

David Önaç

Atlantic Requiem

London Symphony Orchestra & BBC Singers · LSO St Luke's · 11 October 2026

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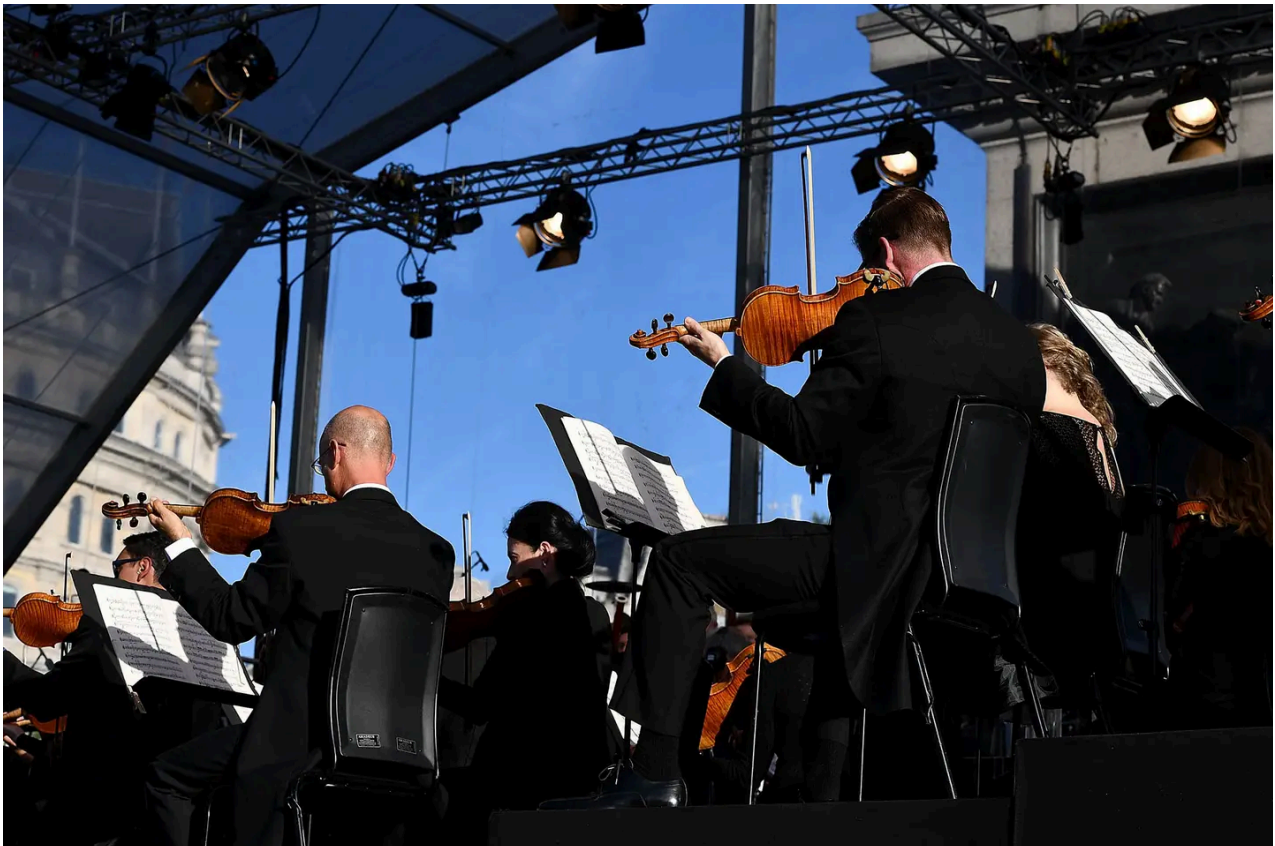
Lloyd's acknowledges historic role in slave trade with ne...

Lloyd's acknowledges historic role in slave trade with new requiem mass

observer.co.uk/news/national/article/lloyds-acknowledges-historic-role-in-slave-trade-with-new-requiem-mass

Vanessa Thorpe

May 30, 2026



Lloyd's of London, one of the world's oldest insurance companies, has commissioned a requiem mass to memorialise the lost lives of enslaved Africans and to acknowledge its part in the history of the "objectification, commodification and dehumanisation" of enslaved people.

The libretto of Atlantic Requiem, which will be performed for the first time this autumn by the London Symphony Orchestra and the BBC singers, has been drawn jointly from the text of the Catholic requiem mass, from documents held in Lloyd's own archive and from American legal testimony from 1791.

In 2023, Lloyd's said it was "deeply sorry" after an independent report exposed the "significant" role it played in enabling the transatlantic slave trade by insuring shipowners and protesting against its abolition. At the time, the City firm said it would invest £40m in helping impacted communities – although campaigners accused Lloyd's of "reparations washing", arguing it needed to do more. Lloyd's has previously disputed this characterisation of its response.

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Lloyd's acknowledges historic role in slave trade with ne...

'My hope is that the Atlantic Requiem will provide a vehicle for others to express sorrow at this loss of life, this blindness to true value, this waste of potential'

David Önac, composer

The new requiem was written by Manchester-based composer [David Önac](#) using parts of the traditional requiem mass as a way to pay his respect to lost enslaved souls. It also to reflect the compromised role of Christianity in the history of enslavement, through its religious conversion of Indigenous people and the use of biblical texts to justify slavery.



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Lloyd's acknowledges historic role in slave trade with ne...

David Ōnac has been commissioned to compose the Atlantic Requiem.

“My hope is that the Atlantic Requiem’s combination of text and music will provide a vehicle for others to express sorrow at this loss of life, this blindness to true value, this waste of potential,” Ōnaç said.

The work was commissioned by the arts and heritage charity [Cuture&](#) in partnership with Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, and with the support of Lloyd’s. When it premieres on 11 October at St Luke’s, London, it will also be live-streamed to the music conservatoire at Johns Hopkins and will be recorded and released on the LSO Live label on CD and for streaming.

The firm, which traces its roots back to Edward Lloyd’s founding of an insurance business in a coffee house on Tower Street in the City of London around 1689, also commissioned Prof Alexandre White of the scholarly research organisation Black Beyond Data to investigate further its historic role in insuring the ships and the enslaved people who were trafficked across the Atlantic during the 18th and 19th centuries.

The findings were published online in a digital humanities archive [Underwriting Souls](#), in a project funded independently by the Mellon Foundation. Lloyd’s then published its response, “Inclusive Futures”, setting out a programme to support black and ethnically diverse groups “from the classroom to the boardroom”.

The artistic director and CEO of Culture&, Dr Errol Francis, said the research by Johns Hopkins University had shown how central the maritime insurance business was to the City of London and to the whole British economy. “The huge profits generated by slavery supported the growth of British industry and commodity markets for goods, such as sugar, rum and cotton,” he said.

Prof Alan Lester, an expert in historical geography in the School of Global Studies at the University of Sussex, said: “There have been reparations claims ever since the [Slavery] Abolition Act and the payment of compensation to slave owners rather than to the enslaved. Lloyd’s of London has committed about £52m as well as making an apology and symbolic gestures like this. But as far as many activists are concerned, for an entity that made £5.9bn in 2023 and was first taken to court [in 2004] by African-American descendants of those whose trafficking it underwrote, it is too little too late.”

Photograph by Ivan Gavan/Getty Images

21C Media Group's Classical Music Season Preview 2026/2027

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CONCERTS, SPECIAL EVENTS, & RECORDINGS

** Abbreviations for New York City concert venues follow below preview*

For 21C's artists and organizations, the 2026–27 season brings a full lineup of performances and recordings. See highlights of the coming year below (all subject to change).

