

NEC Symphony

Hugh Wolff, conductor

Stanford and Norma Jean Calderwood Director of Orchestras

Tianyi Ren '25 MM, conductor

Wednesday, March 5, 2025

7:30 p.m.

NEC's Jordan Hall

PROGRAM

Samuel Kerr '25 MM

Desolate Void, Ecstatic Flight (2024)

Claude Debussy
(1862–1918)

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune. L. 86

Richard Wagner
(1813–1883)

Prelude and “Liebestod” from *Tristan und Isolde*

Tianyi Ren '25 MM, conductor

Intermission

Edward Elgar
(1857–1934)

Variations on an Original Theme, op. 36
“Enigma Variations”

Theme: Andante

Var. I: “C.A.E.” *L’istesso tempo*

Var. II: “H.D.S.-P.” *Allegro*

Var. III: “R.B.T.” *Allegretto*

Var. IV: “W.M.B.” *Allegro di molto*

Var. V: “R.P.A.” *Moderato*

Var. VI: “Ysobel” *Andantino*

Var. VII: “Troyte” *Presto*

Var. VIII: “W.N.” *Allegretto*

Var. IX: “Nimrod” *Moderato*

Var. X: “Dorabella – Intermezzo” *Allegretto*

Var. XI: “G.R.S.” *Allegro di molto*

Var. XII: “B.G.N.” *Andante*

Var. XIII: “***” (*Romanza*) *Moderato*

Var. XIV: “E.D.U.” *Finale: Allegro*

Hugh Wolff, conductor

Kerr *Desolate Void, Ecstatic Flight*

Desolate Void, Ecstatic Flight is a deeply personal work about overcoming all-encompassing, torturing emptiness. I wrote this piece in a chaotic period of transition, having just moved to a new city and finding myself in the midst of a months-long, rollercoaster struggle with bouts of arresting depression. Despite meaningful support from loved ones and mentors, this time proved to be both highly challenging and difficult to break out of—I went weeks at a time without writing a single new note of music, despite my constant efforts.

Through this struggle, I discovered that (for me), the only way to get out of the endless doldrums was to put my head down and lose myself in my work. To search for the void within with both hands and strangle it. I have been able to reclaim some land for myself out of the blackness by aggressively attacking the feelings of negativity as they come – to that end, I wrote the short poem on the last page of the score in December of 2023, forming the narrative basis of the work. I dedicate this piece with kind thanks to Kati Agócs for believing in me and my music. – *Samuel Kerr*

the screaming abyss,
the impossible silence
pushes inward,
oppresses,
envelopes.

shattering echoes,
screaming with no voice
what horrifying entropy
could but be confronted?

yet still,
in a chariot of stars
and mantle of fire,
an Ecstatic Flight
shears away, fighting
wildly and furiously
shredding, eviscerating
the Desolate Void.

blackest nights, darkest days
strangle and confound,
only to be torn asunder
by infinite passion,

as the celestial bell tolls
through the caverns of the universe.

Debussy *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*

Claude Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* is a milestone in musical impressionism, deeply intertwined with the visual and literary movements of its

time. Inspired by Stéphane Mallarmé's Symbolist poem *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, Debussy translates dreamlike sensuality into music, capturing the faun's drowsy reverie as he reflects on his encounters with nymphs in the forest.

In visual art, Impressionists like Monet and Renoir sought to depict light and movement through color, avoiding sharp lines and rigid forms. Debussy achieves a similar effect through fluid, unresolved harmonies, whole-tone scales, and ambiguous tonality. His orchestration, shimmering with harps, muted strings, and ethereal woodwinds, evokes shifting light and shadow.

This piece also anticipates the dreamlike atmosphere of modernism, influencing composers, choreographers, and even early film aesthetics. Nijinsky's radical 1912 ballet interpretation, with its stylized, angular movements, mirrored broader artistic shifts toward suggestion, ambiguity, and sensory experience at the end of the 19th century. Debussy's *Prélude* remains a masterpiece of musical painting, inviting the listener into a world of ephemeral beauty.

