

“The English Symphony Orchestra – enjoying a comet-like rise under Kenneth Woods, its Principal Conductor since 2013.” Martin Anderson, Musical Opinion

The English Symphony Orchestra is committed to the expansion of the orchestral repertoire through commissioning, recording & advocacy for neglected works.

Our 21st Century Symphony Project (21CSP), called "one of the most important musical initiatives of modern times" by Classical Source, has delivered premieres & recordings of new symphonies by David Matthews, Philip Sawyers & Steve Elcock, Matthew Taylor. Forthcoming works in the series include symphonies by Emily Doolittle, Adrian Williams, Errollyn Wallen and Robert Saxton.

Our ground breaking work on behalf of historical female composers was recognised with ABO Sirens Grant.

We are one of the most active proponents of music suppressed by the Nazis with notable recordings and UK premieres of works by Gál, Káprálova, Ullmann & Krenek.

We were proud to receive Classical Music Magazine's Premiere of the Year award in 2015 & 2016. The 2016 premiere of John Joubert's Jane Eyre was also named Birmingham Post's "top classical event" of 2016.

Our educational work reaches 1000s of children a year through our orchestral courses for all levels, chamber music workshops, school clinics & work with educational partners. Resident orchestra of Worcestershire Hub c. 50 concerts/yr in care homes & hospices, continuing with virtual concerts.

ESO commissions are regularly repeated at leading festivals & orchestras, Deborah Pritchard's "Wall of Water" has been done at Aldeburgh, Lichfield & Presteigne.

Our recordings & premieres of "lost generation" composers Krenek, Gál, Kapralova & Ullmann have led to repeat performances & broadcasts worldwide.

Critical Response

The ESO's Return To Live at the Three Choirs Festival, July 2021

- "Steve Elcock's Symphony No. 8 is only 20 minutes long, but a huge symphonic heart beats inside its compact frame...the music strives to return to a safe harmonic harbour at the end, but never quite reaches it. My heartfelt thanks to composer and performers alike for letting me hear new music that harnesses the great symphonic tradition to create an experience with so much personality of its own....We began with music by **Emily Doolittle**, a composer new to me. Woodwings is based on birdsong from Canada, the country of her birth. Cool, fresh and well-ordered in the first of its five short movements, it evolved into wild and free twilit fantasy by the last. Most effective. [In Beethoven Seven] the roof almost came off @Kiddy_Town_Hall, but there was plenty of thoughtfulness among the thunder and thrills. Kenneth Woods & co. maximized the momentum by playing the first two movements without a break, making the major-minor transition all the more powerful. The tumultuous coda had me concerned for the foundations as well but the hall survived."
[Adam Philp, The Symphonist](#)
- "...**Steve Elcock Composer's** 20-minute entity is more about striving towards a destination which remains tantalizingly beyond reach..That was certainly the impression left by this well prepared and finely realized performance, notable for the way in which Elcock's idiomatic while demanding string writing was realized with manifest conviction. A 10-strong wind ensemble (along with cello and double-bass) had opened the concert with **Emily Doolittle's** Woodwings, the songs and calls of nine Canadian birds rendered over five characterful movements somewhere between Poulenc and Messiaen, with a finale whose relatively freeform structure made for an intriguing and enticing payoff....Beethoven's Seventh Symphony received a performance as uninhibited and exhilarating as the piece itself. That all repeats in the first, third and fourth

movements is no longer the surprise it might once have been: more startling was Kenneth Woods's decision – entirely justified – to proceed without a pause into the second movement, so underlining the A-A minor pivot which uncannily anticipates that of Mahler's Sixth almost a century later. Other highlights were the bracing cross-rhythms of the transition into the first movement's reprise, the flexible pacing of the scherzo's trio melody – poised ideally between hymn and dance, then a finale whose coda threatened to breach the confines of **Kidderminster Town Hall** but whose ultimate elation clearly left its mark on the audience's enthusiastic response....An impressive return to live performance from the ESO (above) and a harbinger of just what can be expected in its 2021/22 season." [Richard Whitehouse, Arcana.FM](#)

