



BEDFORDSHIRE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Conductor: Bjorn Bantock

Leader: Caroline Waters

Soloists: Mike Gemmill (violin), Julian Metzger (cello) and Stephen Meakins (piano)

Saturday 23 May 2026
Bedford Corn Exchange, 7:30pm

Programme notes

Richard Wagner (1813–1883)

Prelude to Act III, *Lohengrin*

At the centre of *Lohengrin* lies a persistent tension between the earthly and the spiritual realms. Lohengrin, like the Holy Grail he represents, appears in the human world but does not fully belong to it. This medieval tale of chivalry and betrayal contrasts spiritual purity and striving against worldly evil and machinations. The brilliantly jubilant Prelude to Act III represents the celebratory atmosphere surrounding Lohengrin and Elsa's wedding, and is extroverted and full of energy. The music opens fortissimo, driven by bold brass fanfares, vigorous rhythmic motion and persistent string tremolos, and the presence of a tambourine underscores its festive character. Midway through, the brass and percussion briefly withdraw, allowing the oboe to introduce a gentler melody reminiscent of the well-known bridal march. This moment offers a nod to the ceremony itself before the exuberant opening material returns to close the piece with renewed vitality.

Programme notes: Uwe Radok

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Triple Concerto for violin, cello and piano in C, Op. 56

It was primarily in the last thirty years of the eighteenth century that the *symphonie concertante* won popularity, particularly in Paris. In German-speaking territory the form won less immediate favour, although concertos for two or more solo instruments continued to have a place. Beethoven's single contribution in 1804 was the *Concerto in C major for violin, cello, and piano, Opus 56*, the 'Triple Concerto'.

Beethoven composed his Triple Concerto for his pupil and patron, the Archduke Rudolph of

Austria, who was a pianist and amateur composer. The concerto was intended for performance by the Archduke along with his court violinist and cellist, and it is for this reason that the work makes relatively modest demands on the pianist but presents greater technical challenges to the violin and cello soloists. Beethoven sketched the first movement early in 1803, about the same time he was composing the *Eroica Symphony*, and continued working on it the following year, whilst also planning and writing two of his most famous piano sonatas, the *Waldstein* and the *Appassionata*, and the first of the *Razumovsky* quartets. Thus, the Triple Concerto falls squarely into the period of Beethoven's most productive phase.

The Triple Concerto has long been the stepchild of Beethoven's concerto compositions, the work least often played and most severely criticised. To be sure, the presence of three soloists sometimes leads to more repetition than we expect from Beethoven, but at the same time, the sheer breadth of the work and the intrinsic beauty of many of the ideas mark it as a fascinating step in Beethoven's progression. It starts with an ascending figure played by cellos and double basses, an important rhythmic motif in both the principal and secondary subject material. The orchestral exposition leads to a hushed repetition from the first violins of the key note of C, above which the solo cello enters, establishing its primacy in the solo ensemble. It is joined by the solo violin, the two instruments preparing for the entry of the piano. The following exposition is of some length.

The A flat major slow movement, introduced by muted strings, allows the solo cello the statement of the principal theme. The piano provides a gentle accompaniment as violin and cello join in the melodic material, moving towards a modulation that enables the direct introduction of the final *Rondo alla Polacca*, where the solo cello again introduces the principal theme. There is a change from triple to a rapid duple time for the closing *Allegro*, which provides the equivalent of a cadenza, before the coda proper. The public premiere took place in Leipzig in April 1808.

Programme notes: Steven Ledbetter and others.