Wagner Prelude and "Liebestod" from *Tristan und Isolde*

The Prelude to Richard Wagner's music drama *Tristan und Isolde* opens with the famous "Tristan chord" — a destabilizing harmony that resists resolution, symbolizing the opera's unresolved yearning. This ambiguity permeates the prelude, as chromatic lines weave an atmosphere of restless desire. Wagner's use of suspension-laden harmonies creates an overwhelming sense of tension, mirroring the illicit love between Tristan and Isolde.

The *Liebestod* ("Love-Death") concludes the opera as Isolde, in a state of ecstatic transfiguration, surrenders to death and the promise of love beyond earthly existence. Here, Wagner achieves harmonic resolution, fulfilling the longing outlined in the prelude. Lush orchestration and soaring melodic lines transform suffering into transcendence, blurring the boundaries between life and death.

This music still speaks to us today, not just as an artifact of 19th-century German Romanticism, but as a timeless, deeply psychological meditation on desire. Its effect is striking, echoing the uncertainties and complexities of interpersonal relationships in our contemporary world. The tension and release in Wagner's music mirror our own struggles with fulfillment, whether personal, artistic, or social. In an age dominated by digital immediacy, Wagner's expansive musical architecture invites deep listening — a challenge and an opportunity to slow down and immerse oneself in something profound.

– Tianyi Ren

Emerging young conductor **Tianyi Ren** is a Master of Music in Orchestral Conducting candidate at the New England Conservatory of Music, where he studies with Hugh Wolff. In July 2024, he was selected by members of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra to serve as the Faber Young Conducting Fellow at the Salzburg Festival. Previously, he was the youngest finalist at the Salonen Fellowship audition. Ren's other principal teachers include Mark Russell Smith, Paavo Järvi, and Neeme Järvi. He has been mentored by Christian Thielemann since 2022.

A graduate of The University of Chicago's flagship program of humanistic

inquiry, *Fundamentals: Issues and Texts*, Ren was awarded the Amy Kass Award for Best Thesis for his scholarship on Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain*. He continues to investigate the relationship between ideological presuppositions and cultural production, paying close attention to the cultural politics and theatricality in the performing arts. Ren incorporates his cross-cultural and interdisciplinary background to seek non-political remedies for social cohesion in the postmodern society in which we live.

Elgar *Variations on an Original Theme*

Variations on an Original Theme began with Edward Elgar improvising at the piano. Overhearing, the composer's wife asked what a particularly appealing snippet was. "It is nothing," the composer recalled replying, "but something could be made of it." In the following days, Elgar toyed with the theme, varying it as his friends might, were they, as he put it, "asses enough to compose." This was the unusual genesis of a masterpiece. True to this original intention, Elgar crafted each of the fourteen variations as a portrait. He included his wife in the first variation and himself in the finale. The now-familiar subtitle, *Enigma*, was a mischievous addition of Elgar at the work's 1899 premiere:

"The Enigma itself I will not explain — its 'dark saying' must be left unguessed, and I warn you that the apparent connection between the Variations and the Theme is often of the slightest texture; further, through and over the whole set another and larger theme 'goes,' but is not played. . . . So the principal Theme never appears."

Despite this disclaimer, the variations are very concisely organized on three fundamental motifs stated at the outset: the falling third of the theme's opening measure (often in rising sequence), the falling seventh of the third measure, and the rising scale and falling fourth of the seventh measure.

The work was a phenomenal success, launching the forty-two year old composer to international fame.

Here is a summary of each variation with Elgar's own words in italics.

Variation 1: "C.A.E." Caroline Alice Elgar, the composer's wife. *"The variation is really a prolongation of the theme with what I wished to be romantic and delicate additions; those who know C.A.E. will understand this reference to one whose life was a romantic and delicate inspiration."*

Variation 2. "H.D.S-P." Hew David Steuart-Powell, a pianist and Elgar's chamber music partner. *"His characteristic diatonic run over the keys . . . is here humorously travestied in the semiquaver [sixteenth-note] passages; these should suggest a Toccata, but chromatic beyond H.D.S-P.'s liking."*

Variation 3. "R.B.T." Richard Baxter Townshend, an eccentric writer, scholar and amateur thespian who rode a tricycle around town while constantly ringing its bell.

