
LONDON CONCERT CHOIR

est. 1960

President
Roderick Williams OBE

Music Director
Mark Forkgen



Duke Ellington: Sacred Concert

Monday, 14 July 2025, 7:30pm

Programme: £3

lcchoir.uk



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Interval and timings: Intervals vary with each performance. Some performances may not have an interval. Latecomers will not be admitted until a suitable break in the performance.



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Programme designed by Stephen Rickett
Programme notes by Emily Taylor

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Duke Ellington: Sacred Concert

Mark Forkgen *conductor*

Nina Bennett *soprano*

London Concert Choir
with Big Band

There will be an INTERVAL of 20 minutes.

DUKE ELLINGTON (1899–1974)

Sacred Concert

Duke Ellington composed three *Sacred Concerts*, first performed in 1965, 1968 and 1973. This arrangement, created by John Høybye and Peder Pedersen in 1993, combines elements from the three Sacred Concerts into a cohesive work for soprano solo, mixed choir, and big band, with an emphasis on the choral parts. Tonight's performance includes an additional movement from the second Sacred Concert: Meditation.

Praise God

Meditation

Heaven

Freedom Suite

a. To Be Contented

b. Freedom

c. Word You Heard

d. Freedom is a Word

e. Sweet, Fat and That

f. Freedom (Recitation)

g. To Be Contented

I N T E R V A L

The Shepherd

The Majesty of God

Come Sunday

David Danced Before the Lord

Almighty God

T.G.T.T.

Praise God and Dance – Finale

HISTORY AND HIGHLIGHTS

Pianist and composer Duke Ellington was an outstanding force in the jazz world and in modern music. Born in 1899, he became a fixture of American live and recorded music in the 20th century, writing and performing extensively with his jazz orchestra from 1924 right up until his death in 1974. Much of his prolific output has entered the canon of jazz standards, and his immense contribution to music was recognised posthumously with a Pulitzer Prize Special Award for music in 1999.

Having already toured and composed almost constantly over four decades, Ellington's creative focus in his later years was on bringing his *Sacred Concerts* to audiences. The three pieces premiered in 1965, 1968 and 1973, and were later performed in cathedrals and churches across the US, Europe and the UK. Ellington worked with the choral forces available within each local community to briefly rehearse and perform his simple vocal arrangements. He took a fluid approach to the narrative arc of these compositions, so that after the opening performances, the individual movements were often presented interchangeably in the many shows that followed. Some numbers appeared in more than one of the three *Sacred Concerts*, and some compositions from earlier in his career also featured.

Tonight's performance brings together elements from all three of the original *Sacred Concert* programmes, but draws most significantly on the second (1968) composition – described by Ellington himself as “the most important thing I have ever done”. By this period in his career, he had become increasingly reflective and preoccupied with the spiritual, in the most universal sense. While not a regular churchgoer (according to family accounts), he had deep religious convictions and considered it his mission to convey the divine through his music.

The second *Sacred Concert* might be considered partly as an elegy for Ellington's longstanding friend and close musical collaborator, Billy Strayhorn, who composed pieces that became part of the band's core repertoire, including their signature tune “Take the A-Train”. His death in May 1967 affected Duke profoundly. Meanwhile, the febrile socio-political backdrop also had a significant influence on the composition. The Vietnam war was by then in its thirteenth year, and the civil rights movement continued to evolve following the pivotal events of the mid-60s, including Martin Luther King's seminal 1963 speech “I have a dream”.

The first *Sacred Concert* had drawn on the themes of origination, creation and innocence associated with the book of Genesis (taking as its starting point the opening words of the Old Testament, “In the beginning, God”).

By contrast, the second work deals with the central motif of the book of Exodus, which resonated so deeply with contemporary events: emancipation and renewal.

