

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

The Belfast Ensemble: Dublin Jack

Thursday 9 October 2025, 6pm

Purcell Room

We are proud to be a place where people come together to discover and connect with the wonder of classical music. Throughout the year, we provide unrivalled opportunities to encounter, live in person, the full range of music, and a variety of different ways for you to experience it.

Some of the world's most exciting artists, including our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists, join us to shine a light on this incredible art form. Welcome to Classical Music: Autumn/Winter 2025/26.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Conor Mitchell Dublin Jack – opera in 2 acts
(concert performance) (UK premiere)

100'

Performers

The Belfast Ensemble
Conor Mitchell *conductor*

Dublin Jack was created with funding from Arts Council Ireland's Opera Projects & Production Award, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Vaughan Williams Foundation.

The piece is presented with the support of Dublin Theatre Festival, Southbank Centre and Outburst Queer Arts Festival.

*This performance lasts approximately 2 hours.
There is a 20-minute interval.*

John Saul, also known as Dublin Jack, was a scandalous figure in Victorian London primarily remembered for his involvement in the underground world of male sex work and for his authorship of gay erotic literature. The most famous work attributed to him is *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain* (1881), one of the earliest known examples of explicitly gay literature in English. Presented as a memoir, the book provides a vivid, semi-fictionalised account of Saul's experiences in London's gay subculture. An underground hit, Saul's pornographic literature offers rare insight into the hidden lives of gay men during a time when same-sex relations were not only criminalised but seen as morally poisonous to the empire. So this lad from a post-famine Ireland occupies a unique place in literary and queer history for giving voice – albeit in a provocative form – to a marginalised and persecuted community.

The book aside, here's a boy from the poverty of Dublin slums, raised in the shadow of a famine and wildly effeminate. He was also gorgeous, and seduced by the terrible otherness of the British upper classes. This was British Ireland, the oldest

colony of the growing empire. A place where identities had become intermingled by force through the eradication of Irish language, culture and land. So it is no surprise that a young Saul was drawn to London, the largest city in the world at that time and the centre of the empire. Ireland's deep religious roots, recent catastrophic death toll and burgeoning revolutionary movement was no place for a flamboyant lad who would one day be rumoured to be the lover of Prince Albert Victor, was it?

London, for Saul, was a place of relative freedom; a place where his tribe of 'rent boys' gathered under the lights of Piccadilly. He could flourish. Some may judge his vocation, but we can't judge his success. He climbed to the top of his profession (no pun intended). I was drawn to the parallels with the Ireland of my youth, and the exodus of gay boys in the 1980s and 1990s. The Catholic regime in the south and the hyper-masculine violence-cult in the north saw generations of men leaving their home, flocking to safer cities – sure, it wasn't all roses in Thatcherite London, but there was 'a scene', a community. That this was still happening a hundred years after Saul shocks me. It's changed now, but the Oz-like, Priscilla-like qualities of the queer narrative here are rich.

This concert is a first step in understanding where these characters will take us. It is the first two completed acts of the works that form Part One: an opera in itself. I, as a dramatist, am only interested in character, and giving voice to them here for the first time and allowing them to breathe, is an important part of my process. This is by no means the finished work. These are the large-scale structures that house the critical character and musical DNA. Sharing them with you, and encouraging feedback, good and bad, allows me to move forward and make a final staged production. It also opens up the creative process, and that's something we at the Belfast Ensemble like to do: bring our audience with us as a piece is made. As an Associate Artist of the Southbank Centre, I am delighted that these all-Ireland performers are here tonight. They remind me of the Southbank Centre's importance as a place for national, cultural conversations – and I hope the ghost of Jack Saul is among us, singing along and upstaging the lot of us with the sheer force of his/her fabulousness!

Programme note © Conor Mitchell, composer / librettist & artistic director

The Belfast Ensemble

Voices

Christopher Bowen
Matthew Cavan
Eoin Conway
Graham Cooper
Christopher Cull
Andrew Gavin
Aaron O'Hare
Emma Power

Violin

Clare Hadwen

Viola

Aoife Magee

Cello

Elias Rooney

Double bass

Roger McCann

Flutes

Aisling Agnew

Clarinet/recorder

Anne Harper

Trumpet

Ryan Quigley

Trombone

Casey Trowel

Piano

Dawn Hardwick

Piano/celesta

Fionnuala Ward

Harp

Richard Allen

Percussion – timpani & bells

Ronan McKee

Percussion – hand & tuned

Chris Goody

Staging:

Lights

Mary Tumelty

Sound

Ian Vennard

Production planning

Natalie Murphy

Production manager

Fergal Loneragan

Deputy stage manager

Cal McElwee

Assistant stage manager

Jonathan Rainey Reid

Management:

Artistic director / creator / conductor

Conor Mitchell

Executive producer

Andrew Hume

Creative producer

Alice Malseed

Marketing associate

Aiveen Kelly

Orchestral associate

Aoife Magee

The Belfast Ensemble are funded by Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Belfast City Council and the John Ellerman Foundation.

Find out more

- ▶ The Belfast Ensemble
- ▶ Conor Mitchell
- ▶ southbankcentre.co.uk

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Thursday 23 October 2025, 7pm | Queen Elizabeth Hall

Blending the raw energy of grime, drill and Afrobeat with soulful gospel and orchestral scores, *Stuck* is a bold new musical that explores home and community.

Manchester Collective: Lights and Places

Sunday 9 November 2025, 6pm | Purcell Room

Immerse yourself in a kaleidoscope of sounds and cross-genre experimentation at this radiant celebration of voices from the UK's contemporary music scene.