Soloists:

Mike Gemmill – violin

Mike started playing the violin around the age of five. At the age of nine he was awarded a specialist music scholarship to attend Wells Cathedral School, where he had the opportunity to immerse himself in chamber music and orchestral playing. Shortly before leaving school, he won the Waterstones Young Musician of the Year competition. Mike continued his musical education at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, where he studied the violin with Professor Mark Knight. Whilst studying there, Mike developed a broader range of interests in the field of music, which led to him working in the Electronic Music department at the Guildhall before going on to gain a master's degree in Music Technology at the University of York. Mike has developed an exciting and varied career teaching the violin and Music Technology, as well as freelancing as a violinist in orchestras, bands and a wide variety of chamber music groups. In his teaching he enjoys making use of and promoting the use of technology. He is the founder and developer of scalesace.com, an interactive website that helps students learn their scales, and stringsace.com, which offers a growing variety of online

resources for students. Mike also enjoys composing and arranging music and has had several of his early grade compositions published in the London College of Music's practical violin exam syllabus.

Julian Metzger – cello

German-born cellist Julian Metzger has been a force of musical energy since he first wrapped his hands around a cello at the age of four. Raised in a family where music was a calling – his father a dedicated music teacher and choral conductor, his uncle a distinguished cellist – Julian's early life was steeped in sound, discipline and inspiration. That foundation ignited a passion that would carry him far beyond his native Bad Berleburg, beginning a lifelong conversation with the instrument that has shaped his artistic identity. Arriving in England while still in his teens, the historic cloisters of Wells Cathedral School became the backdrop to a formative musical awakening under the guidance of Dr Ioan Davies, legendary former cellist of the Fitzwilliam String Quartet. His artistic journey continued at London's Guildhall School of Music and Drama with Stefan Popov, before he pursued further artistic refinement in private mentorship with the celebrated Raphael Wallfisch. As a concerto soloist, Julian brings intensity, elegance and drama to the stage. His performances under conductors Alexander Walker, Robert Secret, Adrian Brown, Michael Rose, Anthony Weeden and Jacques Cohen have embraced both the great pillars of the cello repertoire and lesser-known treasures by Tartini, Monn, Bridge, Kabalevsky, Miaskovsky and Shostakovich. With upcoming performances of Beethoven's radiant Triple Concerto and Brahms's noble Double Concerto, Julian continues to expand his artistic landscape with the same blend of authority and imagination.

Equally at home within the orchestral fold, Julian appears regularly as principal and sub-principal cellist with the English Symphony Orchestra, London Gala Orchestra, Orchestra of Stowe Opera, Westminster Chamber Orchestra and Orchestra Pro Anima, with additional engagements including the Northern Ballet, Brighton Philharmonic, Oxford Philharmonic, Oxford City Orchestra, London Concert Orchestra, Sinfonia Viva and the English String Orchestra.

Yet amid all the performing, teaching remains one of Julian's deepest callings. With more than forty students each week at Kimbolton School, Bedford Girls' School, Warwick University, the Purcell School and privately, he passes on the flame that once passed to him – and many of his students now walk the halls of leading conservatoires. His masterclasses at Wells Cathedral School, New College School Oxford and for the Milton Keynes Music Service, along with his frequent work at Benslow Music, reveal a musician who inspires not only through sound but through presence, patience and imagination.

Stephen Meakins – piano

Stephen Meakins is a graduate of the Royal College of Music and has established a career as a collaborative pianist, soloist and organist. He has appeared in major concert venues as both soloist and accompanist, and is recognised for his thoughtful musicianship, stylistic awareness and commitment to partnership in performance.

Born in Northampton, Stephen began his musical training as Organ Scholar at All Saints' Church, Northampton, before holding the Organ Scholarship at St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne.

He later studied at the Royal College of Music with Niel Immelman and Kathron Sturrock, where he was awarded the accompanist prize in the Kathleen Ferrier Competition for Young Singers and was a prize winner in the prestigious RCM Schumann Competition. In his final year, he was invited to represent the College at Wigmore Hall and, upon graduation, joined the teaching staff of the RCM Junior Department.

Stephen performs regularly as a soloist with regional orchestras including the Huntingdon Philharmonic and the Northampton Symphony Orchestra, and has previously appeared with the Bedford Symphony Orchestra. These appearances reflect his long-standing commitment to the piano repertoire and collaborative music-making at a high level.

Alongside his performing work, Stephen is accompanist and organist at Bedford School, where he works closely with instrumentalists, singers and choirs across concerts, competitions and chapel services. He continues to maintain an active musical life through teaching, coaching and masterclasses.