AUGUST 2026

Aug 28; Sep 11 Following a two-month period of streaming on Apple Music Classical, a new recording on OUTHERE MUSIC's Delos label of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7, featuring the SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY led by its Music and Artistic Director RAFAEL PAYARE, will have its worldwide digital release on August 28, with CDs available for purchase on September 11. Marking the first album recorded in the Jacobs Music Center,

in Darius Milhaud's "Psalm 121" and Bobby McFerrin's "The 23rd Psalm"; visions of perfect love, both earthly and divine, in Giovanni Valentini's "Adoramus Te, Christe" and Jean Sibelius's epic Finnish love song, "Rakastava"; and a collection of contemporary songs including arrangements of Richard Evans's "Journey to Recife" and Manuel Sánchez Acosta's "Paraiso Soñado," reminders that sometimes paradise is as close as a plane, a train, or a dream. Chanticleer also continues its celebration of America's 250th year of independence by showcasing the diverse voices, songs, harmonies, and rhythms of the nation in *Our American Journey*. The cornerstone of the program is a commission by composer Trevor Weston, demonstrating the link between traditional American hymnody and African American Spirituals. Other repertoire traces the progression of the American choral tradition from Black Gospel quartets to Shape-Note singing to Barbershop quartets and vocal jazz. the tour culminates with six performances at home in California (May 14–23). [Fall tour begins Oct 8: Saratoga Springs, NY; additional dates TBA; May 14: Santa Clara, CA; May 15: Mill Valley, CA; May 16: Sacramento, CA; May 21: Petaluma, CA; May 22: San Francisco; May 23: Berkeley, CA]

Oct 9, 11

DANIIL TRIFONOV performs Brahms's First Piano Concerto with the Berlin Philharmonic and Chief Conductor Kirill Petrenko at New York's Carnegie Hall. After a previous account of the same concerto, the *Washington Classical Review* wrote: "Trifonov's attention to legato shaping brought out every gorgeous, longing harmonic twist of this exquisite music." [NYC/CH]

Oct 11

Having long "used his platforms and rising profile to champion Black composers" (*The New York Times*), ANTHONY PARNOTHER makes his London Symphony Orchestra debut with the world premiere of *Atlantic Requiem*. Bringing to life a new work commemorating the lives of Africans trafficked into slavery from Royal Philharmonic Society Composition Prize-winning British composer David Ōnaç, the performance will feature soloists J'Nai Bridges and Orson Van Gay II with the BBC Singers. [London]

Oct 13–24 Last year, Grammy-winning violinist JOSHUA BELL was awarded an honorary CBE for his services as Music Director of London's Academy of St Martin in the Fields. In the 2026-27 season, which marks the 15th of their partnership, he leads the orchestra from the violin on extensive tours of Asia and Europe. After kicking off in Taipei, their Asian tour takes them to Beijing, Shanghai, and other destinations in China with a program featuring Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony and Dvorák's Violin Concerto, with himself as soloist. [Oct 13: Taipei; Oct 16: Beijing; Oct 17: Shanghai; Oct 18: Zhengzhou, China; Oct 20: Shenzhen, China; Oct 22: Suzhou, China; Oct 24: Macau, China]

Oct 14–22

"A pianist of magisterial elegance, power, and insight" (*The New York Times*), celebrated Norwegian pianist LEIF OVE ANDSNES undertakes a season-long tenure as 2026-27

‘This is not the kind of music that can be faked’: Anthony Parnter on The Central Park Five and Atlantic Requiem

G gramophone.co.uk/content/blogs/this-is-not-the-kind-of-music-that-can-be-faked-anthony-parnter-on-the-central-park-five-and-atlantic-requiem

2 October 2026



Anthony Parnter (photo: Dario Acosta)

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2 October 2026 3 mins read

Recommended Reviews

Conductor Anthony Parnter talks about the challenges of recording The Central Park Five, Black classical music since the death of George Floyd, and a new requiem about slavery

Hollywood conductor, Anthony Parnter (known to millions for soundtracks to Oppenheimer, Encanto and Minions, amongst others) writes about Black classical music for two new recordings: Anthony Davis' opera The Central Park Five, which won a Pulitzer

Prize, has just been released on Platoon and David Ōnaç's Atlantic Requiem will be recorded live in concert on Sunday, October 11 for LSO Live.

I was living in New York City at the time that the Central Park Five case – in which five Black and Latino teenagers were wrongly convicted for the rape and beating of a female jogger – hit headlines in 1989. It had a very big impact on me, so decades later, when I was asked to give the world premiere of Anthony Davis' opera *The Central Park Five* – it stirred up a lot of emotions. I first conducted it in 2022 for Long Beach Opera, where we had a fairly limited audience because of COVID. However, when we performed the expanded version in Detroit Opera House in 2025 – in its 2500 seat hall – it was completely packed every single night. There was a line of people to talk to me at the theatre door after every performance, and I received emails, DMs and messages for a solid two months after the last performance.

I've never had a reaction like that with any other opera that I've conducted. Apart from anything else, the recent history of the story gives it a viscerality that contrasts with a work like, say, *Carmen*. The composer, Anthony Davis, has constructed *The Central Park Five* so that listeners get to really live inside that world. His compositional language is a melting pot of high modernism, incorporating Black American idioms like hip hop, R & B, jazz, and electronica. So it evokes what New York City sounded like in the late 1980s which I think is part of the extraordinary power of the opera.

When it comes to conducting this work, *The Central Park Five* ranks among the most technically daunting music that I have ever encountered. Anthony is a genius. This is not the kind of music that can be faked – it requires a great deal of preparation, precision and investment just to walk in the front door. I handpicked 16 musicians for the original performance, searching among Los Angeles's best. Then Davis expanded the instrumentation so that we were using a 70-piece orchestra, so we were now asking 12 violinists to play an incredibly virtuosic line instead of just one. It was very difficult but I felt like this was one of those experiences that made me a better musician for going through it. I'm proud that after the blood, sweat, and tears that went into bringing it to life, it feels true to what he intended. Even now that we've done the recording, I feel like I'm still wrestling with it.

Personally, I've been bringing Black compositions into the concert hall for 20 years now. Often, before George Floyd, if you did happen to see a Black composition, it was either part of an educational programme, a children's concert, or some kind of concert starter. Now, more conscientious programming means we are beginning to see more significant works performed from Black composers – works that have been around for almost a century. Sometimes I worry about whether that shift was performative or not, but I'll take performative over zero.

Atlantic Requiem

I'm looking forward to be back in London next week to work with the LSO and BBC Singers to record David Önaç's *Atlantic Requiem* in two live concerts at LSO St Luke's. Önaç's choral work commemorates the lives of Africans trafficked into slavery and I feel like I have a real investment in this. Over the years, I have done a lot of research on the African slave trade. David and I both share Caribbean parentage – my father was born in Jamaica, but I've always wanted to know about my father's African derivation. When I eventually took a DNA test, I felt a strong sense of where my paternal lineage comes from – Benin, Mali, Togo, Nigeria. It was a real full circle moment.

Culture& has co-commissioned the *Atlantic Requiem* with Lloyd's, following the publication of its archive (underwritingsouls.org) as part of its commitment to a programme of 'research, education and investment' to examine its involvement in the slave trade. David has deliberately used only 10 of the 12 notes of the scale, setting five black notes on the piano against five white notes. The requiem starts with the sound of the bell from the slave ship, and brings together classical ideas with Black idioms.

Despite such positive steps forward, we've still got a long way to go to achieve racial parity both in music and politics, and that's perhaps best shown by one of the characters in *The Central Park Five*, Donald Trump. Almost three decades before he ran for president, he took out [full page newspaper advertisements](#) demanding the reinstatement of the death penalty in New York for the wrongly convicted teenagers. The tenor Todd Strange played Trump both in the original and the expanded opera. The first time he portrayed him in an exaggerated comedic way, and it did elicit some laughs. But he played it in a serious, menacing way the second time, and I will never forget the sound in Detroit of more than 2500 people booing him.

Anthony Parnter conducts the world premiere of David Önaç's *Atlantic Requiem* on Sunday, October 11, at 4pm and 5.45pm at LSO St Luke's with the LSO and BBC Singers. Find out more: lso.co.uk



David Önaç on how his Atlantic Requiem aims to memorialise the lost lives of enslaved Africans

planethugill.com/2026/10/to-convey-true-impact-required-depths.html

Monday, 5 October 2026

To convey the true impact required depths only artistic responses could provide: David Önaç on how his Atlantic Requiem aims to memorialise the lost lives of enslaved Africans



David Önaç

How Lloyd's insurance contracts from the transatlantic slave trade became the unlikely inspiration for a new choral work for the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO) and BBC Singers. Composer [David Önaç](#) explains his *Atlantic Requiem*.

