TONIGHT'S CONCERT

A Tribute to Michael Tilson Thomas

Thursday 11 June 2026 7pm
Barbican

Edward Elgar
Variations on an Original Theme, 'Enigma'

Interval

Gustav Mahler
Symphony No 5

Sir Antonio Pappano conductor
London Symphony Orchestra

Concert finishes at approximately 9.15pm

The work of the Chief Conductor with the LSO is generously supported by Alex & Elena Gerko, and members of the Chief Conductor's Circle.

'Enigma' Variations recorded for future release on LSO Live

Concert recorded for future broadcast on BBC Radio 3

BBC RADIO 3

Welcome

Welcome to tonight's London Symphony Orchestra concert, conducted by Sir Antonio Pappano, LSO Chief Conductor. Across the season, Sir Antonio Pappano has explored a strong British thread with the Orchestra, and tonight's performance of Elgar's 'Enigma' Variations continues this journey, heard alongside Mahler's Symphony No 5.

Tonight's concert is dedicated to Michael Tilson Thomas, the LSO's Conductor Laureate and former Principal Conductor, who died on 22 April 2026. Affectionately known as 'MTT', he shared an extraordinary relationship with the LSO spanning more than five decades, first appearing with the Orchestra in 1970 before becoming Principal Conductor in 1988, Principal Guest Conductor in 1995, and later Conductor Laureate in 2016. He was a musician of exceptional imagination and curiosity, whose concerts combined thrilling performances with a gift for communication.

Mahler's music held a particularly important place in Michael Tilson Thomas' life and work, and his performances of the composer's symphonies with the LSO remain especially cherished memories, not least his final appearances with the LSO, conducting Mahler's Symphony No 3 in May 2024 and Symphony No 2 in October 2024. LSO Live had the privilege of filming several memorable performances, preserving moments of his artistry with the Orchestra. Among these was a powerful account of Shostakovich's Symphony No 5, later featured in the film *Tár*, bringing his interpretation to a wider audience.

Tributes to Michael Tilson Thomas are shared on pages 9 to 13, reflecting the affection and admiration he inspired among those whom he knew and worked with. His relationship with the LSO was marked by remarkable generosity of spirit. Together with his husband, Joshua Robison, who predeceased him by only a few weeks, he showed enduring care for the Orchestra and its musicians, offering warmth, encouragement and friendship over many years. Whether supporting colleagues through difficult times or bringing people together in celebration of the Orchestra's achievements, he created a sense of community and belonging that will be remembered with deep gratitude.

Looking ahead, please join the LSO and Sir Antonio Pappano at our annual BMW Classics concert in Trafalgar Square on Saturday 13 June. We hope to see you there.

Dame Kathryn McDowell DBE DL
Managing Director

Tonight, I join my colleagues in remembering our beloved MTT. It is difficult to imagine the musical world without his presence in it.

He was an endlessly curious, generous and extraordinary human being who brought so much joy to our lives both on and off the podium. To sit in an orchestra under his direction was to feel the score in front of you come alive again.

What I will remember most is not only his extraordinary musicianship, but the atmosphere he created around music-making itself. Rehearsals could pivot in an instant from microscopic precision to storytelling, laughter, or a single remark that changed the emotional meaning of an entire passage. One moment he could speak about Mahler with searing emotional insight, the next he would disarm the entire room with humour. There isn't a single moment of any Mahler symphony that for me hasn't been touched by MTT.

There was also an immense warmth and generosity in him and he had a way of making musicians feel trusted and challenged at the same time. There are certain performances that will remain permanently etched into our memories.

He adored audiences and they adored him. I loved hearing him speak to audiences about music, getting 'under the hood' of the repertoire, as he used to say. He championed living composers, young musicians and unconventional ideas with genuine conviction – always urging us to push the boundaries.

For those of us fortunate enough to have shared a stage with him, our gratitude is immense, as is the sense of loss. What a privilege to have known and loved him.

Our thoughts are with his family and friends.

Sarah Quinn
Chair of the Board, Sub-Principal Second Violin

Please switch off all phones.
Photography and audio/video recording are not permitted during the performance.

Details correct at time of going to print.

Share Your Thoughts
Visit **lso.co.uk/survey** or scan the QR code to complete a short survey about tonight's concert.

Editorial Photography
John Davis, Davíð Sighvatsson, Terry Lott, Keith Saunders, Frances Marshall, Mark Allan, Tina Korhonen, Jennifer Taylor, Suzie Maeder, Clive Totman, Jiyang Chen, LSO Archive
Print John Good 024 7692 0059
Advertising Cabbells Ltd 020 3603 7937