Interval

Anton Bruckner (1824–1896)

Symphony No. 3 in D minor

It's nothing short of astonishing that between 1863 and 1875 Bruckner composed six symphonies, all of which were neglected for many years. During this time, his idea of sound gradually shifted from the acoustic of the church interior, with its long reverberation time, to that of the concert hall. At the same time, the stylistic influence of the organ was replaced by the more varied influence of the symphony orchestra, notably the large-scale ensemble of more than 20 first violins and double woodwinds which he heard in Vienna. In this context, the Third Symphony, especially the first version of 1873, stands as being one of the most experimental of his entire output. Bruckner proved himself to be frighteningly modern, with his use of sound composition and minimalist-style rhythms already pointing to the 20th century. However, the premiere of Bruckner's *Symphony No. 3* stands as one of music history's most infamous disasters. The performance took place in Vienna on 16 December 1877 and was to have been conducted by Johann Herbeck, but Herbeck died suddenly, and Bruckner, an accomplished organist and choral director but an inexperienced orchestral conductor, decided to take his place on the podium. The musicians of the Vienna Philharmonic treated the score with disrespect and heckled Bruckner throughout the rehearsals. Also, the work seemed long, complicated, confusing, unmelodic and full of constant interruptions and endless quotations, and the first performance was met with laughter and catcalls from the audience, many of whom walked out between movements. What was misunderstood was that Bruckner's music offered new and bewildering revelations. By the end of the performance, only around 25 dedicated fans remained to offer support to the inconsolable composer. Among them was the young Gustav Mahler.

Bruckner's Third Symphony attempts to enter the mysterious, it's the first of the nine symphonies to represent Bruckner's full and mature mastery of the form. The first movement begins with hushed, mysterious open fifths. A distant trumpet call announces the principal motif over a ghostly rhythmic sostenuto. The shadowy strands build into a frightening cacophonous crescendo. As the music unfolds, the orchestra transforms into a mighty pipe organ, with single thematic lines occurring in expansive octaves. Silence becomes as important as sound, wherein the orchestra is divided into sonic blocks of sound, creating string, wind and brass 'choirs'.

The second movement adagio opens quietly and has a contrapuntal flair, with the strings playing in four parts in a noble chorale which is simultaneously expansive and intimate. Gradually building in intensity and then halting in silence, there is the sense that we are entering into an intimate musical prayer; every moment seems to be searching and arriving at the same time. The final bars emerge suddenly out of hushed tremolo, bringing the ultimate sense of celestial repose. Also, near the end of the movement, there are one or two quotations from Wagner's operas *Die Walküre* and *Tannhäuser*.

The Scherzo third movement begins with a single, snaking melodic strand. The term 'Scherzo' translates as 'joke', but here the humour has a dark, ominous tinge. An initial ghostly whisper grows into an awesome titanic power as we are swept into a terrifying demonic dance. Gentler music brings complacency, but soon the exhilarating ferocity returns. The movement's Trio section is a completely different world, as it feels like a bucolic Austrian peasant dance with occasional hints of birdsongs.

The opening of the Finale springs to life with the same explosive energy which began the Scherzo. A four-note ascending chromatic line begins as a tiny cell and then explodes throughout the orchestra, and open-fifths recall the mystery-shrouded beginning of the first movement. The tension dissipates with the second theme, a return to the kind of rustic dance we heard in the Scherzo's Trio section. In the symphony's final moments, the orchestra is transformed into a mighty, cosmic pipe organ. The strings shadow the brass, which evokes the multiple acoustical delays in a vast cathedral. There is a brief memory of the first movement's second theme, and in the final bars, a blazing fanfare announces the trumpets' triumphant statement of the first movement's opening theme, now transformed into heroic D major.

Programme notes: A compilation of notes by Timothy Judd and others

Several of these notes were supplied through the Programme Note Bank of Making Music, the National Federation of Music Societies, and from other sources.