Legal insurance documents might not be an obvious inspiration for a choral work. But when Lloyd's opened up its archive of contracts from the transatlantic slave trade, the dramatic potential leapt off the page. Keen to respond on an artistic level to these insurance contracts, Dr Errol Francis, director of arts and heritage charity Culture& commissioned a ground-breaking new musico-dramatic work, soon to be premiered by the LSO and the BBC Singers conducted by Grammy award-winning Anthony Parnter.

Prof Alexandre White of Johns Hopkins University had meticulously digitised Lloyd's archives, creating an entire website [Underwriting Souls](#) (via "Black, Beyond Data" funded by the Mellon Foundation) testifying to the insurer's complicity in the transatlantic trade, insuring slave ships and their 'cargo'.

Errol's deep concern was that such comprehensive, systemic undervaluing of human life was about more than facts and figures: indeed, numerical abstraction was part of the problem. To convey the true impact required depths only artistic responses could provide.

In a strange coincidence, when Culture& approached me to write a musical response, I was then arranging *20 Spirituals for Piano* for EVC Music, and awaiting the premiere of a milestone: my violin duo "Out of the Blue" which at last integrated jazz, gospel and classical styles with a newfound confidence I had been seeking since childhood.

I grew up on both sides of the Atlantic, inspired by music from both sides of the ocean at the centre of the slave trade. Gospel, jazz and Junkanoo were styles I'd relished as a child in the Caribbean and tried to emulate on the piano as early as age four. Western Classical music was the air I breathed in the UK as a young solo pianist devoted to Rachmaninov (playing *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* was a teenage highlight), and then as a postgraduate composer studying at Cambridge tutored by Robin Holloway, and at Manchester tutored by Adam Gorb and Camden Reeves.

So the requiem proposal offered a vast 45-minute choral and orchestral canvas to paint the sounds of spirituals and more deeply explore sound palettes from my dual heritage.

Atlantic Requiem is a stylistic fusion of diverse musical ingredients which audibly reference the cultures the work needs to portray and is a personal expression of my transatlantic ethnic mix - a mix my skin makes visibly obvious.

All well and good in theory, but how (exactly) did legal documents lead to a libretto? Everyone who read the insurance documents in the Lloyd's archive had balked at the uncomfortable juxtaposition of grandiose religious language and legalese dehumanisation of enslaved human beings - the now infamous Lloyd's Insurance Agreement for the ship Guipúzcoa (literally) begins "In the name of God, Amen..."

Religious language and grand tone presented an obvious similarity to well-known Catholic Requiem Mass texts (eg "Requiem Aeternam", "Kyrie Eleison", "Dies Irae"). But on a deeper level, bringing the insurance text into conflict with traditional requiem texts could transmute uncomfortable juxtaposition into artistic organising principle and this became my essential approach to writing the entire libretto: multiple voices speak through multiple texts, creating suitably complex combinations and opportunities for any single text to act as commentary, corroboration or critique of any other across a 5-movement span.

The first movement Requiem in Records uses the actual Guipúzcoa insurance agreement text, sung verbatim (abridged) combined with Requiem Aeternam, dona eis Domine

(Eternal rest give to them O Lord), gradually revealing that the prayer is for all unnamed slaves such agreements 'accounted' for. The second movement Kyrie from the depths travels across the Atlantic via Cranston's 1791 Grand Jury testimony, a court document courtesy of Newport Historical Society, Connecticut. It recounts how a female slave with smallpox was thrown overboard alive, blindfolded, bound and gagged to avoid further loss of slaves (profit), a sadly common maritime corollary to insuring slave ships. In court, Cranston still recalled her screams - Kyrie Eleison indeed.

The third movement Exodus Eschatologised is the requiem's nadir, a ferociously violent Dies Irae (Day of Wrath). A megaphone for culpability is provided by Biblical texts pronouncing judgement rather than justification for kidnap slavery (eg Exodus 21:16 "Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death") vs a repeated Biblical assertion of the beauty of blackness (Song of Songs 1:5 "Dark am I, yet lovely...").

The final movements, Angus Dei ("Lamb of God") & Caeruleus Lux Perpetua (Perpetual Blue Light) change direction to combine Latin texts and the book of Revelation with a hint of sci-fi, using texts like Revelation's well-known "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth...". I want my requiem to transcend confession. In this piece, the past's nauseating misdeeds aren't the end of our story. Looking forward *Atlantic Requiem* asks us all a critical question: how glorious might humanity be if we truly appreciated our racial diversity instead of seeing colour as a cause for cruelty?

So how could the very notes and rhythms, instruments and voices convey segregation? Or equality? Or horrific past - and perhaps hopeful future? The epiphany came via the piano, my instrument since childhood: everything could be built on two 5-note (pentatonic) groups, one group black (the piano's 5 black notes) and the other white. Using 10 of the piano's 12 notes is religiously obeyed, and the remaining 2 notes F and B are literally absent from the entire 45-minute requiem.

These 5-note subgroups analogise segregation and hostility based on visible colour, but simultaneously convey sameness, equality and unity. The groups also audibly connect to multiple styles: sounds belonging to blues, jazz and gospel (like pentatonic scales) and sounds familiar from Western Classical music (eg the open strings heard as the orchestra tunes up). Such a sonically diverse requiem was not only topically appropriate but also linked with my personal compositional influences.

Similar approaches are taken to rhythm - 'swung' and 'straight' rhythms are initially opposed and later combined - and to orchestration - instruments more associated with 'classical' or with 'jazz' follow the same trajectory from initial opposition to reconciliation. This is then all connected and integrated with the libretto's context, conflicts and cultures.

The resulting soundworld is one where evocations of formal Catholic chant are married with rap and natural speech patterns; where intensely violent and dissonant 10-note

orchestral chords occupy the same ground as lush, gorgeous 4-part choral harmonies; where the listener is immersed in references to sounds aboard ship like the boatswain's whistle and the Lloyd's Lutine Bell; and where driving asymmetrical patterns drawn from Stravinsky, Bartok and Ligeti meet the contemporary jazz fusion grooves of Snarky Puppy, the neo soul of Robert Glasper & Gretchen Parlato, and the earth-shaking heavy downbeat of Zulu warrior dances.

I hope the segregated harmonic language of black notes and white notes might reflect the displacement of a 17th-C enslaved African, uprooted halfway through life on their home continent and now living half a life on another, experiencing in addition to their daily mistreatment the double dislocation of belonging equally to both places and neither place.

As a person of mixed race, this piece had to connect to my own conundrum of identity, the questions of racial belonging which I have wrestled with all my conscious life, and the language of exclusion I have experienced from both sides. I'm not black enough (or as someone once concisely put it: "You white maaan!") and at the same time not white enough (as was made plain to me as the only non-white child in Year 7: "Go back where you came from!"). Do I float in the vacuum of everywhere and nowhere at once?

Racial devaluing in particular, because colour is such a visible characteristic of us all, is an especially pernicious perversion of precisely what ought to be celebrated: that the unifying racial glory of humanity consists so profoundly in the diversity of race present on this planet that to segregate is what reduces us to the subhuman not the other way round!

This is why the 5th and final movement had to be a celebration, a joyful fusion of more musical styles, sounds, systems. I initially struggled with whether it could even be done, and then how on earth I would notate it. A fantastic problem to have!

My hope is that this combination of text and music will provide a vehicle for others to express sorrow at the terrible loss of life and the shocking blindness to true value and to yearn for a future where all human beings appreciate the high dignity of all others - and to believe that such a future would be filled with joy.

LSO Live will record the live performances of *Atlantic Requiem* at LSO St Luke's to memorialise the lost lives of enslaved Africans and acknowledge the contribution of their descendants to transatlantic culture both then and now.

David Ōnaç's *Atlantic Requiem* is premiered at LSO St Luke's on Sunday 11 October 2026, with London Symphony Orchestra and the BBC Singers, Anthony Parnter conductor, Brittany Renee soprano, J'Nai Bridges mezzo soprano, Orson Van Gay II tenor - full details from the LSO St Luke's [website](#).

The blog is free, but I'd be delighted if you were to show your appreciation by [buying me a coffee](#).

