

**Kate Molleson:** Hello, and welcome to the Edinburgh International Festival 2025. I'm Kate Molleson, and this is The Warm Up, an insider's guide to the performance that you're about to experience.

This time we are backstage with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and the conductor, Karina Canellakis. They bring you a programme of Bernstein and Stravinsky. In a moment, we'll hear from the countertenor Hugh Cutting, as well as from chorus director James Grossmith. But first, here's our festival director, Nicola Benedetti, and also the head of music programme, Nicolas Zekulin.

**Nicola Benedetti:** So after making her sensational International Festival debut in 2023's closing concert, conductor Karina Canellakis returns to lead the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra through a monumental programme featuring Messiaen, Stravinsky and Bernstein. The deeply moving symphonic work *Les Offrandes Oubliées* made Messiaen's name aged just 22. With his devout Catholicism driving this three-part meditation on eternal mysteries and human sin. For the finale of the concert, we will hear Stravinsky's dazzling 1911 Ballet Petruska. This piece was brilliantly re-orchestrated by the composer in 1947, our opening year of the Festival, for the concert platform.

This programme is challenging, modern, unbelievably colourful, showcases every instrument on stage and if you're up for something that you have to invest yourself in but will be just outstanding, definitely this concert is for you.

**Nicolas Zekulin:** My name is Nick Zekulin, and I am the head of music programme at the Edinburgh International Festival.

One of the reasons that we wanted to programme *Chichester Psalms* by Leonard Bernstein is the fact that it shares an anniversary with our chorus, but it connects to the theme of truth as well. It's a piece in three movements, and each movement is a setting of a psalm, but is set to the original Hebrew text. So, we have Psalms 108, 23 and 131.

And you know, Bernstein is a Jewish man himself but innately understood that psalms are texts that sit at a cross section between Judaism and Christianity. And so have in a sort of a Western Judeo-Christian tradition, have universality. Even though they're in Hebrew, whether you're reading or hearing the text in the Hebrew language or in the translation, they will be immediately recognisable to practitioners.

So just by me saying lines like 'the Lord is my shepherd', or 'make a joyful noise unto the Lord', anyone who is of those faiths will immediately be drawn

in and recognise the rest of the text. And I think interestingly as well, for our time in speaking to truth, Bernstein ends with a message of peace and unity, and the truth essentially comes through in how we're connected by common beliefs, even if we are divided by religion.

And so, the whole work ends with these lines from Psalm 131, 'behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity'. It feels like it was written for our times. You know, it's 60 years old and it couldn't be more relevant, even though we all have these, our own personal truths, somehow there feels like there's a connective tissue in our society and great artists find ways to tell those stories that last the test of time.

**James Grossmith:** I'm James Grossmith, and I'm Director of the Festival Chorus. So, we sing Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*. This is a piece that the chorus have sung before. It's a very joyous, upbeat composition.

Yes, it's inspired by Stravinsky. It's a Hebrew setting of the psalms that was written actually for England. It was commissioned by Chichester [cathedral] in 1965 and premiered in New York in the same year and then came and was performed here. He wrote just before it his third symphony, which was the 'Kaddish' symphony, again, Hebrew settings of biblical texts.

But the 'Kaddish' Symphony, which the Festival Chorus have also performed, is a much more grief-stricken work that it explores subjects of despair and very dark human expression. So, *Chichester Psalms*, if you like, is the polar opposite of that. Right from the very first moment, you've got ecstatic rhythms. You've got colourful orchestrations, incredibly biting rhythms that you just can't lose from your ear. They just take hold. So, it's a work of great joy, but yes, it does have the rhythmic drive. Something of the sort of ballets of Stravinsky about it. He was a great proponent, conductor of Stravinsky's words, but also a great admirer of his style.

**Hugh Cutting:** I'm Hugh Cutting, and for a countertenor, being able to do a sort of, you know, a 20<sup>th</sup>-century piece anyway, is a gift because it's not that common, I suppose, from a very practical perspective, and I know that they wanted, when they commissioned Bernstein for the *Chichester Psalms*, they wanted like a touch of *West Side Story* to it, right? I think that was one of the things that they asked for, and he absolutely delivered. I mean, it's got so many good tunes, but also that punchy, very idiomatic of Bernstein, sort of rhythmic impulse to it. Yeah, it's fun. It's full-hearted, full-blooded. The sound world that he creates in that second movement is so, really, it does feel very magical and very linked to the text, the psalm text of it.

And it's just a lovely thing to, you know, I think, yeah, especially for us countertenors to enjoy that rich, slightly more symphonic sound world, I guess.

**Kate Molleson:** Hugh Cutting there and James Grossmith speaking about their performance at the Usher Hall on Thursday, the 21st of August. It runs for an hour and 40 minutes with one interval. Supported by Pirie Rankin Endowed Fund.