In her book, *Memories of a Variation*, Dora Penny (Variation 10) wrote: “Elgar has got him with his funny voice and manner – and the tricycle! It is all there and is just a huge joke to anyone who knew him well.”

Variation 4. “W.M.B.” William Meath Baker, “a country squire, gentleman and scholar. In the days of horses and carriages it was more difficult than in these days of petrol to arrange the carriages for the day to suit a large number of guests. This Variation was written after the host had, with a slip of paper in his hand, forcibly read out the arrangements for the day and hurriedly left the music-room with an inadvertent bang of the door.”

Variation 5. “R.P.A.” Richard Penrose Arnold, son of the poet Matthew Arnold, was “a great lover of music which he played (on the pianoforte) in a self-taught manner, evading difficulties but suggesting in a mysterious way the real feeling. His serious conversation was continually broken up by whimsical and witty remarks.”

Variation 6. “Ysobel,” Isabel Fitton, an amateur violist – hence the special treatment of the solo viola in this variation. “The opening bar, a phrase made use of throughout the variation, is an ‘exercise’ for crossing the strings – a difficulty for beginners; on this is built a pensive, and for a moment, romantic movement.”

Variation 7. “Troyte,” Arthur Troyte Griffith, an architect, amateur pianist and a close friend of Elgar’s. “The uncouth rhythm of the drums and lower strings was really suggested by some maladroit essays to play the pianoforte; later the strong rhythm suggests the attempts of the instructor (E.E.) to make something like order out of chaos, and the final despairing ‘slam’ records that the effort proved to be in vain.”

Variation 8. “W.N.” Winifred Norbury, an amateur pianist, co-secretary of the local Worcestershire Philharmonic Society, and a light-hearted woman with a characteristic laugh. Elgar suggested the variation was “really suggested by an eighteenth-century house and the gracious personalities of the ladies.”

Variation 9. “Nimrod,” August Jaeger, a German-born musician and Elgar’s closest friend. “Jaeger” means “hunter” in German, and Nimrod is a biblical hunter, hence the variation’s title. Jaeger worked for Novello, Elgar’s publisher, and he and Elgar had long conversations about music. One such conversation about the slow movements of Beethoven was the inspiration for this variation. Centrally located in the piece’s structure, it has become one of Elgar’s most recognized and celebrated melodies.

Variation 10. “Dorabella,” an affectionate nickname taken from Mozart’s opera *Così fan tutte* given Dora Penny, a young woman, friend of the family, and later Elgar’s archivist. She recalled the day he played through the entire work for her: “My mind was in such a whirl of pleasure, pride and almost shame that he should have written anything so lovely about me.”

Variation 11. "G.R.S." George Robertson Sinclair, organist of Hereford Cathedral. Written essentially on a dare, *"the first few bars were suggested by his great bulldog Dan (a well-known character) falling down the steep bank into the River Wye (bar 1); his paddling up stream to find a landing place (bars 2 and 3); and his rejoicing bark on landing (second half of bar 5). G.R.S. said 'set that to music'."*

Variation 12. "B.G.N." Basil Nevinson, a cellist with whom Elgar, a violinist, and Hew David Steuart-Powell (Variation 2) played trios. It is a *"tribute to a very dear friend whose scientific and artistic attainments, and the wholehearted way they were put at the disposal of his friends, particularly endeared him to the writer."*

Variation 13. "****" (Romanza). Elgar himself said only that the *"asterisks take the place of the name of a lady who was, at the time of the composition, on a sea voyage."* This presumably was Lady Mary Lygon, a friend then on her way to Australia by ocean liner. *"The drums suggest the distant throb of the engines of a liner."* Elgar quotes Mendelssohn's *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, in the clarinet, his way of saying "bon voyage" at a time when ocean travel had an element of danger.

Variation 14. "E.D.U." "Edu" was Alice Elgar's nickname for her husband. The longest and most complex variation is the work's stirring and eloquent finale.