Critical Praise for Music from Wyastone Virtual Concerts

Bartok - Bluebeard's Castle, August 2021

- "With minimal stage action indicated, Bluebeard's Castle is ideally suited for concertante settings, as the riveting online production by the English Symphony Orchestra and Artistic Director & Principal Conductor Kenneth Woods resoundingly demonstrates....the superlative ESO and Woods team, joined by the powerfully connective duo of Stout and Fredrick, deliver one of the most captivating performances of Bluebeard's Castle in the online archives." [Jari Kallio, Adventures in Music](#)
- "Kenneth Woods' economical, almost austere, and always well-paced conducting building huge intensity from his socially-distanced players in a resourceful orchestral reduction...Fredrick sings with intense involvement, nuancing her delivery to match every shift in Judith's psyche. And Stout is simply compelling and engrossing, both attractive and tormented...At just over an hour this is an emotionally draining experience. Concentration from the ESO players was remarkable, bringing great colour to the interludes between the opening of each of the seven fateful doors, and the sheer absorption from the two soloists, discreetly marshalled by Woods, leapt out from the screen." [Chris Morley, Birmingham Post](#)

Mahler arr. Klaus Simon - Symphony No. 9, July 2021

- "A little corner of Monmouthshire turned Viennese in March when Mahler's Ninth Symphony was performed at the Wyastone Concert Hall.. Such arrangements often seem miraculously sturdy and illuminating, and Simon's is no exception... Otherwise, hearing the Ninth in lighter clothing underlines the music's objectivity... It's certainly easier to hear the piece as a precursor to Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony....The ESO players demonstrate nerves of steel – particularly its texture-controlling concertmaster Zoë Beyers and confident first horn James Topp. Woods ratchets up the tension of the second movement's manic Ländler and the tempo of the Rondo-Burleske to edgy effect. He meets the biggest challenges well, bringing depth and sure consolation to the bare-boned final pages that could easily have fallen flat and empty." [Andrew Mellor, Gramophone](#)

Composer Portrait - Adrian Williams

- "As a whole, the ESO and Woods portrait concert is an immense discovery, providing a splendidly multi-faceted portrait of Adrian Williams's inspiring work, and whetting the appetite for the future collaboration between the orchestra and their Composer-in-Association. An hour more than well spent, the concert is a must-watch for any contemporary music lover...A feast of imagination, the string textures are woven together with sensitivity and detail by Woods and the twenty two string players of the ESO, giving rise to an intense musical meditation, one immediately etched into living memory. The narrative arch is well conceived throughout, resulting in a gripping series of journeys and farewells... Written in the memory of director Ken Russell and conductor and pianist John Russell, the ten-minute Elegy constitutes a moving memorial; striking in its eloquent simplicity and utmost connectivity." [Jari Kallio - Adventures in Music](#)

Inspired by Mahler - Concert for Holocaust Memorial Day

- "This was a stimulating concert. The Weinberg was the highlight for me but all the other pieces – and performances – were excellent. Under the guiding hand of Kenneth Woods, the English Symphony Orchestra played with skill and commitment and the well-constructed programme gave us the opportunity to hear them in a good range of music. This programme is a discerning way to mark International Holocaust Memorial Day." [John Quinn, Seen and Heard International](#)
- "Mieczyslaw Weinberg is the composer of the moment, and his Concertino for Violin and Strings proved a wonderful find. Its opening melody is as gorgeous as that of Samuel Barber's Violin Concerto, there is an equally gorgeous slow movement, and the finale is a bittersweet waltz. There is something of a Jewish melancholy throughout the work which also characterises the Finzi Clarinet Concerto. Zoe Beyers was the persuasive, virtually ever-present soloist, Woods' ESO collaborating with empathy." [Chris Morley, Birmingham Post](#)

The Roaring 20's – Decade of Melody and Mayhem (December 2020)

- Celebrating the roaring spirit of the Twenties, the English Symphony Orchestra and their Principal Conductor Kenneth Woods, had put together an invigorating New Year's online programme, featuring some of the most flamboyantly surreal scores from the era... Schulhoff's suite is, quite simply, an outrageously brilliant score. A resplendent affair altogether, The Roaring 20s provided an apt way to welcome the 2021, a year, hopefully, of rediscovering the joys of live performance. In the days of lockdowns and solitude, online programmes as splendid as this one are simply priceless." [Adventures in Music](#)
- The scaled-down – well, ok, the percussion is scaled up!!! – English Symphony Orchestra absolutely scintillated in their New Year concert. Woods selected works from the irrepressibly glorious Jelly Roll Morton and Eubie Blake, as well as two neglected masterpieces – in this case Erwin Schulhoff's sensational Suite for Chamber Orchestra and Krenek's excellent Fantasie on his opera Jonny spielt auf. Even the – far from neglected – Le boeuf le Toit was here done in the rarely-attempted version for solo violin and orchestra, instead of its more familiar incarnation. Resurrecting neglected masterpieces is one of Woods' trademarks...The whole event was a toe-tapping, heart-lifting, and admirably-judged delight – as have been all the COVID-cut-down-ESO concerts from Wyastone, to be fair" [Classical Music Daily](#)