The heart of the piece is the "*Freedom*" suite, a concert within a concert which offers a meditation on the word *freedom*. With intense focus on this single idea, Ellington imbues the word with both religious and political meaning. The biblical freedom of the Israelites escaping from Egypt is echoed in the contemporary yearning for racial equality; freely chosen faith in God frees the individual to fulfil their potential; while the freedom that comes with God's love and forgiveness is layered with Duke's personal creed: an inclusive, unifying expression of faith which welcomes all and draws all together.

Critics have also observed the parallels with Ellington's sense of musical freedom – his increasingly flexible compositional style which embraced a range of forms, and his self-described genre: "beyond category". *Freedom* is given a variety of treatments in each movement, from lightly sung scat vocals to a slow, richly harmonised chorale which luxuriates in the dream of liberty. Ellington adds spoken elements in multiple languages in the manner of testimonial worship.

The themes of liberation and peace are echoed in "*Come Sunday*", which featured in the first (1965) *Sacred Concert* and forms a petition for divine providence, pleading "Oh please look down and see my people through". These subjects, already emotionally and politically charged, gained additional significance following the first performance in January 1968, with the assassination of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy later the same year. As the second *Sacred Concert* continued touring, this resonance would have been deeply felt by audiences.

The piece is book-ended by a setting of Psalm 150, "*Praise God with the sound of the trumpet*". This scriptural text has provided a rich seam of inspiration for composers, with well-known settings by Bruckner, Stravinsky and Franck among others. Ellington's interpretation gives the words an expansive swagger, along with the requisite reverence and joy, which are amplified in the reprise, reaching ecstatic heights of praise.

Of course, some elements of Ellington's praise are unspoken, whether in instrumental numbers set for big band, or in virtuoso improvised solos. This is taken to ultimate lengths in "*T.G.T.T.*", short for "too good to title": here, the soprano soloist's wordless vocals express the beauty and complexity of the Supreme Being. Even Duke's hesitation to name the piece was said to reflect his sense of the ineffable "wonder of God".





MARK FORKGEN

CONDUCTOR



Mark Forkgen has been the Music Director of London Concert Choir since 1996. He is also Music Director of Canticum chamber choir, Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor of Kokoro (the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra's New Music Group) and Director of Music at Tonbridge School.

He has conducted major UK orchestras, including the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, City of London Sinfonia, English Chamber Orchestra, Northern Philharmonia and Manchester Camerata, and appeared at major venues, including the Royal Festival Hall, the Royal Albert Hall and the Barbican. Outside the UK he has conducted in Denmark, Spain, France, Belgium, Germany, Holland, Eire, the Czech Republic, Italy, Bulgaria and Hong Kong.

A specialist in the field of choral and contemporary music, Mark also enjoys an active life as a pianist, focusing on twentieth-century and contemporary music, and has been Conductor and Artistic Advisor for a number of highly acclaimed festivals.

Highlights this month include Dvorak's New World Symphony, conducting concertos by Strauss, Shostakovich, Ravel and Sibelius, and a choral program celebrating nature at Queen's House.

NINA BENNET

SOPRANO



The versatile soprano Nina Bennet spent the first 20 years of her career performing around the world with choral groups such as the Academy of Ancient Music, Britten Sinfonia Voices, and the BBC Singers, before developing a much larger voice.

Recent concert work includes Mendelssohn's *Elijah* in Romsey Abbey, Britten's *War Requiem* in Haileybury College, Vaughan Williams' *A Sea Symphony* in De Montford Hall, Leicester, Tippett's *A Child of Our Time* here in Cadogan Hall, Britten's *Spring Symphony* in Canterbury Cathedral, Howells' *Hymnus Paradisi* in Bristol Beacon, and Verdi's *Requiem* in Eberbach Abbey, Germany. Nina made her solo Proms debut in the Royal Albert Hall singing in the UK premiere of Lera Auerbach's *The Infant Minstrel and His Peculiar Menagerie* with the BBCSO under Edward Gardner, and sang in 2023 with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra in the televised *Earth Prom*. In 2024 she made her Strauss' *Four Last Songs* debut in Germany with the Deutsche Philharmonie Merck, and returned two months later for three performances of Mahler's epic 8th Symphony.

