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2025–26  
SEASON

# Mendelssohn, Elgar and Wagner

Tuesday 25 November 2025, 7.30pm • Cadogan Hall

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**Wagner** The Flying Dutchman: Overture 11 mins

**Elgar** Sea Pictures 23 mins

Interval (20 minutes)

**Mendelssohn** Symphony No.3, 'Scottish' 43 mins

**Antony Hermus** Conductor

**Jess Dandy** Contralto

**Royal Philharmonic Orchestra**



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# Tonight's Music

Wagner, Elgar and Mendelssohn



## The Flying Dutchman, WWV 63: Overture (1841)

Richard Wagner (1813–1883)

Richard Wagner was the inspired creator of vast operatic monoliths whose revolutionary style took the world by storm. He was the single most influential musical figure of the late 19th century; no composer could ignore his presence. Indeed, the whole course of music was subsequently determined by those who either devotedly peppered their work with Wagnerisms, or those whose style was consciously developed out of a desire to avoid any possible association with 'The Master'. No other composer excites such deeply divided critical opinions, and his most passionate supporters cling to their personal viewpoints and philosophies with a tenacity to equal Wagner's own unquenchable self-belief.

Wagner's big break came in 1842 when he was offered the directorship of Dresden's magnificent opera house, where his latest pair of operas – *Rienzi* and *The Flying Dutchman* – were premiered within 10 weeks of each other between 1842 and 1843. The storm-tossed Overture that opens tonight's concert raises the curtain on one of Wagner's most searingly dramatic creations. Condemned by the Devil to sail the world until Judgement Day, a Dutch sea captain has one chance every seven years to escape the curse by winning the love of a good woman. He arrives at a Norwegian fishing port in 1650, where Daland, excited by his wealth, gives him shelter and is not displeased when he makes eyes at his daughter, Senta. The Dutchman overhears Senta rejecting her boyfriend, Erik, and, fearing her infidelity, he sails away. Senta jumps off a cliff after him, and the two are seen ascending into heaven, redeemed at last.

## Sea Pictures, Op.37 (1897–9)

Edward Elgar (1857–1934)

Tonight's performance of Elgar's *Sea Pictures* is kindly supported by **The Elgar Society**

**Sea Slumber-Song | In Haven (Capri) | Sabbath Morning at Sea | Where Corals Lie | The Swimmer**

When the *Sea Pictures* were first performed at the Norwich Festival in 1899, Edward Elgar was riding the crest of a wave of new-found fame. That same year, the '*Enigma*' *Variations* had been premiered to great acclaim, so the audience welcomed this song cycle with excitement and enthusiasm. Elgar wrote to a friend that the concert went 'marvellously well and we were recalled four times – I think after that I got disgusted and lost count.' The Festival organisers had asked him to write a 'scena' – a short musical story – for the renowned alto Clara Butt, whose low notes were so resonant that conductor Sir Thomas Beecham quipped, 'on a clear day you could have heard her across the channel.'

Elgar's decision to draw five songs together into a cycle with orchestra was unusual given there were few precedents of that genre, although Berlioz's *Les nuits d'été* was a possible inspiration. Elgar had already written one of the songs two years earlier based on his wife Alice's poem *Lute Song*, which became *In Haven*. He orchestrated this and then selected four other poems sharing a connection to the sea. The words are very much of their day and some may say they have not aged well, but Elgar's music lifts them into a new sphere. Each 'picture' characterises the poem's central mood succinctly and with elegant word-painting.

**Sea Slumber-Song:** The motherly sound of the alto voice is perfectly suited to this lullaby, as are the low strings who capture the deep swell and 'shadowy might' of the sea. A gently struck gong adds an extra burr. Several motifs are introduced at the beginning (the simple pulsing vocal line, wave-like couplets in the

strings) that will feature again later in the cycle as a binding device. The strings imitate the breaking of waves while fluttering harps and flutes conjure up a delightful 'elfin land'.

Sea-birds are asleep,  
The world forgets to weep,  
Sea murmurs her soft slumber-song  
On the shadowy sand  
Of this elfin land;  
"I, the Mother mild,  
Hush thee, O my child,  
Forget the voices wild!

