



Gérard Grisey: *Quatre Chants*

Friday 28 November 2025, 7:30pm | Queen Elizabeth Hall

Welcome to the concert this evening. Gerard Grisey's *Quatre Chants* is a modern masterpiece which is rarely performed. The London Sinfonietta commissioned the work and then gave its world premiere shortly after the composer's untimely death. We are excited to be performing it again now, alongside other works which will make up what we hope is a deeply engaging concert experience for you. We are pleased to be working again with Jack Sheen and Nina Guo. They bring brilliance and verve with them, driven by a passion for new music and sound worlds.

The London Sinfonietta has a long tradition of commissioning which dates back to its formation in 1968. Nearly 500 commissions later, and we are still driven by a passion to perform new music, helping to create a new repertoire that takes the art form forward. It's very rewarding to explore the masterpieces of past centuries, yet all those works were new once and some have taken their own time to find their place in the standard repertoire. So now, by enabling composers to write new works and then have them heard in world-class performances, we believe we are playing a vital role in the music ecology. There are risks in this, and not every work finds its place. Yet, repeatedly placing faith in composers and their imaginations is – for us – one of the most important things we can do as an organisation.

We have recently launched our Sound Ignited campaign which seeks to raise money to underwrite the commission and performance costs of 8 works. We would be so grateful if you decided to join in by donating and share the journey with us and the composers towards new works being performed which may become part of a repertoire for the future.

Andrew Burke, Chief Executive & Artistic Director, London Sinfonietta

Tonight's Players

Jack Sheen *conductor*

Nina Guo *soprano*

Jonathan Morton* *violin*

London Sinfonietta

Michael Cox* *flute/piccolo/alto*

Gareth Hulse* *oboe*

Mark van de Wiel* *clarinet/bass*

Laurent Ben Slimane *bass clarinet/contrabass*

Simon Haram* *soprano/alto/tenor saxophone*

Amy Green *tenor/baritone saxophone*

Ryan Linham *trumpet/piccolo*

Byron Fulcher* *euphonium*

Callum Reid *tuba*

Sasha Koushk-Jalali *bass tuba*

David Hockings* *percussion 1*

Jess Wood *percussion 2*

Heledd Gwynant *percussion 3*

Helen Tunstall* *harp*

Clíodna Shanahan *piano*

Sally Pendlebury *cello*

Enno Senft* *double bass*

* London Sinfonietta Principal Players

Programme

6.15-6:45pm: Pre-Concert Talk - Back to Basics... An Introduction to Gérard Grisey with Julian Anderson and Jack Sheen

7.30pm: Evening Concert

Cassandra Miller *for mira* (5')

Rebecca Saunders *Stirrings Still II* (12')

John White *Drinking and Hooting Machine* (5')

Gérard Grisey *Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil* (40')

*This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 10 minutes.
There is no interval.*

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Grisey described his *Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil* (Four songs for crossing the threshold) as a ‘meditation on death’: the death of the angel, of civilisation, of the voice and – finally – of humanity, pooling texts from ancient Christian, Egyptian, Greek, and Mesopotamian civilisations which explore these themes. The work itself is haunted by the spectre of death in a more literal sense: it was Grisey’s final work before he unexpectedly passed away at the age of 52. He didn’t live to see its premiere by tonight’s ensemble, the London Sinfonietta, in 1999. It’s as if Grisey could feel death coming. The work is widely seen as Grisey’s auto-memorial.

Tonight’s programme sees death not as an end but as an act of transformation, as a crossing of the threshold from one state to another. Each work balances extinction with metamorphosis, sitting in ambiguous terrain between conceptual and musical states: between sound and silence, tone and noise, remembrance and rebirth, humour and melancholy.

Cassandra Miller, *for mira*

Cassandra Miller’s *for mira* is built from a transcription of Kurt Cobain singing ‘Where Did You Sleep Last Night’ from their seminal MTV Unplugged album. In some ways it is a sonic tribute, cycling around a melodic line sung by a musical icon. Yet it is not an elegy in the traditional sense. Through a set of increasingly tangled repetitions, Miller focuses in on the grit and the grain of the source material, transforming the original’s trudging melancholy into something explosive, visceral, and glowing with new life. Transcription here is an act of transfiguration. The music is full of lament, but it flies past you with hyperactive, joyful excitement.

Rebecca Saunders, *Stirrings Still II*

The physical threshold of the stage is dissolved in Rebecca Saunders’ *stirrings still ii*, dispersing the musicians around the hall, ‘seeking dialogue with the surrounding architecture and acoustic’. Here, we enter limbo. The piece is a collage of ruined, half-spoken, fragile sounds, ‘encircling and never-ending’ all around us, as if constructing a world from the echoes and resonances of sounds that have already come to pass.

John White, *Drinking and Hooting Machine*

Death need not be so po-faced: we see it reflected everywhere, all the time, in the most banal, everyday activities. John White’s *Drinking and Hooting Machine* brilliantly captures this truth with a chorus of blown bottles, the performers attempting to breathe life into these vessels by emptying their own lungs over and over again. They celebrate this inane activity by drinking as they go, every gulp sinking the communal sound in a ritualistic lament until it completely fades away and the fun ends.

Gérard Grisey, *Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil*

We conclude by accompanying Grisey across his own threshold, not into death, but onto strikingly new musical ground. Grisey’s final work opens a window onto a landscape which suggests where his music may have travelled next. Premiered in 1999 on the cusp of the new millennium, the music of *Quatre chants* seems to turn its

back on much of the 20th century’s modernist tendencies to face simpler, more immediate gestures. Like a death mask, it has an uncanniness to it: it’s at once recognisable, but somehow hauntingly offset. Tonal scales float to the ground, re-tuned and harmonically twisted out of shape. A rising arpeggio repeats, its resonances - its musical shadow - subtly shifting colour behind texts found on Egyptian sarcophaguses. The apocalypse is heralded by a swarm of percussion. We end with a limping, lopsided lullaby. Underneath the voice’s light, suspended lines, the dark, heavy, murky ensemble sits waiting, like an instrumental memento mori that never leaves the stage.

Jack Sheen, 2025

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Tōru Takemitsu: Between Sound and Silence

Saturday 28 February 2026, 7:00pm, Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall

Japanese composer Tōru Takemitsu is one of the most important voices of the postwar era. Drawing inspiration from nature, his music feels both intimate and expansive, rooted in stillness and mystery.

Pulse and Presence

Friday 13 March 2026, 7:30pm, Queen Elizabeth Hall

From Alex Paxton’s frenetic, multilayered sound world, to Tansy Davies’ ritualistic, meditative sonorities, and John Adams’ witty, energetic *Chamber Symphony*, this programme showcases the London Sinfonietta at its virtuosic best.