



City of  
Birmingham  
Symphony  
Orchestra

**PRESS RELEASE**  
**30 November 2023**

## **New CBSO Leadership announce bold plan to diversify programme and rethink the rules of presentation for orchestral music**

In a [vision statement](#) published today, the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra's (CBSO) new leadership – Chief Executive, **Emma Stenning**, Chief Conductor, **Kazuki Yamada** and Chair of the Board, **Lord Tony Hall** – announced plans for an exciting 18-month period of exploration and testing, in search of opportunities to develop the orchestral experience in ways that could be truly welcoming to wider audiences.

The vision is published in draft form as a call to action for the orchestra, and also a call to response from loyal and future audiences, with whom the CBSO hopes to build a pioneering future for orchestral music in Birmingham.

Building on the CBSO's international reputation for boldness, innovation, and quality, the plan is to deepen the orchestra's connection to its city home by openly engaging with musicians, spaces, and communities from across the region, whilst exploring the future live form of a concert experience in collaboration with artists who will offer new perspectives on the performance of symphonic music.

As part of this process, **Tom Morris**, director, writer, producer, and creator of **The Bristol Proms** at Bristol Old Vic, where he worked with Emma Stenning, has been appointed as **Theatre Director in Residence** to oversee a series of changes to the look and feel of CBSO concerts. Emma has also engaged renowned programmer and curator **Gillian Moore** to help develop this new strategic direction. They will both work alongside **Anna Melville**, Head of Artistic Planning, who continues to lead on the programming.

At its core, the CBSO aims to put Birmingham at the heart of everything it does, exploring how the orchestra can meaningfully connect to the city and wider region, welcoming every community. Through initiatives such as the recently opened school – the [Shireland CBSO Academy](#) – and last week's sold-out collaboration with the Orchestral Qawwali Project, the orchestra will collaborate and share creative opportunities and resources across Birmingham, with the aim of both driving real social change and expanding the talent pipeline into the creative industries.

**Emma Stenning, CEO** says *"We need to think radically about the future of symphonic music, and how this miraculous, life enhancing artform stays relevant, impactful and collaborative in today's world. I came to the CBSO entirely because I could see the hunger in this orchestra to be part of leading that change. It's an industry wide revolution, really; one that needs to challenge the traditional conventions of orchestral music, and to tune into the possibilities of performing in new ways and new spaces."*

*"There's no better playground for this work than Birmingham. The city's super diversity, and youthful population is the perfect context for an exploration such as this, and I can't wait to start testing out new ideas over the coming months. The opportunity is to welcome more people to music, and we're going to run at it with all the energy and sense of adventure that you would expect from an orchestra like the CBSO. I want our halls full all of the time, and for the music we make to be an ever more meaningful soundtrack for people's lives."*

**Tom Morris**, says *"I am absolutely thrilled to be joining the CBSO on this journey which aims to bring the orchestra's astonishing quality of playing to wider audiences in a new spirit of performance in Birmingham and all over the world. This spirit is inspired by the joyful vision of Kazuki Yamada and the restless belief throughout the CBSO that great music can and should be enjoyed by everyone. My job is to encourage the radicalism for which the team and orchestra at the CBSO are already"*

*celebrated, and to bring some of the skills and techniques of theatre-making and the welcoming atmosphere of The Bristol Proms to support that."*

On [Wednesday 13 December](#) the orchestra will reveal a new concert presentation of **Beethoven's Eroica** and **Strauss' Don Quixote** which explores the different concepts of 'the hero' within the programme. Conceived by Tom and Kazuki, in collaboration with the orchestra, projection artist, **Rod MacLachlan** and lighting designer **Zaynep Kepekli**, the performance aims to allow the audience to see the structure of the music as it unfolds.

In the first half, narrative is key, and by revealing the story within Strauss' tale of a mad knight, a mixture of found, filmed and live footage will guide the audience through the adventures of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza – brilliantly characterised by two of the orchestra's own musicians, cellist **Eduardo Vassallo** and violist **Chris Yates**. For Beethoven's explosive Third Symphony, the presentation is more abstract, using lighting and projection to explore the idea of heroism, what it means for the orchestra, what it meant to Beethoven, and what it might mean for the audience.

**Kazuki Yamada, Chief Conductor and Artistic Advisor, CBSO**, says *"This period of exploration comes from a shared ambition to move forward following the covid pandemic rather than returning to what we have always done before. I have both an ambitious and challenging heart, and a conservative heart, but the CBSO is the best partner in my musical life and together with these musicians I feel free to take risks, experiment and ultimately – we hope – take our audiences along for the ride with us. Exploring a new form of concert with Tom has been an illuminating process. Together we are trying to visually answer the question of 'what's going on now' and in doing so to shorten the distance between the stage and the audience and deepen the sharing of music."*

The concert in December is one of three concerts in the 23-24 Season which will be produced by Tom, including the [CBSO Youth Orchestra's Mahler 5](#) (Sunday 18 February, 3pm) developed with conductor **Jac Van Steen** and the youth orchestra, and a visual staging of [Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition](#) conducted by Kazuki Yamada (Wednesday 1 May, 7.30pm).