NEC Symphony
Hugh Wolff, Tianyi Ren, conductors

First Violin

Ashley Tsai
Roger Chen
Joseph Zamoyta
Miranda Isbitts
Jessica Kartawidjaja
Anna Suzuki
Rentso Stavrev
Kira Bayer
Mara Zaner
Yoonjin Hwang
Ian Johnson
TzuYi Wu
Hana Taylor
Dora Oliva Devoghel

Second Violin

Cooper Olsen
Irene Koo
Eddy Au Yeung
Kevin Kang
Clark Snavely
Kyle Yang
Minkyung Kang
Audrey Weizer
Alexis Forman
Joanna Peters
Noga Barlev
Keila Wakao

Viola

Diogo Pimentel
Wenhao Wang
Daniel De La Cruz
Jiashu Yin
John Turner
Celine Bares
Rita Hugues Söderbaum
Sing Yin Li
Shiu Chit Chan
Haobo Bi
Qinghong He

Cello

Ethan Takao Murphy
Alexander Shier
Yue Mao
Eric Schindler
Yeon Soo Park
Emily Heewon Woo
Noah Vin
Yun-ting Chiang
Alex Aranzabal
Lazar Kaminsky

Bass

Dennis McIntyre
Lawrence Hall
Brian Choy
Cailin Singleton
Yushu Mei

Flute

Rylan Collins *
Meredith Daly +
Amelia Kazazian †§
Yuxin Song

Piccolo

Rylan Collins +
Meredith Daly *§

Oboe

Yuhsi Chang †
Katherine Filiss +
Annie Jung §
Victoria Solis Alvarado *

English horn

Yuhsi Chang *
Victoria Solis Alvarado †

Clarinet

Evan Chu §
Rohan Miovic +
Haoran Sun
Hanlin Yu *
Zhenyue Zheng †

Bass Clarinet

Evan Chu

Bassoon

Daniel Arakaki §
Jiayue Chen
Yerin Choi
Zilong Huang *
Dingding Xiong †
Keer Zhou +

Contrabassoon

Zilong Huang §
Dingding Xiong +

French horn

Elijah Barclift †
Chih-Yu Ashley Chiang
Mathys Elbaz +
Flynn Ewer
Hans-Erik Jerosch §
Connor Wood *

Trumpet

Lily Clark
Harry James
Anri Ramirez-Garcia
Joshua Retiz
Noah Semsar +
Richard Taylor §
Marlon Teruel *

Trombone

Max DiFonzo-Jones
Devin Drinan §
Quinton Krull *
Allie Klaire Ledbetter
Jaewon Shim +

Bass Trombone

Kyeongmin You

Tuba

Hayden Silvester

Timpani
Izzy Butler §
Patrick Sorah +
Mingcheng Zhou *

Percussion
Camden Briggs ‡
Izzy Butler
Jordan Fajardo-Bird +
Patrick Sorah §
Mingcheng Zhou

Harp
Ji Ma ‡
JT Zhang *

Principal players
+ Kerr
‡ Debussy
* Wagner
§ Elgar

Orchestra Department
Hugh Wolff

Stanford and Norma Jean Calderwood Director of Orchestras

Marjorie Apfelbaum
Director of Performance
Administration

David Loebel
Associate Director of
Orchestras

Timothy Ren
Student Manager

Donald Palma
Artistic Director of
Chamber Orchestra

Andrés Almirall
Performance Librarian

Tara Hagle
Student Librarian

Emma Boyd
Sarah Flynn
Carla Fortmann
Charlie Johnson
Stage Crew

Special thanks to
David Loebel
and
Jason Horowitz, Noriko Futagami, Mickey Katz, Tony D'Amico,
and Eli Epstein for their work in preparing the orchestra
for this evening's concert.

Hugh Wolff

*Stanford and Norma Jean Calderwood Director of Orchestras;
Chair, Orchestral Conducting*

Hugh Wolff joined the New England Conservatory faculty in 2008 and has conducted a large share of NEC's orchestral concerts every year since then. He has taught graduate students in an elite training program for orchestral conductors since 2009.

Wolff has appeared with all the major American orchestras, including those of Boston, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Cleveland. He is much in demand in Europe, where he has conducted the London Symphony, the Philharmonia, the City of Birmingham Symphony, the Orchestre National de France, Czech Philharmonic, Leipzig Gewandhaus, Munich Philharmonic, and the Bavarian and Berlin Radio Orchestras. A regular guest conductor with orchestras in Japan, Korea, Scandinavia, Canada and Australia, he is also a frequent conductor at summer festivals.

