

# The Proms Listening Service

Radio 3's Tom Service proposes onward sonic explorations inspired by the music of tonight's Prom



MAHLER

## Symphony No. 8

A playlist of pieces that are scored for even more performers than Mahler's so-called 'Symphony of a Thousand', which is really a 'Symphony of a Few Hundred or so' in most performances – which may not seem quite as impressive but still makes just as epic a racket! **Havergal Brian's** 'Gothic' Symphony trounces even Mahler's Eighth in the forces it requires, in how long it lasts and in how massively ambitious it is. An unforgettable performance at the Proms in 2011, on a specially extended stage to accommodate the virtual universe of its performing groups – soloists, choirs, orchestras, percussionists (including a jingling Johnny) – revealed why the world needs the 'Gothic'. In 2008 **Anna Meredith's** *forms* was shorter but equally ambitious. It was commissioned for the Last Night of the Proms and composed for simultaneous, digitally connected performance by groups all over the country, with hundreds and quite possibly more than a thousand musicians in the Royal Albert Hall, Hyde Park and parks in Swansea, Belfast and Glasgow. It worked, too!

The truly epic dimension of Mahler's Eighth is how it dares to set the summit of summits of German literature: the closing scene of the second part of Goethe's *Faust*. Mind you, he wasn't the first, because **Robert Schumann's** *Scenes from Goethe's 'Faust'* had already made music for Faust's Transfiguration, the Chorus Mysticus and the rest of Goethe's fantastical, unclassifiable mix of philosophy, drama, literature and spiritual progress.

Schumann's choral-orchestral meditation is cast on a more intimate scale than Mahler's – but then so is the vast majority of the rest of musical history, including **Franz Liszt's** *A Faust Symphony*, which concludes with a hymn to Goethe's 'eternal feminine'. Part 2 of *Faust* fascinates and compels with its transmutations of Christian symbolism into a new, humanist mysticism; but Part 1, with the story of Faust's soul being sold to Mephistopheles, is the more obviously dramatic. **Hector Berlioz** turns the *Faust* drama into a fantastical symphony of the imagination in his *The Damnation of Faust*. Going back to an earlier source for the hero's pact with the devil – no redemption here, but consumption by Hell – **Alfred Schnittke's** *Faust Cantata* is one of the most voluptuously terrifying pieces of the

late 20th century, turning Faust's hellish descent into a lurid nightmare of a score that parodies and perverts tango, pop and classical idioms in some savagely sensual musical storytelling.