

Brigantes “England” concert Sat 16th May 2025, Sheffield cathedral

Why a concert with Brigantes?

Our repertoire planning group has been trying for a while to initiate a collaboration with Brigantes, Sheffield’s recently established professional orchestra. Those of you who’ve been to their concerts will know that they are dynamic and perform to very high standard. It made sense to us that Sheffield’s newest orchestra and oldest symphonic chorus should work together. We have been searching for ways to make it financially possible for our self-funded concerts to include an orchestra, and Brigantes might offer a route to more of this in future. This would enable us to programme more interesting and diverse repertoire with orchestra than the City Hall SICS concerts currently allow.

Brigantes proposed that rather than starting with a full collaboration, as a form of trial-run we should provide the choir for their “England” concert next May. Their 2025-26 season includes 6 country themed concerts: France, The Nordics, Russia, Germany & Austria, England and the USA [Brigantes concert season 2025-26](#)

We agreed as we are keen to work with them, and there is no cost or financial risk to us as this is their concert. The first half of the concert is to be Holst *The Planets*, which at the time we thought we were also going to sing on an invitation tour in 2027 (though this is unfortunately now not happening.)

Choir involvement in this concert

First half: Holst *The Planets*: off-stage semi-chorus of 20-30 sopranos and altos

Second half: Last night of the proms repertoire: On stage choir to lead audience in Arne/Sargent – *Rule Britannia*; Elgar – *Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1* (Land of Hope and Glory); Parry/Elgar – *Jerusalem*; Britten – National Anthem. The second half also includes Henry Wood *Sea Songs* and the Fenby *Ilkla Moor*, but there’s no singing in those.

Member concerns, and the orchestra’s thinking

Some chorus members have expressed concern¹ about the nature of the words in some of this repertoire, as well as the whole notion of an event which some perceive as uncomfortably jingoistic, particularly in the current climate, where nationalism in general - and flags in particular - have become the focus of toxic debate. Now we’ve looked at it, we have more fully registered the controversy that Last Night of the Proms has generated over a number of years. There has been some correspondence with the orchestra, which has been shared with us, giving us an insight into Brigantes’ thinking in relation to this programming, which is summarised here.

¹ See below, letter to Members reps

An SPC member wrote to Brigantes expressing their disquiet at the inclusion of “*Rule, Britannia!*” and “*Land of Hope and Glory*” in this concert. They questioned whether these works, rooted in Britain’s imperial past, might alienate people of non-British heritage or refugee audiences. The member reflected on their own complex relationship with British identity — which combines pride in our cultural diversity with deep unease about colonialism — and suggested that equally uplifting but less divisive English works could be more inclusive. A Brigantes trustee replied, acknowledging the sensitivities but arguing that omitting those pieces risked “erasing” elements of shared history. They explained that “*Rule, Britannia!*” and similar works have evolved in meaning over time — from their origins in the patriotic celebration of freedom from all forms of oppression in the 18th century to symbols of resilience during the world wars — and that their continued performance need not imply endorsement of empire. The trustee drew on their own experience at the *Last Night of the Proms* after the Brexit referendum, describing seeing flags from across the world as a reflection of modern, plural Britishness, and outlined Brigantes’ plans to invite their audience to bring to this concert whichever flag “feels like home”. They emphasised the orchestra’s intent to contextualise the repertoire openly in programme notes and preparatory work with refugee groups, framing the event as a celebration of belonging and shared identity.

We were impressed at the careful thought that had gone into this exchange on both sides (even if minds were not changed by it) and by the mutually respectful tone. In a debate that often descends into fractious mud-slinging, this correspondence tackled the tension between heritage, inclusion, and national pride with depth and civility.

Our plan

Your committee and Darius are agreed that no one should be made to sing in an event that makes them feel uncomfortable, nor feel obliged to do so to support the choir. So, the concert will be optional for members, and we will treat the first and second half separately. This means if you are picked for the first half Planets semi-chorus you can choose to sing only that, or stay and sing the second half too. If you are not in the semi-chorus, you can choose to attend and sing the second half, or not. We need to know numbers, so we are asking you to fill in this anonymous poll [Brigantes concert poll](#)

More broadly

Your committee and Darius are committed to improving the diversity and inclusiveness of our chorus and concerts, which is why we would not have chosen these works for one of our own programmes. Whether you accept Brigantes’ thinking about this concert as summarised above or not, we hope you can see that the orchestra is broadly committed to similar aims.

Sheffield Philharmonic Chorus, Nov 2025

See below: Member email to members’ reps.

From an SPC member to members' reps 17 Oct 2025

I am writing to you as a members' reps on the Sheffield Phil Committee.

As you know, we have undertaken to sing in a concert next year with the Brigantes Orchestra, which will have a 'Last Night of the Proms' programme. It includes a sung performance of 'Rule Britannia', about which I feel very uncomfortable.

I am aware that an opportunity to sing with Brigantes is something Darius and the committee have been wanting for a long time and that negotiations for it have been delicate. I would love us to sing with this orchestra and feel sorry to be raising a concern in relation to this first opportunity to sing with them.

However, I do not feel it is right for our choir to take part in a performance of 'Rule Britannia'. I have considered writing to the orchestra, as an individual citizen of Sheffield, to initiate dialogue about performance of this piece and I might still do that. But I feel it would be stronger if the Sheffield Phil were entering into such a dialogue. So as a first step I am writing to you, to ask if you would take it up with the committee.

I was very disappointed by the decision to continue to perform this piece at the Last Night of the Proms, after some controversy as to whether it was racist/unacceptable (following the death of George Floyd).

I have read the full words of the song and something of its history. I do not feel it is ok simply to say it is 'of its time' or that one has to look at the context (though it is always helpful to look at context).

To me, the words: 'Rule, Britannia, Britannia rule the waves, Britons never, never, never shall be slaves' are offensive and racist - the implication, whatever was intended at the time, is that British people can celebrate their supremacy and freedom from slavery (and never mind all the outrageous harm perpetrated by the Transatlantic Slave Trade and its lasting legacy for Black people today).

I feel there should be some consultation with the choir about how other choir members feel and what they think.

As a choir we are committed to increasing the diversity of our membership and our audience. It is great that we have been singing works by women and Black composers over the past few years. I think we should also take account of the content of the choral works we perform.

I want to stress that I think dialogue is important. That there should be discussion about this within the choir, and hopefully, in some way, with the Brigantes orchestra, while there is still time to do something about it. I think it is possible to talk and listen in a way that aims to understand all points of view and to build bridges, but also to challenge racist material.

My personal view is that sensitivity and commitment to diversity in the choir and audience should be our priority, however much we need funded concerts to keep the choir financially stable.

I have written this after careful thought [...] I hope it can at least be a starting point for discussion and discernment.