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS

1944–2026

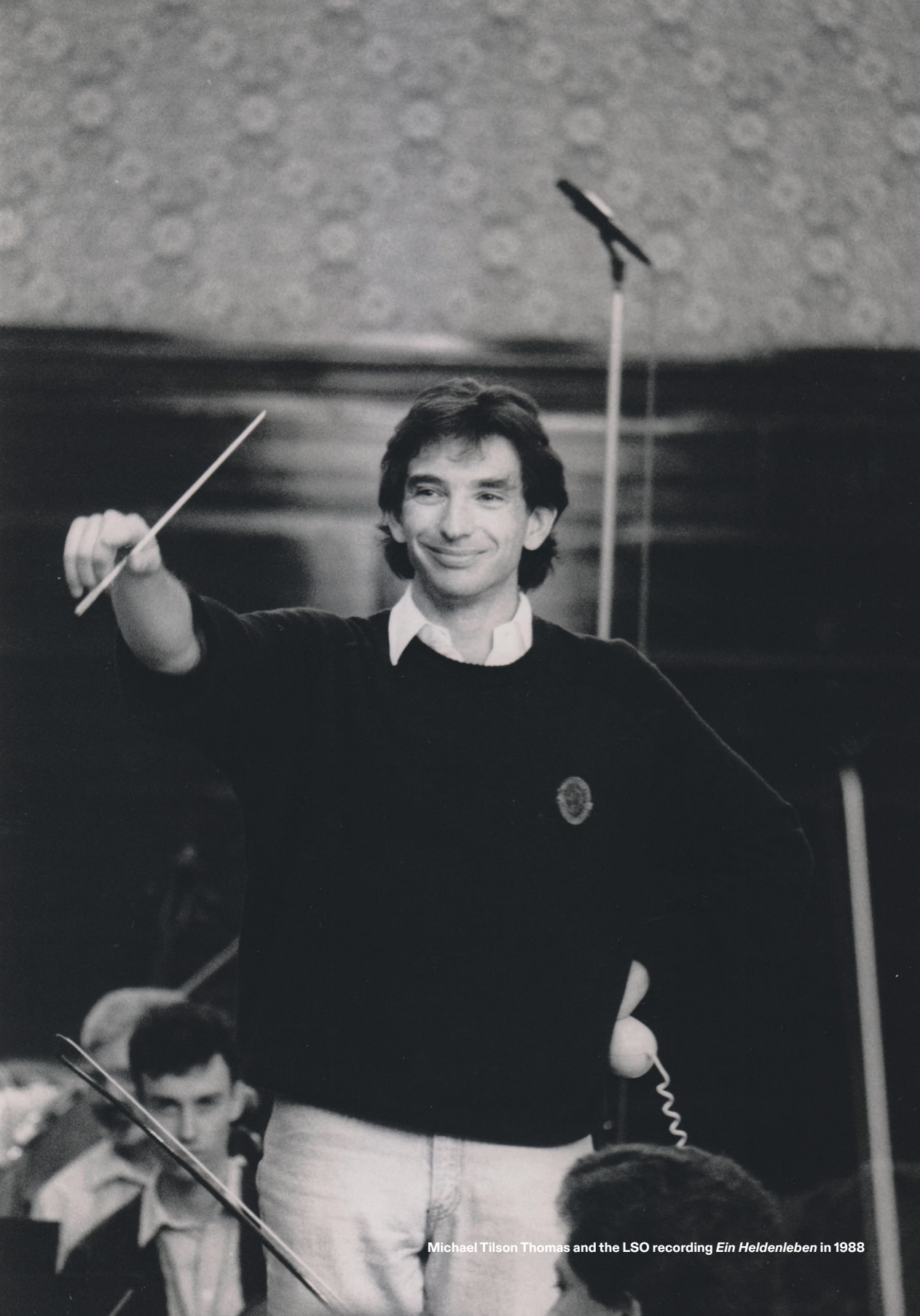
Music critic Michael White reflects on our Conductor Laureate's incredible career, both with the LSO and around the world.

Michael Tilson Thomas wasn't just a star conductor – or, indeed, just anything: his interests, abilities and curiosity about the world seemed limitless. The catalogue of genius included composition. And among an output of reflective, Broadway-leaning songs was one, the text by MTT himself, with a confessional significance. 'Don't be thinking your life was a one-way door,' it runs. 'Good things are still in store.'

That sense of possibility endured until his death in April this year. But until then, it had opened out in all directions on a staggeringly full life. His career as a musician managed to be colourful and glamorous but also serious and inspirational. His relationships with the orchestras he conducted were strong and durable, embracing 25 years as Music Director of the San Francisco Symphony and 34 as Artistic Director of the New World Symphony. And ranking alongside those epic tenures was a profound connection with the London Symphony Orchestra that began in 1970 when, in classic last-minute style, he replaced an indisposed Gennady Rozhdestvensky for a Stravinsky programme at the Royal Festival Hall. Whether anyone at the time realised what this would herald is unlikely. But it generated more engagements that eventually led to his appointment as Principal Conductor from 1988 to 1995, continuing as Principal Guest until 2016, then Conductor Laureate for the remainder of his life, all of which made MTT a central figure in the LSO community for more than five decades – an eye-catching statistic.

Over the years, he took the Orchestra on tours through Europe, Asia and America. On home ground, he delivered landmark festivals that offered London audiences intensively sustained encounters with Debussy, Mahler, Gershwin and Ravel. He explored new ways of presenting repertoire, in person and on television (one thing MTT could do like almost no one else was talk – with charm, charisma and exuberance – about the niceties of music). And he won over sceptical London critics who weren't so sure about charm and charisma but wondered if there was substance underneath. There was.

In the process, he became quite an anglophile, keen to conduct the new generation of British composers like Oliver Knussen,



Michael Tilson Thomas and the LSO recording *Ein Heldenleben* in 1988

Michael Tilson Thomas (continued)

Michael White

Dominic Muldowney, Simon Bainbridge and Colin Matthews. Favourite reading on his bookshelves were the essays of the 18th-century musicologist Charles Burney. It was all an interesting development for somebody whose background was so far removed from Englishness.

Born in 1944 into an intellectually robust Jewish theatre dynasty that was originally from Ukraine but by then had settled on the US west coast, he grew up among the European émigrés (Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Korngold ...) who turned post-war Los Angeles into a high-powered cultural melting pot. It was a place where everyone had come from somewhere else and travelled with impressive luggage.

In the mix was showbiz culture, some of which undoubtedly rubbed off on MTT and never left him. It was, as he told me, 'a direction that I might have gone in'; and the songs he wrote throughout his life suggest he could have flourished – been, perhaps, a west-coast Sondheim – had a different calling not prevailed.

As a teenager, he was an accomplished pianist and found himself accompanying classes given by no less than cellist Gregor Piatigorsky – who then asked him, aged just 20, to conduct a student orchestra. Within a few years, he was conducting the Boston Symphony – initially as an assistant to the BSO's formidable Music Director William Steinberg – but then thrust into a prominence he hadn't bargained for when Steinberg was taken ill and Michael found himself in charge of the remaining season. Thirty-seven concerts in succession.