Elsewhere on this blog

- **Bach & Blood:** a choral version of Bach's *Chaconne*, Pärt's *Magnificat Antiphons* for strings, & David Fenessy meditating on Hildegard & blood - [review](#)
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06/10/2026, 22:17

Why Lloyd's of London paid for a slave trade requiem

Why Lloyd's of London paid for a slave trade requiem

[thetimes.com/culture/classical-opera/article/why-lloyds-of-london-paid-for-a-slave-trade-requiem-0rkvkqhsq](https://www.thetimes.com/culture/classical-opera/article/why-lloyds-of-london-paid-for-a-slave-trade-requiem-0rkvkqhsq)

Daniel Lewis

October 6, 2026

new

After an archive project uncovered the role the underwriters had in the slave trade, the company has funded a dramatic — and traumatic — new work. But its critics say it's not enough



From left: the conductor Malcolm J Merriweather; the Lloyds of London building; and the composer David Onac Fadi Kheir; Getty Images

When HMS Lutine sank off the coast of the Netherlands in 1799, it went down with about 240 people. Only one survived. Also on board was gold and silver bullion and coin worth an estimated £1m — closer to £100m in today's terms. The cargo had been insured by Lloyd's of London, which was able to pay off the claim within two weeks. It was a disaster that helped to make the organisation's name.

The ship's bell was salvaged from the wreckage in 1858. Housed in a little neoclassical temple, it takes pride of place on the ground floor of Richard Rogers's "inside-out" Lloyd's Building, the UK's youngest grade I listed building, which has its 40th anniversary this year. But now the bell sits at the heart of the British composer David Onac's *Atlantic Requiem*, a work inspired by much more bitter and contested history.

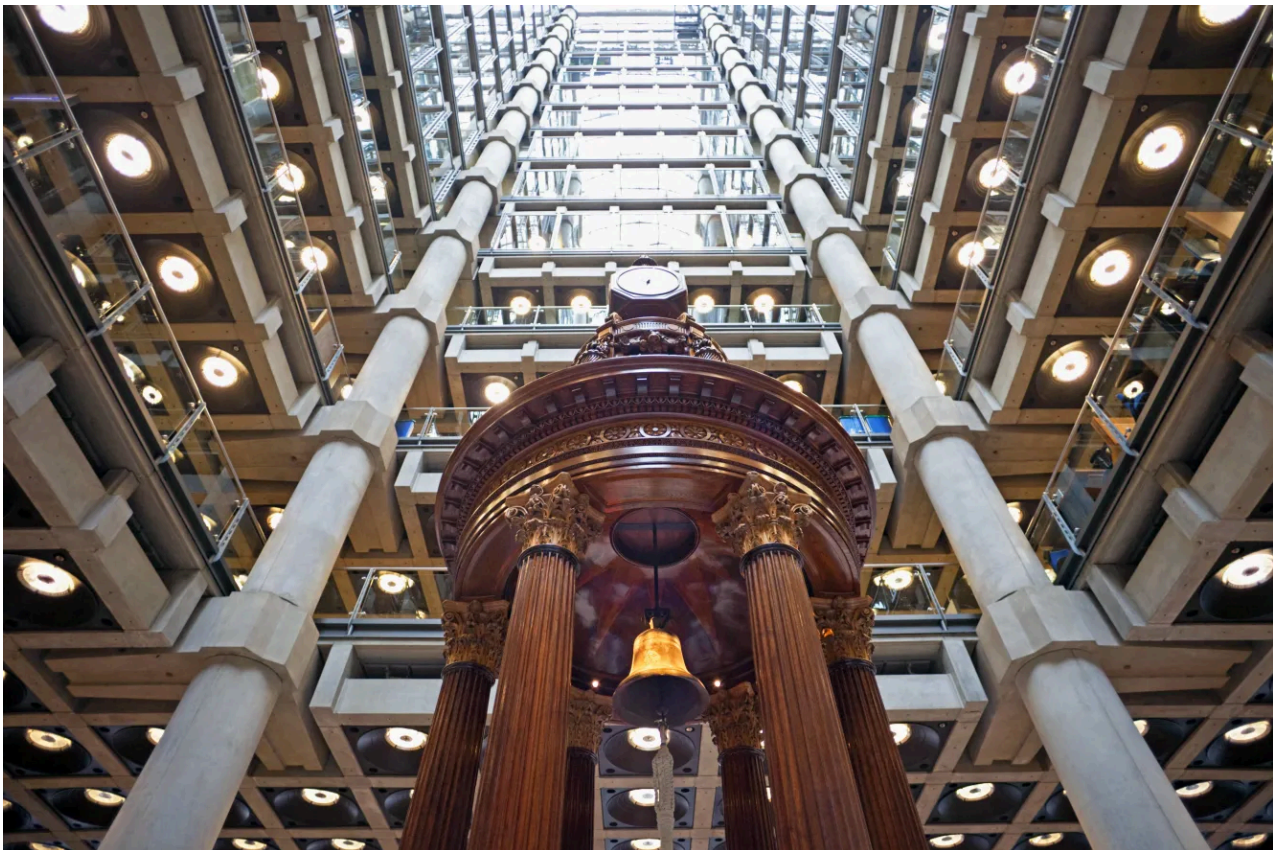
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Why Lloyd's of London paid for a slave trade requiem

In 2020, amid the protests following the murder of [George Floyd](#), the chairman of Lloyd's apologised for the organisation's fundamental role in financially supporting and enabling the trade in African people which, earlier this year, the UN voted to declare "the gravest crime against humanity". Funded by Lloyd's and commissioned by the charity Culture&, which works to facilitate more diversity in the arts and heritage sector, *Atlantic Requiem* has its world premiere at LSO St Luke's this month with the BBC Singers and London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Malcolm J Merriweather.

Lloyd's top executives will be present to hear the piece, which mourns the victims of the trade that resulted in an estimated 12.5 million African people being trafficked across the Atlantic. About 2 million died at sea from starvation, dehydration, disease or the brutal quashing of insurrections — just the sort of "risks" individuals at Lloyd's would underwrite, making the voyages more than worthwhile for traders.

[The Lutine bell](#) was traditionally rung to inform underwriters of a ship's fate at sea — once for a loss, twice for a safe return. Since the 1980s it has been reserved for marking global tragedies and nationally significant deaths, including those of Diana, Princess of Wales and Queen Elizabeth II. Then Onac, who wanted to use it in his piece, took a closer look.



The Lutine bell at the heart of the Lloyd's of London building

Alamy

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Why Lloyd's of London paid for a slave trade requiem

"David needed it rung about 20 times," says Errol Francis, the artistic director and chief executive of Culture&. "It freaked out the whole building." In a stroke of luck, the organisers were able to find a close replica of Lloyd's Lutine among the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra's collection of bells, which will be used for the premiere.

Atlantic Requiem borrows from not only Lloyd's building but also its archives, parts of which were published in 2023 in a digitised collection called *Underwriting Souls*. The research project was spearheaded by the Cambridge professor Alexandre White (then at Johns Hopkins University in the US) with Lloyd's blessing but without its financial or editorial involvement.

White says the archives were limited and fragmentary but nonetheless provided "a sort of translation piece or Rosetta stone to map connections of men across Liverpool, Africa, the Americas and West Indies who we knew were deeply active in the enslaving of African lives".

As he explains over email: "We are able to show that numerous members of Lloyd's, far from solely operating as underwriters, maintained business ties with the largest slave ship owners in Liverpool, actively protested and appealed against the abolition of the slave trade and slavery in the British Empire, and maintained, owned or operated plantations, African slaving ports, and invested in the London docks that would be responsible for expanding the trade in goods produced from the labour and lives of enslaved people and those across the empire broadly. Many of the key figures in the growth of Lloyd's held other very significant roles in the enslaving of people themselves."

Atlantic Requiem's first movement is an almost verbatim setting of a document from 1779, an example of a standard shipping contract used at Lloyd's at the time. The enslaved people are listed beneath "goods" such as corn and fish and "valued at £45 each". The ship itself is valued at £3,500. "I thought it was like the evidence of a crime, the documents themselves," says Francis, who was on the advisory board for *Underwriting Souls*.