Currently Laureate Conductor of the Belgian National Orchestra, Wolff was principal conductor of the Frankfurt Radio Orchestra from 1997 to 2006 and maintains a close relationship with that ensemble. He led it on tours of Europe, Japan, and China, and at the Salzburg Festival. Wolff was principal conductor and then music director of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra (1988-2000), with which he recorded twenty discs and toured the United States, Europe, and Japan.

Performances with the Boston Symphony have included the world premiere of Ned Rorem's *Swords and Ploughshares* in Symphony Hall. Wolff was music director of the New Jersey Symphony (1986-1993) and principal conductor of Chicago's Grant Park Music Festival (1994-1997). He began his professional career in 1979 as associate conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra under Mstislav Rostropovich.

Wolff's extensive discography includes the complete Beethoven symphonies with the Frankfurt Radio Orchestra and music from the baroque to the present. He has recorded or premiered works by John Adams, Stephen Albert, John Corigliano, Brett Dean, Lukas Foss, John Harbison, Aaron Jay Kernis, Edgar Meyer, Rodion Shchedrin, Bright Sheng, Michael Torke, Mark-Anthony Turnage, and Joan Tower and has collaborated on CD with Mstislav Rostropovich, Yo-Yo Ma, Steven Isserlis, Joshua Bell, Hilary Hahn, Dawn Upshaw, Jennifer Larmore, Jean-Yves Thibaudet, and jazz guitarist John Scofield. Three times nominated for a Grammy Award, Wolff won the 2001 Cannes Classical Award.

A graduate of Harvard College, Wolff studied piano with George Crumb, Leon Fleisher and Leonard Shure, composition with Leon Kirchner and Olivier Messiaen, and conducting with Charles Bruck. In 1985, Wolff was awarded one of the first Seaver/ National Endowment for the Arts Conducting Prizes.

A gift from the Calderwood Charitable Foundation endowed the Stanford and Norma Jean Calderwood Director of Orchestras chair now occupied by Hugh Wolff.

He and his wife, harpist and radio journalist Judith Kogan, have three sons.

Symphonic Music at New England Conservatory

Stanford and Norma Jean Calderwood Director of Orchestras Hugh Wolff is joined by Associate Director of Orchestras David Loebel, Chamber Orchestra founder Donald Palma, and a rich array of guest conductors and coaches for dozens of FREE orchestral concerts in NEC's Jordan Hall this year.

Visit necmusic.edu for complete and updated concert information:

New Music Ensemble, Jacob Joyce, conductor

Gruber *Charivari*; Balch *all around the sea blazes gold*; Mazzoli *These Worlds Within Us*; Saariaho *Semafor*; Wagner *Limbic Fragments*; Ligeti *Romanian Concerto*
Wednesday, March 12, 2025 at 7:30 p.m., Jordan Hall

NEC Baroque Orchestra, Guy Fishman, director

Wednesday, April 2, 2025 at 7:30 p.m., Jordan Hall

NEC Chamber Orchestra, Donald Palma, artistic director

Say *Chamber Symphony*, op. 62; Honegger *Symphony No. 2*

Wednesday, April 9, 2025 at 7:30 p.m., Jordan Hall

NEC Philharmonia and Symphonic Choir, Hugh Wolff, conductor

Brahms *Ein deutsches Requiem*; with soloists Josie Larsen '25 AD, soprano and Zhanqui Wang '26 MM, baritone

Wednesday, April 16, 2025 at 7:30 p.m., Jordan Hall

Support the future of music at NEC!

Your gift to The NEC Fund has a direct and immediate impact on student scholarships, NEC's world-class faculty, and a collaborative and innovative learning environment rooted in the highest level of musical excellence.

Please consider making a gift to support NEC at necmusic.edu/givenow

Food and drink are not allowed in the concert hall,
and photography and audio or video recording are prohibited.

Assistive listening devices are available for all Jordan Hall concerts;
contact the head usher or house manager on duty or inquire at the Coat Room.

Latecomers will be seated at the discretion of management.

Stay connected



N | E | C

New England
Conservatory

necmusic.edu/tonight