As baptisms of fire go, it was extreme. From photographs taken at the time, he looks absurdly young and wide-eyed to be dealing with it – trying to master a relentless flow of new work under heavy public scrutiny, and the risk of being eaten alive by seasoned players who aren't always generous to fledgling baton-wavers. That he came through showed resilience. And, having by now attracted the supportive attention of Leonard Bernstein as a friend and mentor, he was being tipped in

Michael Tilson Thomas with former LSO Principal Conductor André Previn during an LSO rehearsal in 1994

Michael Tilson Thomas wasn't just a star conductor – or, indeed, just anything: his interests, abilities and curiosity about the world seemed limitless.

the press as Bernstein's natural successor: sure to pick up the next major American music directorship that fell vacant, with not even the New York Philharmonic out of reach.

That instead, in 1971, he took a relatively low-key job with the Buffalo Symphony was telling. It was certainly a step back from the spotlight. But it bought him time to grow, and think, and work out what it really meant to lead an orchestra into the mutual journey that is making music.

With the spotlight turned low, he could make mistakes, and explore the repertoire that worked for him (or didn't). American voices from Charles Ives to John Adams became programming priorities, alongside Mahler and the early European modernists. And above all, he established his own style as a conductor: affable, relaxed, collaborative, though with an articulately argued sense of what he wanted that you might call non-tyrannical didacticism.

He had legendary people skills: he spared no effort to build trust and meaningful connection with his players, and he made a point of knowing everybody's name. It was completely genuine, not phoney (showbiz though he may have been, he wasn't one to grandstand). And it never left him.

In the last interview I did with MTT, when he was ill with an inoperable cancer, he talked movingly about being 'filled with love and energy for music and the people who make it', and about the importance of holding to that, whatever your age or condition. 'Over the years,' he said, 'I respect more and more the veteran musicians who've been around a long time, frustrated or disappointed by what they've experienced on the conveyor belt of concert-giving but, in spite of everything, holding on to their first inspiration. It may not be up front and centre all the time, but it's tucked away somewhere and can be accessed. That's important.'

Equally important for Michael, though, was to plant this love and energy from day one in the hearts of young musicians. Hence the New World Symphony, which he set up in 1987 and has since become a model – or perhaps, more realistically, an unattainable ideal – for training orchestras across the globe. A product of the inner educator in his psyche, and established in uniquely privileged conditions in a purpose-built Frank Gehry building on Miami Beach (Michael's compendium of talents happily encompassed raising money), New World was the project closest to his heart. It changes lives. Its student players, armed with the experience of being there, move on to leading roles in leading orchestras worldwide. And anybody seeking Michael's legacy need look no further. There it is, in terms that sum up its creator: laid-back, kinda glitzy (how could it be other in Miami Beach?) but built on substance and humanity. This, after all, was a man who marked his 70th birthday in London with a concert at Buckingham Palace, but in San Francisco with a performance of

Michael Tilson Thomas (continued)

Michael White

Michael Tilson Thomas celebrating his birthday at the Barbican in 2015

Liszt's magnificently obscure *Hexameron* for six pianos and orchestra, followed by a mamba procession down the aisles of Davies Hall.

The human side of MTT was never hidden. Blessed with a devoted lifelong partner, Josh (who sadly predeceased him earlier this year), and loving friends, he could be heart-on-sleeve: you only have to listen to his songs to know it.

But his music-making always had finesse and eloquence, the passion guided by a sense of purpose. And in his final years – haunted by illness and, as he put it, 'both in and out of the game, wondering at it' – he approached death with a stoic resignation: thoughtful, practical, not giving up, but facing facts.

There was peculiar poignancy in choosing Mahler's Symphony No 2, the so-called 'Resurrection' Symphony, for what would be his final concert with the LSO in 2024. A piece that stares into the eyes of death and looks beyond it to what may/may not come after, it declared his situation. He was frail. But when he came onto the platform, he ignored the chair placed on the podium and stood for the duration of the score, approximately 90 minutes.

You could understand his need to do this: it was part of the agenda for what had to be achieved while things were possible. And so was sorting out his catalogue of compositions: putting them in order, editing, completing.

As he told me with a lightness that obscured how much this project mattered, it was 'an opportunity I felt the need to take before I'm out of here. After experiences where I've had to question my mortality more seriously than before, there are some messages to the world I'd like to get right.'

Happily, he did. Not long ago, a lavishly produced four-CD set of MTT's own music was issued on the label Pentatone. The messages have come through loud and clear, and they stand testament to an extraordinary musician unconfined by boundaries. He did so much, so brilliantly. And we remember him with gratitude.

Sir Antonio Pappano

LSO Chief Conductor

‘MTT was the kind of musician I always aspired to be. With his astonishingly omnivorous musical appetite, he achieved a knowledge and wisdom not only about the mechanics of how music works but how to communicate its message and spirit to orchestral musicians, students and audiences alike.

His never-ending energy, bags of talent and American can-do approach went hand in hand with a fierce intelligence that underpinned everything he was involved with. I am immensely proud that Michael was a crucial part of the LSO family. A beacon in every way.’

Colin Matthews OBE

composer

‘MTT was a friend and colleague for nearly 40 years, but his courage over the last five years – not only speaking openly about the brain tumour he was diagnosed with in 2021, but continuing to conduct against all the odds – is what stands out for me now. To have taken on Mahler 3 with the LSO, followed by a wonderful Mahler 2 as recently as 18 months ago, was an extraordinary feat to have achieved.

Too many outstanding performances over the years to name any others. What a musician he was, and how lucky we were to have him.’

