Jin Cho, Jean Yves Thibaudet, Nemanja Radulović, Augustin Hadelich, Gil Shaham, Alena Baeva and Ava Bahari.

Continuing their strong touring tradition, Rouvali and the Philharmonia Orchestra have toured the United States in October 2025 and Korea in December 2025. In May 2027, they embark on an extensive European tour, with concerts in cities including Cologne, Dortmund and Munich.

Philharmonia Records' first release – a double CD album *Santtu conducts Strauss* – was issued in March 2023, followed by recordings of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* and Prokofiev's *Symphony No.5*. Mahler's *Symphony No.2*, the second release on the label, appeared in September 2023, followed by Santtu conducts Stravinsky in March 2024, featuring *The Firebird Suite* and *Petrushka*. Another significant release – Beethoven's *Triple Concerto* with Benjamin Grosvenor, Nicola Benedetti and Sheku Kanneh Mason – was released on Decca in May 2024.

Rouvali also completes his acclaimed Sibelius Cycle recording with Göteborg Symphoniker on Alpha Classics with *Kullervo* this season following the release of the Violin Concerto with Ava Bahari last season.

Sol Gabetta – cello



Sol Gabetta © Audoin Desforges

Following her reunion last year with the New York Philharmonic and Jakub Hrůša for a guest appearance at the Bravo! Vail Festival in Colorado, as well as the release of her historically inspired recording project paying tribute to the pioneering cellist Lise Cristiani, Sol Gabetta's 2026/27 season is defined by two major London residencies. As Featured Artist with the Philharmonia Orchestra, she appears in prominent concerts at the Royal Festival Hall and joins the orchestra's musicians for a chamber programme centred on works by Haydn. In parallel, as Focus Artist at Wigmore Hall, Gabetta brings several of her hallmark chamber music projects to the British capital.

Asia forms another significant focus of the season, with Gabetta appearing alongside her friend and long-standing stage partner Patricia Kopatchinskaja in Taipei, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong. Her orchestral engagements take her to the Yomiuri Nippon Symphony Orchestra, the Concertgebouw Orchestra,

the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, Staatskapelle Berlin, the Bamberg Symphony and the Orchestre national du Capitole de Toulouse, among others.

A sought-after guest at leading festivals, Sol Gabetta was Artiste étoile at Lucerne Festival where she appeared with Wiener Philharmoniker and Franz Welser-Möst, Mahler Chamber Orchestra and Francois-Xavier Roth and the London Philharmonic Orchestra directed by Marin Alsop. She continues drawing inspiration from a wide circle of collaborators and musical encounters at the Solsberg Festival, which flourishes under her committed artistic direction.

In recognition of her exceptional artistic achievements, vision, and creativity, which have made a significant contribution to Europe's cultural life, Sol Gabetta was honored with the European Culture Prize in 2022. She also received the Herbert von Karajan Prize at the Salzburg Easter Festival in 2018, and in 2019 she was awarded the first OPUS Klassik Award as Instrumentalist of the Year for her interpretation of Schumann's Cello Concerto.

Sol Gabetta performs on several Italian master instruments from the early 18th century, including a cello by Matteo Goffriller from 1730, Venice, provided to her by Atelier Cels Paris. She has been teaching at the Basel Music Academy since 2005.

Who's who

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Stuart Poyner
David Pratt
Michael and Nina Richards
Professor John and Mrs Alison Sheperd
David and Ruth Simkins
John and Helen Skinner
Joe and Lucy Smouha
Mr and Mrs Colin Stevens

*Thank you to all our supporters
who wish to remain anonymous*

Philharmonia



2026/27 season highlights

**Bruckner 4 with
Esa-Pekka Salonen**

Sun 4 Oct, 3pm

And Leif Ove Andsnes
plays Beethoven

**Tchaikovsky Piano
Concerto No. 1 with
Seong-Jin Cho**

Thu 22 Oct, 7.30pm

Paired with Borodin
and Shostakovich

**Dvořák Violin Concerto
with James Ehnes**

Thu 29 Oct, 7.30pm

A programme full of
irresistible energy

**Mendelssohn Violin
Concerto with Nicola
Benedetti**

Sun 1 Nov, 3pm

Plus Schumann's 'Rhenish'
Symphony

**Shostakovich Piano
Concerto No. 2
with Nobu**

Thu 5 Nov, 7.30pm

See our Featured Artist live

**Manfred Honeck
and Emanuel Ax**

Thu 12 Nov, 7.30pm

Experience one of Mozart's
greatest piano concertos

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