Nina is also at home in both Jazz and Gospel music, and Will Todd's *Mass in Blue* makes a regular appearance in her concert schedule, often performing it with the Will Todd trio. She has performed with the composer and gospel choir conductor Ken Burton in his piece *Take Time to Change*, the Duke Ellington *Sacred Concerts* under Neil Ferris, and a set of jazz standards with members of the Aurora Orchestra in King's Place. She last appeared with LCC in a Rodgers and Hammerstein bonanza with the Southbank Sinfonia here in Cadogan Hall.

Nina has made her first forays into the more dramatic opera works with the parts of Ortlinde and Gerhilde in Wagner's *Die Walküre* for the London Opera Company, Lia in an adaptation of Debussy's *L'Enfant Prodigue* for the Grimeborn Festival, Kathy in *Her Day* for Coventry's City of Culture Festival, and Donna Anna in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* for Surrey Opera at the Minack Theatre.

When not singing, Nina is responsible for raising two teenagers and a cat called Billie Holiday.

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President

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Music Director

Mark Forkgen

James Finlay

Chairman

Martin Goodwin

Concert Manager

Tabitha Strydom

Treasurer

Stephen Rickett

Design and Communications

Jennifer Greenway

Membership

Barbara Paterson

Committee Secretary

Simon Livesey

Company Secretary

One of London's leading amateur choirs, London Concert Choir celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2020. The choir is notable for the commitment and musicality of its performances in an unusually varied repertoire and regularly appears with Mark Forkgen at London's premier concert venues, while tours abroad have included visits to France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain.

The choir's 50th anniversary was marked by two performances of Britten's War Requiem. Other major works have included Rachmaninov's choral symphony The Bells with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, and Elgar's Dream of Gerontius, Mendelssohn's Elijah, Brahms' German Requiem and Vaughan Williams' Sea Symphony, all with Southbank Sinfonia. The choir has also taken part in the St John's Smith Square Christmas Festival, together with Southbank Sinfonia.

Operas in concert performance have ranged from Purcell's King Arthur and Dido and Aeneas to Gershwin's Porgy and Bess. Performances with Counterpoint period instrumental ensemble include Handel's Messiah, Bach's St Matthew and St John Passions and Christmas Oratorio, Monteverdi's Vespers of 1610 and Mozart's 'Great' C minor Mass. LCC has also performed Rachmaninov's Vespers and Will Todd's Mass in Blue and a selection of highlights from the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein.

London Concert Choir often gives concerts for charity, including Christmas Carol concerts in aid of St George's Hospital Children's wards. The choir's new music commissions have included A Light not yet Ready to Go Out by Alison Willis, in aid of Breast Cancer Now, and Per Ardua ad Astra, a major work by Roderick Williams to commemorate the centenary of the RAF.

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LONDON CONCERT CHOIR MEMBERS

Soprano

Dagmar Binsted
Eleanor Blackman
Alison Carpenter
Eleanor Cowie
Emma Davidson
Christine Dencer
Emma Dixon
Emily Dresner
Sarah French
Jennifer Greenway
Dalia Gurari
Emma Heath
Elmina Homapour
Emily Hunka
Eva Ignatuschtschenko
Carol Ihnatowicz
Christine Ingram
Julija Jones
Jane Joyce
Julia Keddie
Vickie Kelly
Anna Kosicka
Joanna Kramer
Kate Leng
Susanna Lutman
Chrysanthi Mavraki
Katie McCullagh
Sue McFadyen
Megan McGrory
Annie Meston
Delyth Morgan
Adrienne Morgan
Stephanie Moussadis
Ciara Munnelly
Margaret Perkins

Jutta Raftery
Hannah Schlenker
Ines Schlenker
Frances Shaw
Caroline Sheppard
Trina Stevens
Aisling Turner
Josephine von Zitzewitz
Janet Wells
Belinda Whittingham
Julie Wilson
Yammi Yip