Belinda McFarlane

LSO Second Violin

‘I first met Michael when I joined the LSO, when he was our Principal Conductor. He immediately befriended me as a new member, and one of the youngest. He was so open and friendly. I was always inspired by his adventurous and spirited performances, always mixed with a breadth and depth of musical interpretation. What a privilege it has been to perform with him for over 30 years. So many memorable performances, and the concerts on tour so often followed by extremely generous and memorable parties! Michael brought so much to the Orchestra – not only was he the Principal and Laureate conductor, he was also our friend and our champion. He will be sorely missed, but his legacy will live on.

I last saw Michael in San Francisco last year, on the day he had made the announcement that he would no longer be conducting due to his illness. I messaged his husband (and artistic partner), the incredible Joshua, to say I was there in their beloved city, and was thinking of them. He immediately responded and asked me over for afternoon tea. I arrived, and there they were, hanging out in their Pacific Heights kitchen with their beautiful dogs and a couple of friends. Joshua asked me what I would like, and I said tea would be nice. He said, ‘Sure, you can have tea, but we always have tequila at this time of day.’ ‘Fantastic!’ I said. So we shared a tequila and talked about old friends, colleagues and memorable concerts. A treasured memory, one of the many I have of Michael and Joshua.’

Sue Mallet

LSO Director of Planning

‘Over the past 50 years, I have definitely undertaken more tours with Michael than any other LSO conductor, and on every tour, Joshua Robison was by his side.

Free days are a rarity on tour and normally only crop up on the long-haul trips to the US and East Asia, but invariably I would spend those days with Michael and Joshua. If Michael was in a composing mood, Josh (who was a keen rider) and I would find some horses to ride.

Back in the 80s and 90s, the long-haul tours were frequently three to five weeks (much longer than today) and Michael always enjoyed the post-concert dinners, especially when Japanese food was being served. He was a great raconteur, mimic, and would often treat the dinner guests to a rendition of the latest catchy song he had written. Whenever we were on the West Coast, Michael and Joshua would invite me and members of the Orchestra to lunches and dinners at their fabulous house in San Francisco.

Michael and Joshua were officially together for 50 years, and tied the knot in November 2014. Joshua’s death in February was a terrible twist of fate, preceding Michael’s by just two months. I consider myself very lucky and privileged to have got to know them both and spend the time I did with them.’

Sir Clive Gillinson

Former LSO Managing Director and LSO Cello

'I first met and worked with Michael shortly after I joined the London Symphony Orchestra as a player in 1970. I was just out of music college, and he was a brilliant young whiz kid – Leonard Bernstein's protégé and star pupil – who was making his debut as a conductor with the LSO. We were dazzled.

We engaged him at the LSO over many seasons and eventually, after Claudio Abbado retired as our Principal Conductor and following a vote of the players, we appointed him to succeed Abbado. By then, I had become the LSO's Managing Director and worked with him very closely throughout his seven-year tenure.

What never ceased to amaze me: his personality seemed to be frozen in time. In his early twenties, he was a young, dazzling, enthusiastic, brilliant kid, which was exactly who he was in his sixties and even seventies! During his time as our Principal Conductor, we developed many fascinating projects, including a major focus on Mahler and others on Russian, French and American music.

Michael's lifelong exploration, endless curiosity and constant searching for greater depths and truths were essential parts of what made up the fundamental MTT – with whom we deeply cherished every moment, and who will always be a source of enduring inspiration for us all.'

Lennox Mackenzie OBE

LSO Principal Emeritus, former LSO Chair and Sub-Leader

'Knowing, and making music with, Michael has been one of the greatest joys of my life in music. I remember revelling in the early days of his Principal Conductorship in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and in particular the infectious effervescence of the Gershwin Years Festival; and the popular, televised lecture-concerts, with Michael's fascinating and entertaining insights into the composers' minds and their masterpieces; and the serious, deeply felt music-making within the Mahler Festival. And so much more. The mutually enjoyed, creative, fulfilling collaboration between MTT and the LSO happily lasted over 50 years.

He brought charm, wit and touching care, not only to the music but also to his interactions with us, the musicians. He was always so willing and keen to be our friend. The feeling was mutual. He forever asked me about the players' lives, caring deeply about the welfare of his musicians. MTT was a flamboyant, but also seriously profound, conductor, and we in the LSO also enjoyed him as a brilliant virtuoso pianist, a talented composer of heartfelt, touching music, a totally committed educator and a generous, comical host of so many parties around the globe.

The music world is a lesser and duller place without MTT's inspiring enthusiasm. Goodnight and thank you for everything, Michael.'

Jonathan Vaughan

Former LSO Chair and
LSO Double Bass

‘When I think back to my years with the London Symphony Orchestra between 1992 and 2002, certain musical memories rise above the many remarkable experiences we were fortunate to share. At the centre of so many of them stands Michael Tilson Thomas – MTT to the world – but to us, quite simply, a conductor of rare imagination, generosity and unmistakable presence.

As a communicator, he was direct, vivid and deeply knowledgeable. His personal connections to Stravinsky and Bernstein left unmistakable fingerprints on his performances, and he inherited Lennie’s unique gift for illuminating music through performance. He would speak, illustrate at the piano and then, almost in the same breath, step onto the podium to bring those ideas to life. Those moments were revelatory, and we all learned immensely from them.

Looking back now, they feel part of a larger legacy – not only his, but one shared with the orchestra and our audiences. His belief in the integrity of the score and the individuality of the musicians in front of him left an enduring mark. During those years with the LSO, he helped create moments that continue to resonate long after the final note. For that, and for the artistry, curiosity and humanity he brought to the podium, I remain deeply grateful.’

Alice Coote CBE

mezzo-soprano

‘Beloved MTT … an utterly unique balance between levity and gravitas existed in you. All you did and were seemed suffused with both a rigorous precision and a defiant freedom. A virtuosic sense of humour coexisting simultaneously with profound depth sparkled in those perspicacious eyes. It was a killer combination which made you a generous leader, guide and teacher of rare wit and humility.