Francis was particularly struck by the opening of these agreements, which begin "In the name of God, Amen!" He felt there needed to be some kind of response. "I thought, well, if you're going to invoke God in this underwriting document, we're going to invoke God in different ways, which is in the requiem."

- [A requiem I wrote for a fallen soldier and his widow became a tribute to my son](#)

Onac's work is, however, far from a typical requiem, as the composer tells me. The second movement is also an almost verbatim setting of a historical document, this time from the US: the court testimony of a crewman who was compelled by his captain to throw an enslaved woman with smallpox overboard to prevent an outbreak. The woman was gagged, blindfolded and bound to a chair. When asked whether the captain expressed any regrets, the crewman remembers: "All he said was he was sorry he had lost so good a chair."

06/10/2026, 22:17

Why Lloyd's of London paid for a slave trade requiem

Onac will dramatise the episode with a trio of solo singers. He has a tenor soloist play the part of the captain. Meanwhile, Onac has two soloists sing from the woman's perspective. "All we know about her was this horrible thing that happened to her. I wanted to give her double voice," Onac says. By the end of the movement, one of the two soloists is literally screaming.

Onac's work and the circumstances of its commission come at a time of fresh and acrimonious debate about what institutions complicit in the slave trade might owe today — and to whom. In September Jamaica's culture minister, Olivia Grange, lodged a set of legal questions with Buckingham Palace that ultimately ask whether the UK is bound by law to provide recompense for the forced transportation of African people to the Caribbean. As part of its response to the publication of *Underwriting Souls* in 2023, Lloyd's pledged £52 million for an "inclusive futures" programme, with £40 million to go to African development funds in regions affected by the transatlantic trade, and a further £12 million to go to internal diversity and inclusion initiatives and commemorative projects.

- [David Olusoga on how the world wars and the Windrush shaped Britain](#)

I spoke to one of the programme's main architects, Mark Lomas, a Juilliard School graduate from Bermuda who was (until last month) Lloyd's head of culture. "The way Lloyd's went about undertaking the research and formulating the response has almost been a model approach," he says. He points to its choice to consult "over 250 black and ethnically diverse colleagues and experts" from which the need for some artistic response became clear. Other projects include a poetry anthology, *Uprising & Resistance*, that accompanied the research project, and a portrait of Lloyd's first black broker, David Flint, who joined in 1978. *Atlantic Requiem* is the most ambitious.

06/10/2026, 22:17

Why Lloyd's of London paid for a slave trade requiem



Jamaica's culture minister, Olivia Grange

PA

06/10/2026, 22:17

Why Lloyd's of London paid for a slave trade requiem



Lloyd's first black broker, David Flint, who joined in 1978

Alamy

Not everyone approves of Lloyd's efforts. Professor Alan Lester at the University of Sussex called *Atlantic Requiem* a "symbolic gesture" and "too little too late". Lloyd's reported a pre-tax profit of £10.6bn last year. What does Lomas make of such criticisms? "I think with any kind of issues of this nature, there are always those who think, you know, it's in the past, why bring it up? And there will always be those who think, no matter what you do, it's never enough."

Onac expresses frustration at how the conversation around slavery seems to get hijacked by money. "The blindness to all else but finance is one of the things that this work is talking about," he says. "I want us to have a better conversation."

That sentiment is embedded in the musical language of *Atlantic Requiem*, which is based on the aural relationship between the black and white notes on a piano keyboard. Many of Onac's musical ideas are built on the tritone, an interval that puts black and white keys in tension. And Onac entirely excludes the notes F and B, the only tritone that can be made with two white notes on the piano. In the reconciliatory Latin-only fourth movement, Onac attempts to re-enter the "Cambridge choir world" he knows first hand from his days as a student at the university, while the fifth and final movement creates "some gospel funk out of a kind of medieval dance".

06/10/2026, 22:17

Why Lloyd's of London paid for a slave trade requiem

Rumbling through it excitedly during a piano demonstration, Onac shouts out the unexpected influences. Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*. The jazz fusion band Snarky Puppy. A Zulu warrior dance. He slaps out its rhythm on his thighs. It's an explosion of energy that consciously attempts to balance the creeping horror of earlier movements. But, Onac says, it also tries to begin to seriously answer the question, in musical terms, "What would it be like if we all actually respected each other and got on?"

***Atlantic Requiem* is at LSO St Luke's, London, Oct 11, [iso.co.uk](https://www.iso.co.uk)**

11/10/2026, 08:29

Manchester-based composer creates requiem to honour enslaved Africans | Slavery | The Guardian

Manchester-based composer creates requiem to honour enslaved Africans

[theguardian.com/news/2026/oct/11/manchester-based-composer-creates-requiem-to-honour-enslaved-africans](https://www.theguardian.com/news/2026/oct/11/manchester-based-composer-creates-requiem-to-honour-enslaved-africans)

Aamna Mohdin

11 October 2026



Composer David Önaç said the piece would allow him to explore longstanding questions about where he belongs.

Composite: The Guardian

David Önaç uses insurance documents for work funded by Lloyd's of London after research uncovered its slavery links

A centuries-old insurance document detailing the trafficking of enslaved Africans began with the words: "In the name of God, Amen."

For Dr Errol Francis, the artistic director and chief executive of the arts and heritage charity Culture&, the contradiction was striking: an invocation of God in a document that treated human beings as cargo.

It gave him an unusual idea: what if the documents that once insured the trafficking of enslaved Africans could instead be used to create a requiem in their memory?

The new work, *Atlantic Requiem*, by the Manchester-based composer David Önaç, will premiere on Sunday at LSO St Luke's in London, performed by the London Symphony Orchestra and BBC Singers.

Commissioned by Culture&, the project grew out of research into Lloyd's of London, the historic insurance market whose members helped insure ships and enslaved Africans during the transatlantic slave trade.

Sponsored by Lloyd's, the 40-minute, five-movement work brings together Catholic liturgy, historic insurance documents and testimony concerning the killing of an enslaved African woman aboard a ship in 1790.

11/10/2026, 08:29

Manchester-based composer creates requiem to honour enslaved Africans | Slavery | The Guardian

Its musical language combines contemporary classical composition with jazz, gospel and other traditions that emerged on both sides of the Atlantic.

The performances, taking place during Black History Month, will be conducted by the Grammy award-winning conductor Malcolm J Merriweather.

“This is a really complicated situation in how religion is being used. Religion was used to convert the indigenous people then, the indigenous people often took up religion as part of emancipation,” Francis, who was a member of the steering group overseeing research into Lloyd’s historical involvement in the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved Africans, said.

“That was why I thought to myself, ‘Maybe we should write a Requiem Mass, because that would really bring out these contradictions and also use these documents for a different purpose than what they were intended for.’”

When Culture& approached Önaç about Atlantic Requiem, he jumped at the opportunity. “The styles that I’m interested in come from both sides of the Atlantic, so it just felt like I finally had this grand canvas on which I could explore these dual interests, allow the two styles to enrich one another,” he said.

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Manchester-based composer creates requiem to honour enslaved Africans | Slavery | The Guardian

[illegible]

The account of John Cranston, preserved by the Newport Historical Society. Photograph: David Önaç/Guardian

For Önaç, who is of mixed heritage and hails from both sides of the Atlantic, the piece was an opportunity to explore longstanding questions about where he belongs.

“As a pianist, sometimes the piano itself and the layout or the geography is an inspiration to me,” he said.

“When you took the five black notes and two of the significant white notes from the other set, you got this seven-note blues scale, which is the product of the musical and cultural experience of enslaved Africans from the other side of the Atlantic.”

11/10/2026, 08:29

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But while the work ultimately moves towards reconciliation and joy, some of its most harrowing passages confront the violence of enslavement directly. The second movement draws on a 1791 grand jury testimony concerning the killing of an enslaved African woman aboard the brig *Polly*, commanded by James DeWolf.

The testimony, preserved by the Newport Historical Society, records the account of John Cranston, a crew member who described a horrific incident during the ship's voyage from Africa to the West Indies in 1791.

According to Cranston, an enslaved woman suspected of having smallpox was bound to a chair, gagged and thrown overboard on the captain's orders, amid fears she would infect others aboard the ship.



