

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Lawrence Power & Aurora Orchestra: In Italy

Sunday 29 June 2025, 6pm | Queen Elizabeth Hall

Classical music has always had reinvention at its core. Throughout our programme, we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – capture that trailblazing spirit with works that broke the mould across the ages and brand-new approaches to timeless classics.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

A musical and dramatic exploration of
Berlioz Harold en Italie, Op.16

60'

Interval

Mendelssohn Symphony No.4 in A (Italian)
(performed from memory)

30'

Performers

Aurora Orchestra

Nicholas Collon *conductor*

Lawrence Power *viola*

Charlotte Ritchie *actor*

Jane Mitchell *concept, script & co-director*

James Bonas *co-director*

Hector Berlioz (1803–69)

Harold en Italie (1834)

1 *Harold in the Mountains*

2 *March of the Pilgrims*

3 *Serenade of a Mountaineer from the Abruzzi to his Mistress*

4 *Orgy of Brigands*

With its resplendent history and iconic cultural achievements – not least the glories of Roman antiquity and the inspirational art and sculpture of the Renaissance – it's perhaps no surprise that Italy formed the epicentre of many a well-to-do young man's Grand Tour of Europe during the 18th and early 19th centuries. These were no mere tourist trips. The Grand Tour represented what was considered the culmination of a young gentleman's education, offering him a direct encounter with Italian art, culture and society, with the aim of cultivating his tastes, broadening his knowledge and – naturally – polishing his all-important manners. Goethe, Byron, Shelley and even Thomas Jefferson all undertook edifying tours of Italy. So did Felix Mendelssohn, though not until after he had explored his more idiosyncratic choice of Scotland as a country of inspirational landscapes and passionate stories. The composer of tonight's first piece, however, was far more reluctant to immerse himself in the azure skies and endless sunlight of Italy.

What did drive Hector Berlioz, was a chance of winning the prestigious Prix de Rome, France's (and probably Europe's) loftiest artistic contest, established during the reign of Louis XIV and suspended only as recently as 1968. A win would serve to cement a young composer's reputation in the eyes of French society, bringing enduring fame and respect that in many cases defined their later careers. Berlioz was so keen that he tried no fewer than four times, finally winning in 1830 with his cantata *La mort de Sardanapale* (earlier attempts had been considered far too audaciously forward-looking).

In Italy is kindly supported by the New Berlioz Edition Trust

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

But when it came to his prize – a lengthy stay at the Villa Medici in Rome, where he would be allowed time to compose, free of other commitments – Berlioz did just about all he could to avoid the trip. He argued that remaining in Paris would be

far more conducive to his creativity (and even got his friends and fellow composers Giacomo Meyerbeer and Gaspare Spontini to petition on his behalf). There was also the small matter of his love life: after his obsessive pursuit of Irish-born actress Harriet Smithson (which had inspired his *Symphonie fantastique*), Berlioz's affections had moved on to the pianist and teacher Camille Moke, who agreed to marry him around the same time as his Prix de Rome victory.

Nonetheless, Berlioz was compelled to fulfill his Roman obligations, though with his evident disdain for Italian culture, his sojourn at the Villa Medici was hardly a happy one. In his colourful *Mémoires*, he would later describe life in Italy as 'a continual martyrdom – one's beautiful musical dreams are dispelled by grim and hopeless reality; every day brings fresh disappointment – while other arts flourish, displaying their manifold beauties, music alone is degraded to the level of a poor hunted slave'. It can't have helped that he bumped into fellow composer Felix Mendelssohn, who clearly adored the place. Berlioz nonetheless took the opportunity to sample the cultures of nearby regions, travelling to Florence, Naples, Genoa, Siena, Pisa and several other cities. (He also made an aborted return to Paris, vowing to murder his former lover Camille Moke, who had taken up with another man, Camille Pleyel, heir to the piano manufacturing business. Berlioz got as far as Nice before thinking better of the idea.)

Nonetheless, following his proper return to Paris in 1834, Berlioz' years in Italy would go on to colour and shape several of his later compositions – chief among them, his 'symphony with solo viola' *Harold en Italie*. And it was another Italian who was directly responsible for the piece's commissioning. Violinist and composer Nicolò Paganini was at that time an international superstar with something of a cult status, a musician so devilishly brilliant in his playing that he was rumoured to be in league with Satan himself (a piece of gossip taken so seriously that it may have contributed to delays to Paganini's burial in consecrated ground, which finally took place more than three decades after his death). Paganini had acquired a viola made by legendary luthier Antonio Stradivari, and asked Berlioz for something to showcase the instrument's distinctive sound. But when Paganini saw Berlioz' initial ideas for *Harold en Italie*, he considered he would be spending far too long out of the limelight, and turned it down (though he still paid the fee they had agreed). After hearing a performance of what became *Harold en Italie* in Paris in 1838, however, Paganini was so overwhelmed that he dragged Berlioz on stage, then knelt and kissed his hand before the adoring audience (and later sent him a follow-up gift of 20,000 francs, more than twice Berlioz' annual earnings).