You were deeply loved by musicians and audiences globally, not least in your close bond with the LSO over many decades. Never over-imposing yourself on a work, your innate absolute respect for and trust in the composer set the truth of the music free for us all.

I, and so many, learned so much from you. I love to think that your famous blue spectacles are glinting quizzically down at the funny side of all our tragedy from the blue yonder, eternally … (as in the last two words of Mahler’s *The Song of the Earth*) ‘Ewig … ewig …’.

Sally Matthews

soprano

‘I had the very great privilege of working with Michael Tilson Thomas (known by everyone as MTT, of course) on several occasions, both with the London Symphony Orchestra and in the US.

Michael was a brilliant, warm-hearted and immensely gifted musician, with an infectious zest for life and a profound belief in the power of music to bring people together.

What made him especially remarkable, however, was his generosity towards artists. He had an extraordinary ability to put people at ease and to create an atmosphere of trust and inspiration. I was still a very young singer when I first worked with him, and he taught me an enormous amount – not only about musicianship, but about courage: to be fearless, to take risks, and to embrace the vulnerability from which true artistry emerges. That, he believed, was where the magic happens.

He will be deeply missed by all of us who had the great honour of working with him.’

Variations on an Original Theme Op 36, 'Enigma'

Edward Elgar

	Theme
1	CAE
2	HDSP
3	RBT
4	WMB
5	RPA
6	Ysobel
7	Troyte
8	WN
9	Nimrod
10	Dorabella
11	GRS
12	BGN
13	***
14	EDU


1898–99


29 minutes

Programme note by **Stephen Johnson**

One evening in October 1898, Edward Elgar lit himself a cigar and sat down at the piano. It had been a wearying day, and his playing was aimless – just a kind of improvisatory doodling. Suddenly his wife, Alice, interrupted him:

'Edward, that's a good tune.'
I awoke from the dream: 'Eh! Tune, what tune?' And she said, 'Play it again, I like that tune.' I played and strummed, and played, and then she exclaimed: 'That's the tune.'

And that, according to Elgar, is how the theme he was to call 'Enigma' came into being. In another version of the story, Alice asks him what he'd been playing: 'Nothing,' says Elgar, 'but something might be made of it.' That comment is of more than musical significance, because it seems that, for Elgar, that theme represented something important about himself. At first, he was cagey about this: 'The Enigma I will not explain – its 'dark saying' must be left unguessed.' But 13 years after the hugely successful premiere of the 'Enigma' Variations, he told the critic Ernest Newman that 'it expressed, when written [in 1898] my sense of the loneliness of the artist ... and to me, it still embodies that sense.'

Loneliness, a sense of nothingness yet combined with great idealism and ambition – all that was true of Elgar. Since the 'Enigma' Variations first appeared, there has been endless speculation as to whether some musical riddle is contained in the 'Enigma' theme: a cryptogram perhaps, or a scrambled reference to the well-known tune, *Auld Lang Syne*, has been suggested. However ingenious or entertaining the results, surely this misses the point. The variations may begin with 'nothing', the lonely, melancholic, self-doubting artists; but they progress to something very different: a depiction of the artist in the triumph: in the Finale, EDU ('Edu' was Alice's nickname for Elgar), we see the man who has indeed made something of himself. And it is a musical journey through friendship – the 13 vivid musical portraits of his closest friends that build up to the Finale – which has enabled Elgar to reach that longed-for goal.

But there is another side to this story. In Elgar's own words, 'This work, commenced in a spirit of humour and continued in deep seriousness, contains sketches of the composer's friends. It may be understood that these personages comment or reflect on the original theme and each one attempts a solution of the Enigma, for so the theme is called.' So, something of Elgar the Enigma remains unresolved – even the warmest, most understanding friendship cannot completely relieve that 'sense of loneliness of the artist'.

After the 'Enigma' theme, the First Variation depicts Elgar's wife: CAE – Caroline Alice Elgar – 'a prolongation of the theme with what I wished to be romantic and delicate additions', was Elgar's description. No 2, HDSP, is Hew David Steuart-Powell, a chamber music partner of Elgar, and clearly a light-fingered keyboardist. No 3, RBT, mimics Richard Baxter

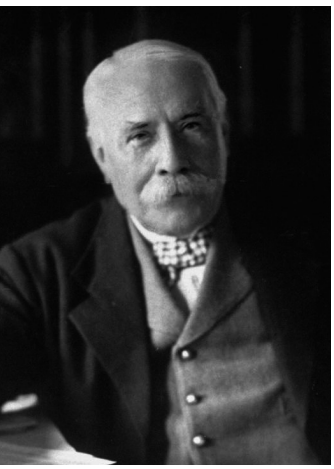
Townshend, eccentric tricyclist with a querulous, reedy voice. No 4, WMB, depicts Squire Baker of Hasfield Court, hurriedly presenting his house guests with the day's itinerary, then slamming the door as he leaves. No 5, RPA, reveals two sides of Matthew Arnold's son Richard, serious in conversation, but with a 'funny little nervous laugh' on woodwind. 'Pensive, and for a moment, romantic' was Elgar's description of Isobel Fitton, the subject of No 6, Ysobel – a viola player, hence the starring role for this instrument. No 7, Troyte, depicts more music-making, though this time, it is the 'maladroit' efforts of the architect Arthur Troyte Griffith to play the piano. According to Elgar, No 8, WN, is 'really suggested by an 18th-century house': Sherridge, near Malvern, home of Winifred Norbury. But Winifred herself appears in 'a little suggestion of a characteristic laugh'.