Dr Errol Francis said
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Randerick
Photography

"There's bits in it that I get tearful even just talking about it," Francis said. "It is about people who've passed away, but it's also about the fact that we have survived this incredible trauma."

For Önaç, the combination of the words and the music were at times so powerful that it felt overwhelming.

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Önaç added that the requiem is not only a response to historical atrocities but a commentary on modern society.

“Everything’s so polarised and segregated and polemical right now, it seems to me, and I’ve tried to portray that in the black and white notes.

“It’s not just for then; it’s a commentary on now as well.”

12/10/2026, 10:51

Manchester-based composer creates requiem to honour enslaved Africans | Slavery - Indmedia News

Manchester-based composer creates requiem to honour enslaved Africans | Slavery

indmedia.in/manchester-based-composer-creates-requiem-to-honour-enslaved-africans-slavery

Indmedia

October 11, 2026

Monday, October 12



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[Source link](#)

12/10/2026, 19:50

Atlantic Requiem review – Önaç gives historical slavery documents howling raging life | Classical music | The Guardian

Atlantic Requiem review – Önaç gives historical slavery documents howling raging life

[theguardian.com/music/2026/oct/12/atlantic-requiem-review-slavery-david-onac-lso-st-lukes](https://www.theguardian.com/music/2026/oct/12/atlantic-requiem-review-slavery-david-onac-lso-st-lukes)

Alexandra Coghlan

12 October 2026



J'nai Bridges, Brittany Renee and Orson Van Gay II perform Atlantic Requiem at St Luke's. Photograph: Mark Allan

LSO St Luke's, London

From syncopated funk to the Latin requiem mass, Gregorian chant to bureaucratic recitative, the score to David Önaç new oratorio, premiered by the London Symphony Orchestra, is serious and beautiful

How do you put a value on a human life? If you're an insurance underwriter that's not a philosophical question, it's a practical one. The answer, incidentally, as calculated by Lloyds of London in 1779 was £45: the figure placed on each enslaved person transported across the Atlantic alongside corn, fish and other cargo. Court transcripts from two decades later describe a woman quarantined for smallpox, subsequently bound, blindfolded and tossed overboard tied to a chair. The captain later expressed his regret for the loss of "so good a chair".

Archives can tell us what, but it takes art to give us the human *how* of the past. Enter composer [David Önaç](#) – commissioned to take the historical documents unearthed from the Lloyds archive and give them howling, raging life in his new Atlantic Requiem, premiered this weekend by the London Symphony Orchestra, an expanded BBC Singers, three soloists and (in a last-minute step-in) conductor Malcolm J Merriweather.

This is a big piece – in theme and scope. Önaç's score is beautifully, seriously constructed, turning the pitches of the piano's white and black keys into symbolic gestures of opposition, equality and – perhaps – reconciliation. It's a microcosm of a work in which the syncopated funk and alternative scales of jazz and blues drift into the western classical architecture of the Latin requiem mass, Gregorian chant bleeds into the chattering banality of bureaucratic recitative, and soloists soar but also scream. The conversation is particularly effective in the convulsive dance of the finale – a chewily textural, highly rhythmic intervention after the rapt choral meditation of the Agnus Dei.

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Atlantic Requiem review – Önaç gives historical slavery documents howling raging life | Classical music | The Guardian

Merriweather steered his forces safely through the choppy musical waters, though soloists Brittany Renee, the ever-expressive J’Nai Bridges and especially tenor Orson Van Gay II risked being overwhelmed from their position behind the orchestra. In many ways this pair of Sunday afternoon performances at LSO St Luke’s (too small for so large a project) felt like a workshop for a piece still under construction. Önaç packs a lot into a short span, at the expense of pacing that feels almost perfunctory. There’s a full-length work here dying to get out, and a major new composing talent who deserves the space to tell the stories that have been silenced for so long.

12/10/2026, 12:27

Classical Music to see in October: Atlantic Requiem, LSO St Lukes

How to mourn 12 million deaths in a single piece of music

[telegraph.co.uk/music/classical-music/classical-music-october](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/classical-music/classical-music-october)

Ivan Hewett

October 9, 2026

David Ōnaç's Atlantic Requiem is an astonishingly poignant tribute to the lives lost in the slave trade



Space to breathe: Malcolm J Merriweather conducts the LSO Credit: Mark Allan

One death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic. That phrase came to mind when I learned the London Symphony Orchestra would be performing the brand new *Atlantic Requiem* in memory of the Africans transported across the Atlantic by slave-traders. The scale of the horror numbs the mind: 12 million souls perished over a period of more than 350 years. How could they be mourned in music?

Some might say David Ōnaç, a 40-something composer of mixed West Indian and Turkish roots was foolhardy even to try. But try he did, and the result was powerfully moving. The commission came from Lloyd's of London, as part of its wide-ranging corporate act of atonement for its historic links to the slave trade.

The oratorio was rooted in stories gleaned from Lloyd's archives of particular ships and how they were insured, which anchored the vast tragedy in something local and specific. Slaves were typically insured for £45 a head, and when one female slave caught smallpox en route she was blindfolded, gagged, bound to a chair and tossed overboard. The captain said he regretted the loss of a fine chair.

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Classical Music to see in October: Atlantic Requiem, LSO St Lukes

These stories (and fragmentary pleas and cries inspired by them) were sung by three black American soloists Brittany Renee, J’Nai Bridges and Orson Van Gay II with heart-breaking eloquence, though they struggled against Önaç’s over-heavy orchestration. The stories were woven into fragments of the Latin Mass and Biblical injunctions against slavery, sung with hair-raising fervency by the BBC Singers.



Heart-breaking eloquence: soloists J’Nai Bridges, Brittany Renee, and Orson Van Gay II Credit: Mark Allan

This bitterly ironic juxtaposition was one of several echoes of Benjamin Britten, alongside references to jazz, a funeral bass drum, gospel and blues – and the constant tolling of a bell, a reference to Lloyd’s famous Lutine Bell. Conductor Malcolm J Merriweather, who stepped in at very short notice, gave space for all these different elements to breathe.

However Önaç’s oratorio is far more than an assemblage of borrowed idioms. His music has a strong, dark harmonic colour of its own, rooted in a symbolic opposition of “black” and “white” modes. This was revealed with spell-binding poignancy at the beginning, when a melody of angelic purity on a high solo violin was threatened by “wrong” notes below.

As the *Requiem* moves towards the final choral plea of “Grant us Peace” we heard that angelic violin return in a mood of timid hope. After all the cries and lamentation, Önaç must have been tempted to end with a radiant affirmation. It is to his great credit that he didn’t.

The Atlantic Requiem will be released on the LSO Live label next Autumn

12/10/2026, 16:34

Atlantic Requiem review – David Önaç's shattering premiere at LSO St Luke's | Concert and Recital Reviews | musicOMH

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 [musicomh.com/classical/reviews-classical/atlantic-requiem-review-david-onac-lso-st-lukes](https://www.musicomh.com/classical/reviews-classical/atlantic-requiem-review-david-onac-lso-st-lukes)

Barry Creasy

October 12, 2026

[CLASSICAL AND OPERA / CONCERT & RECITAL REVIEWS](#)

Rating 4.5 out of 5 stars

12 Oct 2026

LSO St Luke's, London • 11 October 2026

Bridges' mezzo and Renee's soprano were magnificent in David Önaç's moving Atlantic Requiem premiere



LSO, BBC Singers, Brittany Renee, J'Nai Bridges, Orson Van Gay II & Malcolm J Merriweather (Photo: Mark Allan)

'In the name of God, Amen'. It was this phrase, at the head of a 1794 Lloyd's of London document, [insuring the ship Guipúzcoa and its 'cargo'](#) – enslaved people from the West Coast of Africa being shipped to the Americas – that rightly enraged Dr Errol Francis (Artistic Director of [Culture&](#)) and moved him to propose the writing of a Requiem for the countless lives lost and debased by the transatlantic slave trade. The composer [David Önaç](#) – himself of Jamaican heritage – was co-commissioned by Johns Hopkins University (where, under [Professor Alexandre White](#), the Lloyd's documents had been studied) and Lloyd's (by way of retrospective apology) to write the music, which

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Atlantic Requiem review – David Ōnaç's shattering premiere at LSO St Luke's | Concert and Recital Reviews | musicOMH

sets a mixture of texts from the Requiem Mass, the insurance documents, court testimony of the time, and extracts from scripture (including those condemning slavery). On Sunday evening, the work received its première in two performances at [LSO St Luke's](#) by the [London Symphony Orchestra](#), the [BBC Singers](#), [Brittany Renee](#) (soprano), [J'Nai Bridges](#) (mezzo) and [Orson Van Gay II](#) (tenor), under the baton of [Malcolm J Merriweather](#).