Isles in elfin light  
Dream, the rocks and caves,  
Lulled by whispering waves,  
Veil their marbles bright,

Foam glimmers faintly white  
Upon the shelly sand  
Of this elfin land;

Sea-sound, like violins,  
To slumber woos and wins,  
I murmur my soft slumber-song,  
Leave woes, and wails, and sins,  
Ocean's shadowy might  
Breathes good-night,  
Good-night!"

*Poem by Roden Noel (1834–1894)*

**In Haven (Capri):** Alice Elgar wrote this while on holiday in Capri, shortly before meeting her husband-to-be. Elgar picks up on that carefree holiday spirit with dancing violins and pizzicato cellos. Where the first song emphasised the sea's depths, this is all about its glittering surface. Elgar's lightness of touch matches the fleeting gestures of love, but allows the words 'stand' and 'stay' to ring out, full of hope.

Closely let me hold thy hand,  
Storms are sweeping sea and land;  
Love alone will stand.

Closely cling, for waves beat fast,  
Foam-flakes cloud the hurrying blast;  
Love alone will last.

Kiss my lips, and softly say:  
"Joy, sea-swept, may fade to-day;  
Love alone will stay."

*Poem by Caroline Alice Elgar (1848–1920)*

**Sabbath Morning at Sea:** By contrast, this central song has the stoutness of a Victorian anthem, with marching rhythms and pious resolve. It opens in darkness, echoing the *Sea Slumber-Song's* motif for the heavy swell beneath. The lower brass return for a noble chorale and the song builds to a grand climax as the soloist faces down her fears and invokes God's 'burning' presence.

The ship went on with solemn face;  
To meet the darkness on the deep,  
The solemn ship went onward.  
I bowed down weary in the place;  
For parting tears and present sleep  
Had weighed mine eyelids downward.

The new sight, the new wondrous sight!  
The waters around me, turbulent,  
The skies, impassive o'er me,  
Calm in a moonless, sunless light,  
As glorified by even the intent  
Of holding the day glory!

Love me, sweet friends, this sabbath day.  
The sea sings round me while ye roll  
Afar the hymn, unaltered,  
And kneel, where once I knelt to pray,  
And bless me deeper in your soul  
Because your voice has faltered.

And though this sabbath comes to me  
Without the stoled minister,  
And chanting congregation,  
God's Spirit shall give comfort. He  
Who brooded soft on waters drear,  
Creator on creation.

He shall assist me to look higher,  
Where keep the saints, with harp and song,  
An endless sabbath morning,  
And on that sea commixed with fire,  
Oft drop their eyelids raised too long  
To the full Godhead's burning.

*Poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861)*

**Where Corals Lie:** As the music descends over the first two bars, so we are plunged into an entrancing underwater world. Nothing can entice the protagonist away, not even the promise of a kiss. Delicate woodwind solos are used to counter the vocal melody against a gentle off-beat string accompaniment, and the harp is used for extra magic.

The deeps have music soft and low  
When winds awake the airy sly,  
It lures me, lures me on to go  
And see the land where corals lie.

By mount and mead, by lawn and rill,  
When night is deep, and moon is high,  
That music seeks and finds me still,  
And tells me where the corals lie.

Yes, press my eyelids close, 'tis well;  
But far the rapid fancies fly  
The rolling worlds of wave and shell,  
And all the lands where corals lie.

Thy lips are like a sunset glow,  
Thy smile is like a morning sky,  
Yet leave me, leave me, let me go  
And see the land where corals lie.

*Poem by Richard Garnett (1835–1906)*

**The Swimmer:** Elgar finishes the cycle on a note of high drama, with the stormy sea reflecting the inner turmoil of the lovesick protagonist who wants to find oblivion in the waves. The vivid poetry invites a theatrical response, and Elgar doesn't hold back, unleashing the whole orchestra and pushing the soloist to her highest note.

With short, sharp, violent lights made vivid,  
To southward far as the sight can roam,  
Only the swirl of the surges livid,  
The seas that climb and the surfs that comb.  
Only the crag and the cliff to nor'ward,  
The rocks receding, and reefs flung forward,  
Waifs wreck'd seaward and wasted shoreward,  
On shallows sheeted with flaming foam.