Then comes the famous Nimrod, Variation 9. This is a portrait of one of Elgar's closest friends, A J Jaeger ('jaeger' is the German word for 'hunter', and Nimrod is the hunter mentioned in the biblical book of Genesis). Specifically, this music records 'a long summer evening talk, when my friend discoursed eloquently on the slow movements of Beethoven ... It will be noticed that the opening bars are made to suggest the slow movement of the Eighth Sonata ('Pathétique').' No 10, Dorabella, was Elgar's nickname for Dora Penny. 'The movement suggests a dancelike lightness,' Elgar wrote. It does – but it also reveals great tenderness: of all Elgar's friends, Dora was one of the most helpfully responsive to Elgar's devastating mood swings. GRS (G R Sinclair, organist of Hereford Cathedral), was the owner of Dan the bulldog, who fell into the River Wye, scrambled out and barked in triumph. 'Set that to music,' said Sinclair. The result was Variation 11. The heartfelt cello melody of No 12 is a tribute to Basil G Nevinson, whose faith in Elgar sustained him in times of crisis and neglect. The subject of variation 13, ***, is more mysterious. Elgar tells us that he intended it for the 'most angelic' Lady Mary Lygon, who was then on a long sea voyage – hence the clarinet's quotation from Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, and the depiction of a ship's low, throbbing engine. But according to Ernest Newman, there is also a memory of an earlier love lost and still yearned for – there is certainly a strange poignancy here. But it is Elgar the self-made Edwardian gentleman who strides out in the Finale, 'bold and vigorous in general style'. Memories of earlier friends' variations are recalled, especially CAE and Nimrod. But the end is a glad, confident apotheosis, culminating in a foretaste of the first phrase of Elgar's next orchestral masterpiece, the First Symphony – a celebration of the present, and hope for the future.

Interval – 20 minutes
Find us on Instagram
@londonsymphonyorchestra

Edward Elgar

1857 to 1934 (United Kingdom)



Contemporaries
Gustav Mahler, Claude Debussy

Key events
1904: Receives knighthood
1924: Made Master of the King's Music

With the LSO
1908: London premiere of Symphony No 1
1910: World premiere of Violin Concerto
1911–12: Serves as Principal Conductor of the LSO
1919: World premiere of Cello Concerto

Listen to
'Enigma' Variations
lsolive.co.uk

Composer profile by
Alexandra Wilson

Edward Elgar was one of the most acclaimed British composers of modern times. Receiving no formal conservatoire training, he worked as a jobbing musician as a young man, only gaining success as a self-taught composer as he approached middle age. In the late 1880s and 1890s, he wrote chamber and instrumental pieces of considerable charm, such as *Salut d'amour*, *Chanson de nuit* and *Chanson de matin*.

The orchestral 'Enigma' Variations (1899), with its movements cryptically named after Elgar's friends, marked the beginning of professional recognition. International fame arrived in 1900 with the composition of the oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius* – a piece that spoke directly to Elgar's deeply held, if at times unconventional, Roman Catholic beliefs – and with a three-day festival devoted to his music at Covent Garden in 1904.

Thereafter, Elgar continued to write oratorios, most notably *The Apostles*, *The Kingdom* and *The Music Makers*, but also ventured into large-scale orchestral works, writing two symphonies (and sketching a third, completed by the composer Anthony Payne in the 1990s), the Violin Concerto and the much-loved Cello Concerto. In later years, Elgar devoted himself to committing his compositions to record for the gramophone, and also composed a number of major chamber works, including his Piano Quintet and String Quartet.

Elgar travelled to Paris and Leipzig as a young man and took inspiration for his elegiac style from the leading German composers of the 19th century, including Mendelssohn, Wagner and Brahms. Nevertheless, his music came to be characterised as quintessentially English and bound up with Edwardian patriotic sentiment, not least because of the enduring success of the exuberant *Pomp and Circumstance* Marches, composed intermittently over the first three decades of the 20th century.

Like the Suffolk-born Benjamin Britten after him, Elgar is a composer closely associated with a specific English region. Periodically, he would reside in London, but he always found the atmosphere uncongenial. For a time, he lived in Hereford, but he repeatedly returned to his native Worcestershire, where he was born and would eventually die.

Michael Tilson Thomas during his tenure as Principal Conductor of the LSO

Symphony No 5 in C-sharp Minor

Gustav Mahler

PART 1

1 **Funeral March: In gemessenem Schritt. Streng. Wie ein Kondukt.** (With measured tread. Strict. Like a procession)
2 **Sturmisch bewegt. Mit grösster Vehemenz** (Stormy. With utmost vehemence)

PART 2

3 **Scherzo: Kräftig, nicht zu schnell.** (Vigorous, not too fast)

PART 3

4 **Adagietto: Sehr langsam** (Very slow)
5 **Rondo-Finale: Allegro**

1901–02

70 minutes

Programme note by **Stephen Johnson**

When Mahler started work on his Fifth Symphony in the summer of 1901, he must have felt that he'd survived an emotional assault course. In February, after a near-fatal haemorrhage and a dangerous operation, he had resigned his post as conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. His relationship with the musicians had been uneasy at best – not all of them appreciated his intensely demanding style of rehearsal – and some of the press (especially the city's vocal anti-Semitic press) had been poisonous. Still, leaving such a prestigious and lucrative post was a wrench.

At about the same time, Mahler met his future wife, Alma Schindler, and fell passionately in love. That at least was a hopeful development, but still emotionally challenging. Right from the start, there were tensions in their relationship, which Mahler chose to ignore – to his cost, as he eventually found. Some composers seek escape from the trials of their personal life in their music, but Mahler was the kind of artist whose life and work are inextricably, often painfully, interlinked. Unsurprisingly, the Fifth Symphony bears the imprint of Mahler's recent experiences throughout its complex five-movement structure.

At the same time, the Fifth Symphony marked a new departure for Mahler. Up until then, all his symphonies had either contained sung texts or come with detailed explanatory programmes. The Fifth has neither. Instead, we are expected to interpret the music directly, for ourselves, without any explicit help from the composer. One of the problems with programmes, he'd come to realise, was that people would take them literally, and then go on to assume that the music had been explained for them. Listening was also creative: it went beyond 'real' events and feelings to another, more mysterious world – a world beyond simple sequence in time and space.

