

Happy returns

A milestone birthday will put Sir James MacMillan and his work in the spotlight, while ambitious plans for a new concert hall in Edinburgh could be a gamechanger for the city

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There's no doubt about it: 2019 is going to be a busy year for classical music in Scotland. But then again, which year isn't? With recent departures and imminent arrivals, however – as well as a slower-burn musical saga in Edinburgh – it's likely to be a year of change, some of it prominent, some behind the scenes.

It's going to be a big year, too, for Scotland's most high-profile composer. Sir James MacMillan turns 60 in July 2019, a milestone that's certain to mean a strong focus on his music across concerts and festivals. Some celebratory events have already been announced – Martyn Brabbins conducts the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra in his Trombone Concerto on 17 January with soloist Jörgen van Rijen, and Sir James himself conducts the Scottish Chamber Orchestra in his much-loved *Veni, veni, Emmanuel* plus the choral *Seven Last Words from the Cross* on 21 and 22 February. But expect plenty more MacMillan as 2019 progresses and more events are announced – he recently tweeted about the completion of his Fifth Symphony, for instance, “a choral one.” Might Scotland even host its unveiling?

Staying with the SCO, its big news for 2019 is the arrival of new principal conductor, Maxim Emelyanychev, who gives his first concerts in the role at the start of next season. The young Russian has been on the podium with the SCO twice already, both times as stand-in for indisposed conductors: replacing Robin Ticciati in March with spectacularly powerful results, then Bernard Labadie in October in a tremendously energetic Haydn *The Seasons*. With his lithe, urgent

direction and his obvious abundant enthusiasm, we clearly have plenty to look forward to – though we'll have to wait until the spring to discover his musical choices.

Away from the concert platform, the SCO has another valuable initiative for 2019. The SCO String Academy is a new partnership with St Mary's Music School, Edinburgh, to offer tuition and guidance from SCO players to young string players. It's free of charge, and there's no audition (though realistically it's only open to intermediate or advanced players – Grade 6+ is noted in the description). Its focus is on group playing, with all the broader benefits of confidence, communication and teamwork that brings. It's an exciting opportunity for young Scottish musicians, and it kicks off in March 2019.

Over at the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, international touring remains a strong focus during 2019. It was a central focus for former chief executive Krishna Thiagarajan – he headed off to the Seattle Symphony in September following three years in Glasgow, but his outward-looking plans continue to expand the orchestra's international profile. The RSNO is currently in China for a New Year tour with Nicola Benedetti and music director Thomas Søndergård, and Søndergård jets the orchestra off again to the West Coast at the end of March for a tour of Arizona and California.

Scottish Opera begins 2019 with an intriguing proposition – the world premiere of *Anthropocene* by composer Stuart MacRae and librettist Louise Welsh. It's their fourth collaboration for the company, in a creative partnership



Clockwise from main: Sir James MacMillan; Maxim Emelyanychev, the new principal conductor of the SCO; Winterfest organiser and pianist Susan Tomes

that was forged there, following the witty, powerful *The Devil Inside* in 2016. Despite its title, we're assured that this is not a “climate change opera” – though its storyline of a group of scientists mysteriously stranded in the Arctic can hardly ignore the rapidly melting ice. It's followed up by a new production of Janáček's *Káťa Kabanová* from respected international director Stephen Lawless in March, and finally a revival of Sir Thomas Allen's gloriously entertaining, spectacularly steampunk *Magic Flute* to end the season in May.

It's still a couple of months before we'll know much about this year's Edinburgh International Festival, though if the past three years are anything to go by, we should be getting the concluding opera in the EIF's four-year Ring cycle in concert, *Götterdämmerung*.

Susan Tomes's Winterplay is a bold, brilliantly broad-ranging addition to the capital's festivals



On a far smaller scale, though just as rewarding, is pianist Susan Tomes's Winterplay mini-festival, which returns to Edinburgh's Queen's Hall on 16 February. With a children's music and movement workshop, a piano and literature afternoon with Tomes and novelist Janice Galloway, and finally a starry trio performance with Tomes, violinist Erich Höbarth and cellist Philip Higham, Winterplay is a bold, brilliantly broad-ranging addition to the capital's festivals.

Which brings us, finally, to the slow burn of IMPACT Scotland's plans for a brand new venue and concert hall in St Andrew Square in Edinburgh. Designs were submitted to the City of Edinburgh Council for planning approval back in August, and a decision is expected in the spring, but we now have details and images of David Chipperfield Associates' designs (check out impactsotland.org.uk to see them). The process might be gradual, but – despite no doubt inevitable changes to its planning, timescale or design – this is the project that potentially promises the profoundest impact on Scottish musical life. ■