The concept that Berlioz came up with for his unusual piece was based around the poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* by Lord Byron, hugely popular at the time. *Harold en Italie* imagined Byron's melancholy, introspective wanderer observing scenes from Italian life and landscape – though, as many commentators have pointed out, there are so few specific connections with Byron's original that the piece might more accurately have been called *Berlioz en Italie*.

As has probably become clear, Berlioz was an undeniably larger-than-life character, and he chronicled his adventures and his often withering opinions in his hugely entertaining, autobiographical (though, it has to be said, hardly reliable) *Mémoires*, which form the basis for much of the theatrical setting for tonight's performance of *Harold en Italie*. And after all, for a composer who was so radical and pioneering in his ideas about musical storytelling and musical forms, it's only appropriate that one of his most iconic works is treated with a certain degree of creative freedom and imagination.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–47)

Symphony No.4 in A (Italian) (1834)

- 1 *Allegro vivace*
- 2 *Andante con moto*
- 3 *Con moto moderato*
- 4 *Presto and Finale: Saltarello*

If Berlioz hated his time in Italy, then Felix Mendelssohn adored the ten months he spent in the country from October 1830, making his way from the family home in Berlin to Venice and Naples via Bologna, Florence and Rome, then back home through Genoa and Milan. The three weeks he had earlier spent in Scotland – which inspired his *Hebrides Overture* and *Scottish Symphony* – had been about brooding landscapes, swirling mists and blood-soaked history. By contrast, his Italian trip – as he wrote home to his parents – was about light, sunshine and happiness: 'This is Italy! And now has begun what I have always thought to be the supreme joy in life. And I am loving it.'

Unlike Berlioz, it was during his travels that Mendelssohn devoted time to planning what he called 'the jolliest piece I have ever done' in a letter to his sister Fanny. He would go on to complete his *Italian Symphony* back home in Berlin on 13 March 1833. It was an immediate success at its premiere in London two months later.

Mendelssohn described the Symphony as 'blue sky in A major', and the piece's bright optimism is encapsulated in the first movement's bounding opening theme, though the movement's central development section brings in somewhat darker, more impish material. Religious processions that Mendelssohn witnessed in Rome inspired the slow second movement: it contrasts a noble melody in the woodwind and violas with a plodding bassline, slipping away at its conclusion as if the procession has moved into the distance.

Following an elegant third-movement minuet (complete with distant horn calls in its central trio section), Mendelssohn closes with a finale that blends two breathless Italian dances: the Roman saltarello (which gives the movement its name) and the Neapolitan tarantella. The *Italian* is one of very few symphonies in the repertoire that begins in the bright positivity of the major and ends in the more serious minor (more often the journey is the other way round: just think of Beethoven's Fifth). Despite this, the finale's whirling energy – alongside a melancholy memory of the Symphony's opening melody just before the end – ensures a propulsive, even delirious conclusion.

Programme notes © David Kettle, 2025

Aurora Orchestra

Violin 1

Alexandra Wood
Marcus Barcham Stevens
Peter Liang
Maria Spengler
Elizabeth Cooney
Katharina Paul
Naoko Keatley
Patrick Curlett
Anna Caban
Laura Dixon

Violin 2

Jamie Campbell
Elvira van Groningen
Hannah Bell
Gillon Cameron
Ana Do Vale
Alexandra Lomeiko
Elise Scheurer
Tamara Elias

Viola

Kinga Wojdalska
Kay Stephen
Hannah Shaw
Anna Barsegjana
Kasia Ziminska
Ruth Nelson

Cello

Torun Stavseng
Sébastien van Kuijk
Reinoud Ford
Ben Chappell
Charlotte Kaslin

Double bass

Ximo Clemente
Lucía Polo Moreno
Samuel Rice
Phoebe Clarke

Flute

Fiona Kelly

Flute/Piccolo

Clare Jefferis

Oboe/Cor anglais

Steven Hudson

Oboe

Katie Bennington

Clarinet

Timothy Orpen
Adam Lee

Bassoon

Amy Harman
Dominic Tyler
Linton Stephens
Emily Ambrose

Horn

Annemarie Federle
Joel Ashford
George Strivens
Hannah Williams

Trumpet

Russell Gilmour
Imogen Whitehead

Cornet

Holly Clark
Will Thomas

Trombone

Matthew Gee
Huw Evans

Bass trombone

Guy Berry

Tuba

Stuart Beard

Timpani

Stefan Beckett

Percussion

Jacob Brown
Catherine Ring
Sarah Mason

Harp

Sally Pryce

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