Alto

Kate Britten
Janet Cole
Carys Cooper
Deborah Curle
Rosie de Saram
Kathleen Dormer
Rebecca Foulkes
Anna Garnier
Sarah Gasquoine
Mary Glanville
Muriel Hall
Penny Hatfield
Denise Howell
Chrina Jarvis
Margaret Kalaugher
Sharon Kipfer
Carol Lane
Aurore Le Comte
Liz Lowther
Bridget Maidment
Adrienne Mathews
Karen McManus

Neetu Menon
Rosie Norris
Cathy Packe
Barbara Paterson
Judith Paterson
Rachel Pearson
Gillian Perry
Dubravka Polic
Beccy Reese
Pamela Slatter
Tabitha Strydom
Josie Taylor
Gabriel West
June Williams

Tenor

James Azam
David Broad
Angela Bryant
Richard Davison
Dave Dosoruth
Fabyan Evans
Jonathan Gregson
Graham Hick
Richard Holmes
Carolyn Knight
Ian Leslie
Andrew Lyburn
Eckart Marchand
Ben Martin
Alice Reed
Stephen Rickett
Arick Shao
Tim Steer
Andrew Sutcliffe
Ruth Yeo

Bass

Colin Allies
John Ancock
Miles Armstrong
Andrew Burton
Mark Davies
Chris Finch
James Finlay
Martin Goodwin
Nigel Grieve
David Hannah
Robert Harris
Keith Holmes
Ian Judson
Robert Kealey
Stefan Klaazen
Simon Livesey
Mark Livingstone
Jeremy Lucas
Hamish Naismith
Paul Norris
Morgan Roberts
Jonathan Rogers
Tom Roles
Keith Searle
Anthony Sharp
John Somerville
Ryszard Stepaniuk
Wilson To
Tony Trowles
Dai Whittingham

BIG BAND MEMBERS

Saxophones

Alto 1

Sam Bullard

Alto 2

Ollie Weston

Tenor 1

Gareth Lumbers

Tenor 2

John McKillup

Baritone

Jonny Ford

Trumpets

Danny Marsden

Toby Coles

Martin Evans

Richard Thomas

Trombones

Nichol Thomson

Dan Higham

Harry Maund

Sam Freeman

Drum Kit & Congas

Matthew Arnold

Double Bass

Murray Dare

Guitar

Will Scott

Piano

Mark Forkgen

LONDON CONCERT CHOIR

SUPPORTING THE CHOIR

London Concert Choir appreciates the encouragement of our audiences, especially those of you who come along regularly, bringing friends and family with you, and those who share the word about our achievements, enhancing our reputation.

As one of London's leading choirs we want to share our joy in making music with as many people as possible, but performing large concerts at major venues with professional soloists and orchestras requires more financial support than we can get from ticket sales alone. We rely on donations from our Friends, Companions and Patrons who give regularly.

We would love you to join them by becoming a regular financial supporter! You will receive a mention in our concert programmes, regular communications from the Choir, invitations to supporter events and the gratitude of our membership!

To find out more, please email:

supporters@londonconcertchoir.org

JOINING THE CHOIR

London Concert Choir welcomes new members, who are invited to attend a few rehearsals before an informal audition. Rehearsals are on Monday nights at Bloomsbury Baptist Church near Tottenham Court Road station. If you are interested in joining the choir, please fill in your details online at:

londonconcertchoir.org

JOIN OUR MAILING LIST

If you would like to receive advance information about our concerts, you can join the choir's free mailing list by clicking on the link on the home page of the website.

The information you provide is subject to data protection regulations (GDPR) and as such will be used exclusively by London Concert Choir.

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Miriam Kramer
Jill Marx
Janet and Michael Orr
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LCC is delighted to acknowledge the invaluable contribution made by the following individuals:

Peter Barley
Trish & Timothy Barnes
Deborah Bono
Anne Clayton
David Greenwood
Jeremy Groom
Alan Huw Smith
Tim Ingram
Simon Livesey
Sue Logan
Mark Loveday
Sue McFadyen
Gregory Rose
Will Tilden