Mahler does, however, give us a substantial clue to the possible meaning of the first movement. Entitled 'Funeral March', it opens with an ominous trumpet fanfare, then the full orchestra thunders in with an unmistakable funereal tread. Shuddering string trills and deep, rasping horn notes evoke death in full grotesque pomp. Then comes a more intriguing pointer: the quieter march theme that follows (strings alone) is clearly related to Mahler's song *Der Tambourg'sell* (The Drummer Lad), which tells of a pitiful young deserter facing execution. Here, perhaps, is another face of death: not grand, but pitiful and desolate.

The much faster second movement has the character of an urgent personal struggle. The shrill three-note woodwind figure near the start comes to embody the idea of striving. Several times, aspiration falls back into sad rumination and echoes of the Funeral March. At last, the striving culminates

in a radiant brass hymn. Is the answer to death to be found in religious consolation – faith? But the affirmation collapses under its own weight, and the movement quickly fades into darkness.

Now comes a surprise. The Scherzo bursts onto the scene with a wildly elated horn fanfare. The character is unmistakably Viennese – a kind of manic waltz. Perhaps some of Mahler's feelings about his adopted Viennese home went into this movement. Certainly there are parts of this movement where the gaiety sounds forced, even downright crazy. Mahler himself wondered what people would say 'to this primeval music, this foaming, roaring, raging sea of sound, to these dancing stars, to these breath-taking iridescent and flashing breakers?'

Mahler, the great Lieder composer, clearly intended this movement as a kind of love song without words to his future wife, Alma.

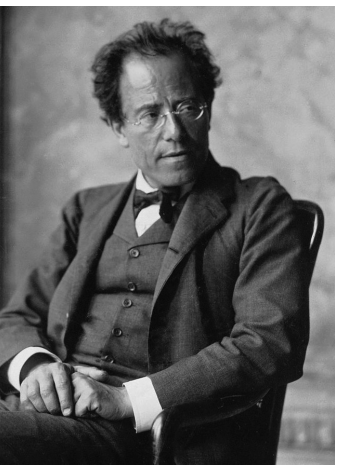
Now comes the famous Adagietto, for strings and harp alone, and another profound change of mood. Mahler, the great Lieder composer, clearly intended this movement as a kind of love song without words to his future wife, Alma. There is another significant clue here. At the movement's final climax, Mahler invokes one of his greatest songs, 'Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen' (I am lost to the world) from his *Rückert Lieder*. The poem ends with the words 'I live alone in my heaven, in my love, in my song'; Mahler quotes the violin phrase that accompanies 'in my love, in my song' at the very end of the Adagietto.

So human, rather than divine, love provides the true turning point in the Fifth Symphony – just as Mahler believed it had done for him in 1901. The finale is a vigorous, joyous contrapuntal display – genuine joy this time, it seems, not the Scherzo's manic elation. Even motifs from the Adagietto are drawn into the bustling textures.

Finally, after a long and exciting build-up, the second movement's brass chorale returns in full splendour, now firmly anchored in D major, the symphony's ultimate home key: the triumph of faith, hope and, above all, of love? Not everyone finds this ending convincing; significantly, Alma Mahler had her doubts from the start. But one can hear it either way – as a ringing affirmation or as forced triumphalism – and it still stirs. For all his apparent late-Romanticism, Mahler was also a very modern composer: even in his most positive statements, there is room for doubt.

Gustav Mahler

1860 (Bohemia) to 1911 (Austria)



Contemporaries
Richard Strauss, Gustav Klimt

Key events
1895: Premiere of Symphony No 2, Mahler's first major success
1897: Becomes Director of the Vienna Court (now State) Opera

Listen to
Symphony No 3
lsolive.co.uk

With the LSO
First London performance of the cantata *Das klagende Lied*, conducted by Walter Goehr

Composer profile by
Stephen Johnson

Gustav Mahler's sense of being an outsider, coupled with a penetrating, restless intelligence, made him an acutely self-conscious searcher after truth. For Mahler, the purpose of art was, in Shakespeare's famous phrase, to 'hold the mirror up to nature' in all its bewildering richness. The symphony, he told Jean Sibelius, 'must be like the world. It must embrace everything'. Mahler's symphonies can seem almost over-full of intense emotions and ideas: love and hate, joy in life and terror of death, the beauty of nature, innocence and bitter experience. Similar themes can also be found in his marvellous songs and song cycles, though there the intensity is, if anything, still more sharply focused.

Gustav Mahler was born the second of 14 children. His parents were apparently ill matched (Mahler remembered violent scenes), and young Gustav grew dreamy and introspective, seeking comfort in nature rather than human company. Death was a presence from early on: six of Mahler's siblings died in infancy. This no doubt partly explains the obsession with mortality in Mahler's music. Few of his major works do not feature a funeral march: in fact, his first composition (at age ten) was a *Funeral March with Polka* – exactly the kind of extreme juxtaposition one finds in his mature works.

For most of his life, Mahler supported himself by conducting, but this was no mere means to an end. Indeed, his evident talent and energetic, disciplined commitment led to successive appointments in Prague, Leipzig, Budapest, Hamburg and climactically, in 1897, at the Vienna Court Opera. In the midst of this hugely demanding schedule, Mahler composed whenever he could, usually during his summer holidays. The rate at which he composed during these brief periods is astonishing. The workload in no way decreased after his marriage to the charismatic and highly intelligent Alma Schindler in 1902.

Nevertheless, many today have good cause to be grateful to Mahler for his single-minded devotion to his art. T S Eliot – another artist caught between the search for faith and the horror of meaninglessness – wrote that 'humankind cannot bear very much reality'. But Mahler's music suggests another possibility. He can take us to the edge of the abyss, then sing us the sweetest songs of consolation. If we allow ourselves to make this journey with him, we may find that we, too, are the better for it.