A grim, grey coast and a seaboard ghastly,  
And shores trod seldom by feet of men –  
Where the batter'd hull and the broken mast lie,  
They have lain embedded these long years ten.  
Love! when we wandered here together,  
Hand in hand through the sparkling weather,  
From the heights and hollows of fern and heather,  
God surely loved us a little then.

The skies were fairer and shores were firmer –  
The blue sea over the bright sand roll'd;  
Babble and prattle, and ripple and murmur,  
Sheen of silver and glamour of gold.

\* \* \* \* \*

So, girt with tempest and wing'd with thunder,  
And clad with lightning and shod with sleet,  
The strong winds treading the swift waves under  
The flying rollers with frothy feet.  
One gleam like a bloodshot sword-blade swims on  
The sky line, staining the green gulf crimson,  
A death-stroke fiercely dealt by a dim sun,  
That strikes through his stormy winding sheet.

O, brave white horses! you gather and gallop,  
The storm sprite loosens the gusty reins;  
Now the stoutest ship were the frailest shallop  
In your hollow backs, or your high arched manes.  
I would ride as never a man has ridden  
In your sleepy, swirling surges hidden;  
To gulfs foreshadow'd through strifes forbidden,  
Where no light wearies and no love wanes.

*From a poem by Adam Lindsay Gordon (1833–1870)*

## Interval

# Symphony No.3 in A minor, Op.56, 'Scottish' (1829–42)

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)

**Andante con moto – Allegro un poco agitato | Vivace non troppo | Adagio |  
Allegro vivacissimo – Allegro maestoso assai**

Felix Mendelssohn was the most precociously gifted composer the world has ever known – not even Mozart could lay claim to having produced burning masterpieces while still in his mid-teens. By this time, Mendelssohn had already reached compositional maturity alongside his other achievements as a double-prodigy on the violin and piano, an exceptional athlete (a particularly strong swimmer), a highly gifted poet, multi-linguist and watercolorist, and an inspired philosopher more than capable of holding his own with learned Berlin University professors. He excelled at virtually anything that could hold his attention for long enough, although it was music which above all activated his creative imagination. If Mendelssohn was in possession of a talent that was almost inexhaustible in terms of its promise and potential, he lacked the

inner determination to develop his powers to their fullest extent. He was a sensitive man who was ultimately destroyed by his constant, caring attempts to balance his extraordinary gifts with the need for a small number of intimate relationships, away from the exhausting demands of being an idolised musical celebrity. As he once put it: ‘The thoughts which are expressed to me by music that I love are not too indefinite to be put into words, but on the contrary, too definite.’

It was during the summer of 1829 that Mendelssohn first set out for the British mainland. He journeyed to Scotland in the July and, following a visit to the Hebrides, noted down a theme that the following year would blossom into the remarkable concert overture of the same name. This same trip also sowed the seeds of inspiration for another of Mendelssohn’s most popular orchestral works. It was in the ruined chapel of Mary Stuart at Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh that he composed the first 16 bars of what would eventually become the slow introduction to his ‘Scottish’ Symphony. With its broken altarpiece and shattered roof, through which the eerie moonlight poured, it is not difficult to imagine the extent to which this Casper David Friedrich-like scene would have haunted the impressionable young composer. In the event, it would be another 13 years before he would develop his inspirational sketches into a full-scale symphony.

It was not until 1842 that Mendelssohn began serious work on the ‘Scottish’ Symphony (No.3), some 10 years after the ‘Italian’ (No.4) was completed – the numbering of the two works reflects the order in which they were published rather than composed. Cast in four near-continuous movements, the ‘Scottish’ is beautifully orchestrated and finely balanced in its proportions. Although opinions differ as to the effectiveness of the dreamy ‘song-without-words’ slow movement and the final triumphant coda, which, for some, ends the work in a blaze of slightly cosy affirmation, Mendelssohn’s innumerable deft touches and unfailingly delightful melodic invention provide a constant source of pleasure. There is much atmospheric writing throughout, with subtle allusions to the picturesque that remain tantalisingly understated. However, the work’s origins are put beyond any doubt by the indelible, and characteristically Scottish, dotted rhythms of the light-as-air second movement.


Programme notes © Julian Haylock (Wagner and Mendelssohn) and Jonathan James (Elgar), edited by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

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