The first movement – 'Requiem in Records' – opened with the twin themes of the whole work: anger and reconciliation. The harsh clang of a bell referenced the Lutine Bell – still hanging today at Lloyd's, and traditionally rung when a Lloyd's-insured ship founders – but it was followed by the sweetest melody, somewhat reminiscent of Vaughan Williams' *The Lark Ascending*, played high on a solo violin. Ōnaç makes much use of a pentatonic scale – symbolically, five each of black notes and white notes – and this proved perfect for both the turbulent discomfort of the first three movements and the more emollient note clusters of the latter two.



J'Nai Bridges, Brittany Renee & Orson Van Gay II (Photo: Mark Allan)

Turbulence and discomfort certainly followed – a despairing, high cry of 'Requiem' from the soprano led into the bald, unison/homophonic recitation of the Guipúzcoa document by choir and soloists, underscored by rolling, angular orchestral harmonies, and punctuated by the thump of a bass drum, and the earsplitting tolling of the bell. A mezzo solo began the second movement – 'Kyrie from the Depths' – over low, slow orchestral chords, and the story, told in court, of an enslaved woman with smallpox, who had been tied to a chair and pushed overboard unfolded, interspersed with a low

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Atlantic Requiem review – David Ōnaç's shattering premiere at LSO St Luke's | Concert and Recital Reviews | musicOMH

'Kyrie' from the choir basses. After the admission from the captain – tenor solo – that his regret was the loss of a good chair, overlapping, chaotic choral voices under the rumble of the orchestra signalled a rising cry of disgust. 'Dies Irae: Exodus' amalgamated dramatic, orchestral agitation with choral recitations of parts of the Latin text with quotations from Exodus, Deuteronomy and The Song of Songs – the latter's 'I am dark yet lovely', sung with exquisite tenderness by Renee, and accompanied by lush, 'American Song Book' orchestral material, suddenly changing the mood. 'Agnus Dei' marked a shift to regret and empathy through a lengthy unaccompanied choral section of sumptuous modern harmonies, followed by a percussion/brass-heavy rhythmic dirge that conjured a New Orleans funeral procession. The final movement – 'Caeruleus Lux Perpetua' – was the most musically mercurial: illustrating the text from Revelation – 'And I saw a new heaven and a new earth...' – were shimmering low strings, grandiose muddy chords, syncopated blues, an energetic 'tv drama' theme, and an *ostinato* choral repetition of 'Requiem'; the work closed on that early, sweet violin theme, reducing from *tutti* to solo, interrupted by a final drum beat.

It is tempting to concentrate on the obvious tropes in the piece: the declamatory, homophonic choral work; the uncomplicated solo narrative lines; the references to African-American musical styles; the acerbic orchestral writing and the occasional honeyed melodies. And while these affect the listener in overt ways, they also mask the complexity of the work's fusion of material, and its subtler messages – as mentioned before, the fascinating use of a pentatonic scale, the feeling, through connection of one movement to another, of a whole arc of musical response – that stay with you long after the performance.

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LSO, BBC Singers & Malcolm J Merriweather (Photo: Mark Allan)

As always, both the LSO and BBC Singers gave of their best, and under Merriweather's precise direction turned in a nuanced performance. LSO St Luke's is an excellent venue for smaller works, but its flatter layout, with the orchestra very close to the audience, perhaps doesn't make for easy balancing of forces, and this occasionally showed: the soloists, placed over to one side, weren't always audible – Orson Van Gay II's voice was particularly prone to this: it has a beautifully pure *Helden* quality, but it was often swamped by the instrumental forces between him and us. J'Nai Bridges' rich, creamy tones came across well, but then, her solo work was only lightly accompanied. Brittany Renee has the most astonishing top range – clear and bell-like – and it mostly managed to pierce the orchestral veil.

This is supremely moving work, and it needs to be heard by more audiences, preferably in a venue friendlier to its demands.

12/10/2026, 19:41

Atlantic Requiem | Plays To See

Atlantic Requiem

P playstosee.com/reviews/uk-reviews/atlantic-requiem

Tim Hochstrasser

October 12, 2026



Back in 2020, Lloyd's of London offered a formal apology for its role in the Atlantic slave trade and followed it up with a substantial investment in projects that include the commissioning of creative responses to the horrors of that episode. David Önaç's *Atlantic Requiem* faces up to the substantial challenge involved with music that combines intellectual depth and ingenuity with emotional range and power equal to the dimensions of the events invoked. This is a work imbued, not only with the history of the slave trade, but also the history of musical commemoration of atrocity so that the complex framing in multiple genres provides an apt and convincing embrace of both the scale of suffering and the possibilities of redemption and reconciliation.

In an intriguing preliminary discussion, Errol Francis, one of those who commissioned the piece, pointed out the suitability of a requiem as the structure for the work, given the multiple roles that Christianity played for good and ill in the era of the slave trade, with the name of God deployed both to justify and excoriate the trade, and the conflicting evidence of the Bible itself. The composer uses the standard Latin text of the Requiem Mass, dispersed across five movements, which also contain texts taken from a variety of other sources, including an insurance contract valuing a ship and slaves as chattels, a contemporary description from a court record of a slave being thrown overboard after contracting smallpox, and a visionary section of the book of Revelation, with which to conclude. Each of these elements is interwoven with vivid imagination in both the choral and instrumental writing, with both narrative drive and emotional high points provided by the three soloists.

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Atlantic Requiem | Plays To See

The mood is dark and ominous at the start, with a prominent role for a copy of the Lutine bell, the traditional marker of disaster in Lloyd's of London. This mood is intensified by the cold and clinical language of the shipping contract, delivered with biting precision by tenor Orson Van Gay. Darker still is the second movement, with its graphic depiction of the slave cast overboard tied to chair, her death marked only by the Captain's regret for the chair. The setting is gruesomely vivid, marked by the anguished screams of soprano Brittany Renee, and vivid orchestral tone painting. The turbulent third movement sets the *Dies Irae* and presents in stark terms the conflicts and contradictions within Christianity, as a source of both solace and historic repression. But in the final two movements, an *Agnus Dei*, aspiring to hope, and a 'polyrhythmic, polymetric and polystylistic' finale the mood lightens as a celebration of musical and thematic diversity.

There is a lot more to grapple with here that a first impression of a world premiere cannot convey nor a reviewer properly register. In particular the mixture of classical, jazz, gospel and blues elements deserves to be understood in depth and the composer's intriguing use of a pentatonic scale by including only five black and five white notes of the scale in a principle of schematic equality. What is not in doubt though is the assurance with which these large forces are confidently set in motion, and the quality of the performance the work received. The history of music is littered with examples of under-rehearsed and poorly performed premieres – not a touch of that here.

This first performance attracted three exceptional soloists who more than held their own alongside a full-scale orchestra and large choir. Each of them had fine individual expressive moments indicative of their extensive experience in the world of opera, and natural feel for dramatic representation. Likewise, the BBC Singers produced their customary crisp and confident engagement with new music, with a wide dynamic range and layered ensemble. There was plenty for all sections of the LSO to get their teeth into, together with several notable and demanding instrumental solos, especially for the leader, violinist Benjamin Marquise Gilmore, playing stratospherically high at the very end of the work. Players of a full range of percussion and even a drum kit distinguished themselves. A particular plaudit should go to conductor Malcolm J Merriweather, who stood in at only six days notice, yet seemed entirely on top of proceedings in a work with many and varied technical demands.

This requiem made a strong immediate impression on its first audience and will doubtless yield more on repeated hearings which it fully deserves to receive. Why not move a few sizes up from St Luke's to St Paul's Cathedral?