Each of these concerts will be framed in a curated conversation with artists, audiences, and stakeholders about these experiments and how they might be taken forward. From supporters and regular concert goers to those attending a concert for the first time, the CBSO will find ways to encourage and engage with audience feedback at every part of the journey.

Alongside the changes to programming plans which will feed into the 24/25 programme, the CBSO will also commit to a defined set of presentational changes to all concerts with effect from early 2024. Designed to create a welcoming and comfortable environment for every audience member, these changes will include a clear welcome for audiences (both as they arrive and from the stage), carefully curated pre-concert experiences, and the removal of any perceived 'rules' of a traditional concert. Further details of these changes can be found within the [draft vision document](#).

**Anna Melville, Head of Artistic Planning** says *"I remain committed to further increasing the diversity and expanding the range of programming with the CBSO. By collaborating with Tom and Gillian, I look forward to embarking on a journey together creating a dynamic synergy that will bring a richer and more inclusive musical experience to our players and audiences alike."*

**Lord Tony Hall, Chair of the Board** says *"I couldn't be more excited for us to be sharing our new vision today. This is a fabulous world-class orchestra pushing the boundaries to win even more people over to the wonders of great music. It's one of the hallmarks of the CBSO and, indeed, of the great city the orchestra calls home."*

The CBSO is grateful to its endowment fund, the CBSO Development Trust, for its generous support enabling this period of exploration to happen.

LINK: [Read the draft vision statement in full on the CBSO website](#)

LINK: [Watch Emma and Tom speaking about their plans in more detail](#)

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**Notes to Editors**

**About the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO)**

The City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO) is an internationally celebrated symphony orchestra, at home in Birmingham. A family of 90 incredible musicians, led by Chief Conductor and Artistic Advisor Kazuki Yamada, proud to make exciting musical experiences that matter to the people of Birmingham, the West Midlands and beyond.

Resident at Symphony Hall, the orchestra's musicians perform over 150 concerts each year in Birmingham, the UK and around the world, with music that ranges from classics to contemporary, soundtracks to symphonies, and everything in between. With a far-reaching community and education programme, alongside a family of choruses and youth ensembles, it is involved in every aspect of music-making in the Midlands – and has been for more than 100 years.

This longstanding tradition started with the orchestra's very first symphonic concert in 1920 – conducted by Sir Edward Elgar. Ever since then, through war, recessions, social change and civic renewal, the CBSO has been proudly 'Birmingham's orchestra'. Under principal conductors including Adrian Boult, George Weldon, Andrzej Panufnik and Louis Frémaux, the CBSO won an artistic reputation that spread far beyond the Midlands. But it was when it discovered the young British conductor Simon Rattle in 1980 that the CBSO became internationally famous – and showed how the arts can help give a new sense of direction to a whole city.

Rattle's successors, Sakari Oramo, Andris Nelsons and Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, helped cement that global reputation and continued to build on the CBSO's tradition of flying the flag for Birmingham.

In April 2023, Japanese conductor Kazuki Yamada took up the post of Chief Conductor and Artistic Advisor, and under his dynamic leadership, the CBSO continued to do what it does best - playing great music for the people of Birmingham, the Midlands, and beyond.

**About Tom Morris**

Tom Morris is a theatre director, writer, and producer. He was Artistic Director of the Bristol Old Vic from 2009-2022 where he worked closely with Emma Stenning on many projects including The Bristol Proms. This was a ground-breaking partnership between Bristol Old Vic and Universal Music which presented classical repertoire performed by Nicola Benedetti, Daniel Hope, Bryn Terfel, Pumeza, Milos, Lisa Batiashvili, Hakon and Mari, Charles Hazelwood and many others without musical compromise, with the production values of theatre, the digital expertise of The Pervasive Media Studio and an atmosphere of complete informality and welcome.

Tom's notable productions in theatre and opera include *Dr Semmelweis* (Bristol Old Vic and West End) *Breaking the Waves* (Edinburgh International Festival and World tour), *The Death of Klinghoffer* (ENO and the Met), *L'Orfeo* (Vienna Staatsoper), *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (NT) and *War Horse*.

**The CBSO is generously supported by principal funders Arts Council England, Birmingham City Council and SCC.**

Arts Council England is the national development agency for creativity and culture. We have set out our strategic vision in Let's Create that by 2030 we want England to be a country in which the creativity of each of us is valued and given the chance to flourish and where everyone of us has access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences. From 2023 to 2026 we will invest over £467 million of public money from Government and an estimated £250 million from The National Lottery each year to help support the sector and to deliver this vision.