Michael Tilson Thomas backstage before his first concert with the LSO in 1970

Sir Antonio Pappano

Chief Conductor

One of today's most sought-after conductors, Sir Antonio Pappano is renowned for his charismatic leadership and inspiring performances across both symphonic and operatic repertoires. He is Chief Conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra, Conductor Laureate of The Royal Opera, Covent Garden, and Music Director Emeritus of the Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome, having held the position of Music Director at both institutions from 2002 to 2024 and from 2005 to 2023, respectively. He was previously Music Director of Norwegian Opera and Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Brussels, and Principal Guest Conductor of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra.

Pappano is in demand as an opera conductor at the highest international level, including with the Metropolitan Opera, New York, the State Operas of Vienna and Berlin, the Bayreuth and Salzburg Festivals, Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Teatro alla Scala. He has appeared as a guest conductor with many of the world's most prestigious orchestras, including the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonic Orchestras, the Staatskapelle Dresden, the Leipzig Gewandhaus, Bavarian Radio Symphony and Czech Philharmonic Orchestras, the Orchestre de Paris and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, as well as with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, Chicago and Boston Symphonies and the Philadelphia and Cleveland Orchestras. He maintains a particularly strong relationship with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe.

Pappano has been an exclusive recording artist for Warner Classics (formerly EMI Classics) since 1995. His awards and honours include *Gramophone*'s Artist of the Year in 2000, a 2003 Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement in Opera, the 2004 Royal Philharmonic Society Music Award, and the Bruno Walter Prize from the Académie du Disque Lyrique in Paris. In 2012, he was created a Cavaliere di Gran Croce of the Republic of Italy and a Knight of the British Empire for his services to music, and in 2015 he was named the 100th recipient of the Royal Philharmonic Society's Gold Medal.

Sir Antonio Pappano was born in London to Italian parents and moved with his family to the United States at the age of 13. He studied piano with Norma Verrilli, composition with Arnold Franchetti and conducting with Gustav Meier. He has also developed a notable career as a speaker and presenter, and has fronted several critically acclaimed BBC Television documentaries including *Opera Italia*, *Pappano's Essential Ring Cycle* and *Pappano's Classical Voices*.

Coming up with the LSO
Wednesday 1 and Sunday 12 July
5pm, Barbican
Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*

London Symphony Orchestra

KEEP LISTENING

Hear more from the London Symphony Orchestra and Sir Antonio Pappano with the latest release on LSO Live.

Pappano brings out the emotional depths of Copland's Symphony No 3 and Walker's Sinfonia No 5, celebrating the enduring legacy of these pivotal American composers.

Available at lsolive.lso.co.uk

Listen on Music Classical

LSO

London Symphony Orchestra

On Stage

Leader
Andrej Power

First Violins
Savva Zverev
Clare Duckworth
Ginette Decuyper
Maxine Kwok
William Melvin
Stefano Mengoli
Claire Parfitt
Elizabeth Pigram
Laurent Quénelle
Harriet Rayfield
Sylvain Vasseur
Dániel Mészöly
Hilary Jane Parker
Julia Rumley
Rhys Watkins

Second Violins
Thomas Norris
Sarah Quinn
Miya Väisänen
Matthew Gardner
Naoko Keatley
Alix Lagasse
Belinda McFarlane
Csilla Pogány
Caroline Durham*
Mitzi Gardner
Aleem Kandour
Gordon MacKay
Polina Makhina
José Nuno Matias
Djumash Poulsen

Violas
Eivind Ringstad
Gillianne Haddow
Anna Bastow
Thomas Beer
Germán Clavijo
Steve Doman
Julia O'Riordan
Robert Turner
Mizuho Ueyama
Michelle Bruil
Errika Collins
Xinyuan He*
Elisabeth Varlow

Cellos
David Cohen
Laure Le Dantec
Salvador Bolón
Daniel Gardner
Young In Na
Amanda Truelove
Joanna Twaddle
Anna Beryl
Silvestrs Kalniņš
Victoria Simonsen

Double Basses
Rodrigo Moro Martín
Patrick Laurence
Joe Melvin
Jani Pensola
Paul Aksman
Tom Amigoni*
Matthew Gaffney
William Puhr
Adam Wynter

Flutes
Gareth Davies
Amy Yule
Imogen Royce

Piccolo
Patricia Moynihan

Oboes
Juliana Koch
Olivier Stankiewicz
Rosie Jenkins

Cor Anglais
Maxwell Spiers

Clarinets
Chris Richards
Chi-Yu Mo

Bass Clarinet
Ferran Garcerà Perelló

Bassoons
Rachel Gough
Joost Bosdijk

Contrabassoon
Martin Field

Horns
Timothy Jones
Mihajlo Bulajic
Angela Barnes
Jake Parker
Jonathan Maloney
Zachary Hayward
Finlay Bain

Trumpets
James Fountain
Sam Dusinberre
Adam Wright
Katie Smith
Toby Street

Trombones
Simon Johnson
Rebecca Smith
Jonathan Hollick

Bass Trombone
Paul Milner

Tuba
Ben Thomson

Timpani
Nigel Thomas
Patrick King

Percussion
Neil Percy
David Jackson
Sam Walton
Markus Gruett

Harp
Bryn Lewis

Organ
Richard Gowers

* Members of the LSO String Experience Scheme
Established in 1992, the Scheme enables young string players at the start of their professional careers to gain work experience by playing in rehearsals and concerts with the LSO. The musicians are treated as professional 'extras', and receive fees in line with LSO section players. Kindly supported by the Barbara Whatmore Charitable Trust, the Idlewild Trust, The Thriplow Charitable Trust and The Thistle Trust.