The Art of Storytelling

- Following on from its uproarious version of Lubin from Chelm [*], the English Symphony Orchestra continues its series of pieces for virtual storytelling in the guise of an old Egyptian tale – here given a contemporary twist to result in the 'morality' fable The Warrior Violinist....Davood Ghadami is a personable and thoughtful narrator; his understatement enabling one to focus on a musical score that, even more than the previous two in this series, packs a wealth of incident into a through-composed score which is effortlessly sustained over its 18 minutes. Not the least of its attractions is the extensive role allotted solo violin, played here by Zoë Beyers with no mean poise and resourcefulness. The remaining ESO musicians play with skill and sensitivity, while Kenneth Woods ensures clarity of texture even in denser passages. The production should provoke children and adults alike – and, as usual with ESO, a range of sundry material enhances the overall experience." Richard Whitehouse, Arcana.FM

Visions of Childhood (October 2020)

- "The English Symphony Orchestra's Music from Wyastone online series continued this evening with an ingenious programme centred on Childhood, as depicted in music from the latter 19th century, and featuring chamber arrangements by the orchestra's principal conductor Kenneth Woods... Fredrick's judicious floating of the

vocal line was integrated with Wood's astute handling of the ensemble to good effect... Hearing the latter piece in Stein's reduction as finale of the Fourth Symphony served equally to bring this well-planned and thought-provoking programme full circle; one that is required listening for those yet to hear it, and with the next concert in this series keenly anticipated." [Arcana.FM](#)

- ..."Das Himmlische Leben", soprano April Fredrick so resourcefully communicative, the tiny ESO remarkably sonorous under Kenneth Woods, conductor's quietly urbane conducting.....this was a rapt account, every note perfectly placed, immaculately led by Zoe Beyers, fondly remembered from her days with the CBSO... April Fredrick, soprano totally enchanting in the Sandman's aria from Humperdinck's Hansel und Gretel (was she also the children who sang the Evening Hymn?), outraged in Schubert's Die Forelle, Woods interweaving elements of the Trout Quintet between verses of the song, characterful in Mahler's Das Irdische Leben, and bringing a compelling conclusion to Woods' imaginative variations on Schubert's Death and the Maiden, the harmonium appropriately doomily trombone-like... a presentation as sensitive and smooth as this made the whole experience very rewarding." [Birmingham Post/Midlands Music Reviews](#)
- "...fresh and animated...The musicians performed all this music with great skill and empathy... This was very intelligent programme planning..." [Seen and Heard International](#)

Strauss – Four Last Songs and Morgen (September 2020)

- "The continued difficulties in mounting live concerts with an audience has led to any number of virtual and online presentations, of which the English Symphony Orchestra's Music from Wyastone is among the most imaginative. As organized and curated by Kenneth Woods, the ESO's redoubtable music director (below), this promises a fresh perspective on various (often if not always) familiar pieces – performed in chamber reductions which respect the need for social distancing and illuminate aspects of the music not always evident in its more familiar guise... what promises to be a rewarding series, and one which looks set to reaffirm the significance of the ESO within the context of British music-making." [Arcana.FM](#)
- "This was a very fine account of Strauss's last gift to the soprano voice. We had a lovely singer to whom the opportunity to perform the songs again clearly meant a great deal; we had a conductor who directed with skill and empathy; and we had 13 players who did full justice to a very successful reduced scoring. This short Strauss concert gave great pleasure. To complement the fine singing and playing, the video and audio presentation has been expertly handled by Tim Burton and Phil Rowlands respectively. There are English subtitles." [Seen and Heard International](#)