[LSO St Luke's](#)

Composer: David Ōnaç

LSO and BBC Singers

Conductor: Malcolm J Merriweather

Soloists: J'Nai Bridges, Brittany Ree, Orson Van Gay II

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Atlantic Requiem | Plays To See

11 October 2026

40 minutes

Photo Credit: Mark Allan

13/10/2026, 09:43

Önaç's new music is certainly impressively constructed; the ideas lofty and a piece to hear live – Seen and Heard International

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By Colin Clarke

12/10/2026

United Kingdom Önaç *Atlantic Requiem* (2026, world premiere): Brittany Renne (soprano), J'Nai Bridges (mezzo-soprano), Orson Van Gay II (tenor), BBC Singers, London Symphony Orchestra / Malcolm J. Merriweather (conductor). Jerwood Hall, LSO St Luke's, 11.10.2026. (CC)



David Önaç's *Atlantic Requiem* at St Luke's, London © Mark Allan

All credit to conductor Malcolm J. Merriweather (director of the New York Philharmonic Chorus and MD of The Desoff Choirs and Orchestra) for stepping in at the last minute for an indisposed Anthony Parnter for this culturally important world premiere of a score by David Önaç. Merriweather conducted with clarity and assurance, ensuring the score's multifaceted aspects, from Spiritual to Modernism, all made their mark.

Commissioned by Culture& and Lloyd's of London as part of a research project, *Underwriting Souls*, that explores the Lloyds link with the transatlantic slave trade, *Atlantic Requiem* was born to explore and honour lives lost to slavery while simultaneously honouring the descendants of the slaves.

Taking both Western Classical and African-American musics on one space is both musically effective and symbolic at the same time, a unification in one 40-minute span reflecting the stark juxtaposition of the Latin Mass with texts from insurance documents (in which enslaved people are given a monetary value 'for the purpose of insurance') and an account of an enslaved lady who was thrown overboard for contracting smallpox – at which, the Captain reputedly bemoaned the loss of 'a good chair'.

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Possibly the most interesting movement from a text perspective is the third, the 'Dies irae,' which takes Christian texts that have been used to justify violence and cruelty. It is only with the fourth movement, the Agnus Dei, that some sort of hope appears (a prayer towards reconciliation) and in the fifth and final section, texts from the Book of Revelation argue for a brighter future. And it is here that the different musical styles combine in a sort of polystylism: perhaps, the new whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

How clear cut this ending is, is up for discussion. It speaks not of paradisaical World-harmony, but of 'mutual coexistence', a far richer space, but one in which conflict could rear up at any moment. And the use of different musics is at the heart of David Önaç himself, who has studied composition at Cambridge with Robin Holloway and the Royal Northern College of Music with Camden Reeves, and (for his doctorate) with Reeves at the University of Manchester; but who is also an active jazz performer and arranger for gospel choirs.

Önaç uses only ten of the twelve well-tempered notes available: five white and black (itself highly symbolic): the five pentatonic white notes of C, D, E, G and A while the black notes of F, G, A, C, and D sharps balance this (which explains why a lot of 'dissonant' passages feature whole-tone clashes). The material is laid out clearly at the opening, with a solo violin followed by a jazzy clarinet solo. Separated by the tritone – the 'diabolus in musica' – the separation of black and white skin is again symbolically captured.

The music begins with the sound of a bell – the 'Lutine Bell'. In this first movement, Önaç calls upon text from a trial scene: we, the audience, are, by implication, an extension of the jury. A full symphony orchestra is used (four horns, triple woodwinds and trumpets, a pair of trombones, a tuba, and three percussion players). The non-Kyrie text of the first movement comes from the *Guipúzcoa* Insurance Agreement which labelled humans as mere 'cargo'. Parts of the text are repeated ('to be insured' is a framing device). The 'pro forma' parts are allocated to the tenor solo, whose music sits somewhere between recitative and rap. Small wonder the opening is marked *doloroso* (with the extension *ma molto ritmico sempre*). Benjamin Marquise Gilmore's violin sang in filigree in response to the choral 'Requiem', answered by its harmonic complement on Chris Richards's clarinet. The two eventually conjoin, before a restatement of 'Requiem' in the choir. There are echoes of Negro Spiritual in the music, too. Orson Van Gay II was a superb solo tenor (almost, narrator) who dealt with the sometimes rapid delivery well.

The performance was filmed as well as recorded, and I assume the placement of soloists was for this; they were placed fairly far back from the audience and could get lost in louder passages (the tenor in particular in the third movement). In the first movement, soprano and mezzo-soprano soloists often sing together; the voices of Bethany Renee and J'Nai Bridges worked beautifully together. And when tenor and choir come together in a rapid-fire passage in which they are asked to 'violently enunciate each syllable' (at the words, 'And it is agreed by the insurers'), there is no denying the efficacy of the gesture.

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At the end of this movement, the solo violin returns, linking to the 'Kyrie from the Depths' and the mezzo's cry of 'What is this sickness?' with the tenor taking the role now of the ship's Captain ('The Negro wench has the pox!': marked *molto agitato*, naturally). There is the sense here of a drama that could be enacted, much as there are stagings of the Bach Passions, even down to Önaç's use of the piccolo for the bosun's whistle. The choir acts as the ship's collective ('Smallpox! Lord have mercy') against which the woman rails ('Have I no future have I no value?' she asks). The music is certainly involving, as was the very visceral performance. The mezzo solo is cut off in mid-phrase as an illustration of her loss of freewill (and voice) as the decision is enacted against the choral 'Kyrie'. Önaç includes screams for the soloists in his score – a risk, for sure. Its very physicality carried this live, but I wonder if this will survive domestic replay?

The 'Dies irae: Exodus eschatologised' is the moment the work turns. Carefully chosen and relevant passages speak of the Bible's inherent violent tendencies (*Exodus* 21:16: 'Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death'). Dramatic pauses separate fortissimo statements of 'Dies irae'. Given the front-page position of the death sentence at the moment (the proposed streaming of an execution in the USA), the impact of these words could hardly be more powerful. *Deuteronomy* (23:15, 'If a slave has taken refuge, do not hand them over to their master', and 16, 'Let them live among you wherever you like, and in whatever town they choose. Do not oppress them') was also part of the Biblical schema. Once again, as the quotations and stories piled up, there was the sense of a drama-in-waiting to be staged. The BBC Singers sounded stunning in the 'Tuba mirum', absolutely honouring the composer's marking of 'fortissimo sonoro maestoso'.

It is quite a way to the *dolce, affettuoso* of the Agnus Dei (here, 'Agnus Dei in harmony'), clarinet and bell against the choir's Latin *a cappella* statement of the Agnus; compositionally and performatively, the return of the violin and clarinet seemed perfectly judged, as did J'Nai Bridges's solo 'Dona eis requiem'. The plea for peace was answered by a harmonic warmth. The music is not 'home' yet though, as the 'Miserere' pulls the music downwards emotionally; it is left to the finale, 'Caelestis Lux Perpetua,' marked *Maestoso molto grandioso*, to elevate us. But Utopia is not achieved fully, or easily, perhaps, despite the conflation of the work's disparate elements here. The bell tolls still, against which the solo violin has something of a *Lark Ascending* moment.

The music is certainly impressively constructed, the ideas lofty. This is a piece to hear live, I would suggest; and even then, the final effect, while involving, was far from overwhelming. The message is clear, though, and all credit to the performers, for sure. All three soloists were exceptional (Brittany Renne's upper register glowing, J'Nai Bridges outstanding throughout and, as our latter-day Evangelist, tenor Orson Van Gay II a real discovery). The BBC Singers were, as always, remarkable and the LSO flawless, with Malcolm J. Merriweather revealing a fine knowledge of the score.

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Atlantic Requiem: An LSO World Premiere

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October 14, 2026

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Önaç *Atlantic Requiem* (2026, World premiere). Brittany Reese (soprano); J'Nai Bridges (mezzo); Orson Van Gay II (tenor); BBC Singers; London Symphony Orchestra / Malcolm J. Merriweather (conductor). Jerwood Hall, LSO St Luke's, 4pm, 11.10.2026

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[This YouTube video by Daria Challah gives a good summary of the ideas:](#)

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