Pre-Covid Concert Highlights

- **Beethoven and Matthew Taylor Fifth Symphonies at Cadogan Hall, June 2019.** "Beethoven's Fifth Symphony also received one of the best performances I have heard live. Woods's fine and sane musicality ensured a genuine performance, full of real intensity and sensitivity within a constant view of powerful onward momentum throughout" [ClassicalSource](#)
- **David Matthews – Symphony No. 9 Premiere at St. George's Bristol.** [The Spectator](#) "Top 10 Classical Concerts of 2018". "Stunning concert with every piece done to perfection. The superb Sheku Kanneh-Mason in the Elgar. The world premiere of David Matthews' 9th Symphony. And a terrific orchestration of the Elgar Piano Quintet. Everything presided over by the urbane Kenneth Woods", James Jolly, Editor-in-Chief, Gramophone, May 2018
- **Elgar Violin Concerto and Brahms Piano Quartet in A Major (world premiere), Cheltenham Town Hall, November 2017.** "Any Brahms lover would be fascinated to hear this orchestration, and under Woods's direction the ESO played it with whole-hearted commitment and verve....under Woods's artistic leadership, the ESO is an orchestra that gives you a lot to talk about..." [Birmingham Post](#)
- **Americana '18 at St John's Smith Square, April 2018, Music of Ives, Copland, Jones (world premiere) and Piston.** "...this truly iconic building showcased the excellence of the ESO admirably, with a richness and depth of corporate tone, admirable for Charles Ives's Third Symphony, revealed in this account as an

undervalued masterpiece of quite original inspiration... An excellent concert; let's hope sanity returns to those charged with disbursing public money to valuable examples of civilised behaviour in terms of saving this fine London concert venue." [ClassicalSource](#)

- **Thea Musgrave, Pritchard, Emily Doolittle & Kaija Saariaho at LSO St Luke's & Bridgewater Hall.** "... a strong programme...eloquently played..." – [The Guardian](#)
- **Sibelius Symphony No. 7 and Schumann Symphony No. 4 in Hereford Shirehall.** "Kenneth Woods has re energised the English Symphony Orchestra to a point where it is one of the finest orchestras in England." [ClassicalSource](#)
- **String orchestra works by Kapralova, Dvorak, Martinu and Mozart in Kings Place, April 2019** "....the main novelty was undoubtedly the Partita for piano and orchestra composed in 1939 by Kaprálová (1915-1940) which opened the second half. It is a work that wears its seriousness of purpose on its sleeve... this conductor and orchestra can make the ordinary—not that there was any of that this evening—sound glorious, the extraordinary sound divine. I went home on a musical Cloud Nine." [Musical Opinion](#)
- **ESO at Kings Place: Haydn 44, Mozart 40 and James Francis Brown Clarinet Concerto (London Premiere).** "Kings Place would be wise to plan a weekend for Woods and his fine players to devote to as many of Haydn's Symphonies as possible....It says a lot for Mozart 40 that it sounded the most modern on the programme, aided by Woods's exhilarating swift tempos and also his control of phrase, freed from the cinematic and theatrical associations accorded to this divine genius. With almost all repeats observed Woods strode forth and the musicians were equally fleet of foot" [ClassicalSource](#)
- **Sawyers Violin Concerto (world premiere) at Hereford Shirehall.** "ONE is not often wowed by a new work, but Philip Sawyers' Violin concerto—premiered here by Alexander Sitkovetsky and the English Symphony Orchestra under Kenneth Woods—really did the trick.... Sitkovetsky despatched everything with tremendous aplomb, and the support of Woods and his ESO players sounded terrific even in this hard acoustic. I can't wait for the CD." [Birmingham Post](#)
- **Wall of Water – New works by Deborah Pritchard, Emily Doolittle, Thea Musgrave and Kaija Saariaho at LSO St Luke's** "Finally, a work by the Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho, Terra memoria (UK premiere), which opens and closes as a study in pianissimo, but which, as the music's events unfold, continues to present aspects of quite simple ideas which are developed and threaded in enthralling fashion. Saariaho's inventiveness in drawing much from – for example - a simple descending three-note scale, and its inversion, proved surprisingly original and emotionally fulfilling, as phrase after phrase lapped and fell back, as waves on the shore: not a Finnish 'wall of water' but invention curbed and directed by the imagination of this eminently gifted composer... Throughout this absorbing concert, one must pay tribute to the players' musicianship, self-evidently as one in their desire to do their best, and to Kenneth Woods, whose skill and undemonstrative mastery of the music was a joy to behold." [ClassicalSource](#)

Projects/Recordings (Links lead to digest of reviews)

- [Fiddles, Forests and Fowl Fables.](#) World premiere recordings of four new works for narrator and orchestra with Hugh Bonneville, Henry Goodman, Davood Ghadami and Gemma Whelan
- [Visions of Childhood.](#) A classical concept album featuring world-premiere recordings of new arrangements by Kenneth Woods and James Ledger of Strauss's Four Last Songs and works by Wagner, Mahler, Schubert and Humperdinck. "an astonishingly good CD with stunning orchestral arrangements by ESO's principal conductor, Kenneth Woods" [ArtsMuse, London](#)
- [Matthew Taylor - Symphonies Four and Five.](#) ". Premiered in 20219 [as part of the ESO's 21st C. Symphony Project]. "Taylor's Fifth Symphony is a powerful utterance... an imposing, personal and deeply felt work ... the English Symphony Orchestra's committed advocacy brings both purpose and poetry to the Fifth Symphony. Recording and documentation are exemplary. This is an outstanding release." [Paul Conway, Musical Opinion](#)
- [Elgar arr. Donald Fraser – Piano Quintet](#) (War Symphony) arr. for symphony orchestra (world premiere concert and recording). 2015 Classical Music Magazine Premiere of the Year, Classic FM Recording of the

Month (May 2016)

- **Ernest Krenek: Complete Piano Concertos [Vol. One](#) and [Vol. Two](#)** (world premiere recordings) : Best Recordings/2016" -Sunday Times, "Top 10 CDs of 2017" -Forbes Magazine, "Electric performances, all..." The Sunday times
- **[An Eventful Morning In East London](#) – 21st C. Violin Concertos by Deborah Pritchard, Emily Doolittle, Paul Patterson, Robert Fokkens and David Matthews** (world premiere recordings) : . 5 stars, Richard Morrison – The Sunday Times, MusicWeb Orchestral Recording of the Year, 2017
- **[The Art of Dancing](#)** – 21st Century Concerti for Trumpet, Piano and Strings, Simon Desbruslais and Clare Hammond (world premiere concerts and recordings). "Deborah Pritchard's Seven Halts on the Somme is an arresting response to a series of oil paintings by Hughie O'Donoghue, and pairs poignant commemoration with a powerful sense of musical drama...this beautifully performed, highly original disc." BBC Music Magazine
- **[John Joubert – Jane Eyre: An Opera](#)** (world premiere concert and recording). Classical Music Magazine Premiere of the Year 2016, Birmingham Post Classical Highlight of the Year 2016, MusicWeb Opera Recording of the Year 2017
- **[Hans Gál – Concertino for Cello and Strings](#)** (world premiere recording). 2018 MusicWeb Recording of the Year
- **[The 21st Century Symphony Project](#)** (world premiere concerts and recordings): "one of the most important musical initiatives of modern times" - Classical Source
 - [Philip Sawyers – Symphony No. 3](#). Gramophone 'Critics' Choice: Best Recordings of 2017", "A masterpiece" - Classical Source
 - [David Matthews – Symphony No. 9](#). One of The Spectator's Top 10 Classical Events of 2018
 - [Matthew Taylor – Symphony No. 5](#). "a masterwork of genuine symphonic thinking, given a performance of which any composer would have been thrilled." ClassicalSource
 - Steve Elcock - Symphony No. 8
- **[Brahms arr. Kenneth Woods – Piano Quartet in A Major](#)** arr. for symphony orchestra. Top Ten Classical CDs of 2018 – The Arts Desk. "Hopefully this new addition to the Brahms symphonic canon will get the widespread dissemination it certainly deserves..." Erik Levi – BBC Music Magazine
- **[Philip Sawyers – Violin Concerto, The Valley of Vision, Concerto for Trumpet and Strings, Elegiac Rhapsody in Memory of John McCabe](#)**. "Sawyers' thrilling orchestral music truly captivates, aided and abetted by pitch-perfect soloists Alexander Sitkovetsky (violin) and Simon Desbruslais (trumpet) and the ESO." BBC Music Magazine
- **[David Matthews – Symphony No. 9, Variations for Strings, Double Concerto](#)**. "A remarkable, enjoyable disc, brilliantly performed by Kenneth Woods' English Symphony Orchestra. Buy multiple copies and distribute to the ones you love... This is easy music to love, a modern expression of the English pastoral tradition which never descends into easy pastiche... Matthews' euphonious Double Concerto for Violin and Viola is another find, the point at which both soloists imitate nightingale calls quietly magical." Graham Rickson – The Arts Desk