

Norfolk & Norwich Festival

By far the largest arts festival in the East of England and the fourth largest in the UK, the 2025 Norfolk & Norwich Festival runs from Friday 9th to Sunday 25th May offering a huge variety of work staged in and around the fine city of Norwich. Festival regular Tony Cooper reports.

Following the tradition of the past few years the festival kicks off with the Welcome Weekend (9-11 May) inviting audiences to enjoy a host of free outdoor events spanning the centre of Norwich; therefore on Friday 9th May, Speak Percussion, a modern-day mash-up of dance, music and performance, come together in their High Voltage show featuring 150 guitarists from across the region as a Garage band in a showcase of musical talent that, hopefully will tick the box and make you want to rock!

And indoors on the same day, this year's edition gets truly underway with Grammy Award winner, Pakistani-born singer, composer and music producer, Arooj Aftab, who's primarily active in the field of minimal music. Her performance takes in the medieval and gracious space of Norwich Cathedral. Declared 'the coolest rock star in the world right now' by 'Uncut' magazine, Aftab has earned her position at the vanguard of creative music for her embrace of risk and nonconformity.

Following Ms Aftab into Norwich Cathedral (10 May) comes Gilles Peterson, a French-born DJ, broadcaster, avid record collector, curator and music-label owner whose musical spectrum includes dub, reggae, jazz, nu jazz, broken beat, house, drum-and-bass and hip-hop. In what he describes as 'a unique sit-down affair' he'll join the musical dots while playing and chatting about some of his favourite sounds past, present and future.

Star guitarist, Sean Shibe, will play

lute, acoustic guitar and electric guitar over the course of three shows. In the first, entitled 'Forgotten Dances' (15 May, Maddermarket Theatre), he'll explore overlooked corners of the guitar repertoire at the venue in which Julian Bream made his final appearance. The programme includes Martin's *Quatre*



Sean Shibe

pièces brèves pour guitare, a largely neglected piece until championed by Bream in the 1960s.

The following day (16 May, St Peter Mancroft Church) Shibe teams up with 12 Ensemble and the GBSR Duo to perform Oliver Leith's recreation of the imaginary band Doom and the Dooms' only concert, the centrepiece of this wistful programme celebrating the porousness of high and low art ranging from the

stylistic magpies of the Scottish Lute Manuscripts to brand-new work by genre-hopping composer, violinist and electronic musician, Sasha Scott.

The final concert sees Shibe pick up his lute in the quietness of Norwich Castle Museum (17 May) offering 15-minute 'after hours' recitals from 5 to 8pm. With a backdrop provided by The Paston Treasure (a mysterious painting by an unknown Flemish artist depicting objects found at Norfolk's Oxnead Hall) he'll perform short but exquisite pieces of music that engage with stories found in the painting.

In the second music residency, Australian-born mezzo-soprano, Lotte Betts-Dean, will explore the full and colourful range of the human voice. In a trio of performances, her first concert (18 May, Octagon Chapel), Ms Betts-Dean, accompanied by pianist Joseph Havlat, will perform Messiaen's *Harawi - Chant d'amour et de mort*, a piece widely regarded to be his grandest song-cycle. *Harawi*, in fact, is the first part of his 'Tristan' trilogy, a collection of works inspired by the medieval myth of Tristan and Isolde.

A rare and interesting concert of music coming from Corsica, Greece and Mallorca is on offer by the singers and instrumentalists of the Idrisi Ensemble (11 May, Norwich Cathedral) who'll also include in their specialised programme Gaelic Psalms and Old Roman Chant in a celebration of human imagination whilst also providing a powerful encounter with sounds on the brink of extinction.

A lovely and spiritual (free) event takes place in Norwich Cathedral (Tuesday, 13 May, 9pm) when the Senior Girl Choristers, Lay Clerks and Choral Scholars of Norwich Cathedral Choir sing the ancient monastic office of Compline in a warm and inviting candlelight setting. Deriving its name from the Latin word 'completorium' meaning 'completion', Compline is a meditative service of quietness and reflection before the end of the day.

Founded in 2019 in Berlin, the Leonkoro String Quartet, who made their Norfolk & Norwich Festival début in 2023 as one of the BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artists, makes a welcome return visit to the city to give a performance at Norwich Playhouse (12 May) of Haydn's Quartet in F major ('The Dream'), Berg's Lyric Suite and Mendelssohn's Quartet No.4 in F minor.

The young American cellist, Sterling



High Voltage

Elliott, who has established an exciting reputation for his effortless, joyous musicianship, will be joined by pianist Joseph Havlat performing works by modern American composers such as Amy Beach, George Walker and William Grant at a lunchtime concert (13 May, Octagon Chapel, 1pm) while an evening concert in the same venue (7.30pm) features the 23-year-old saxophonist, Emma Rawicz. Her performances are distinct, engaging and full of thrilling interplay and with over 70 international shows in the past year, she has become one of the most sought-after artists of her generation.

Another Octagon show (14 May) that looks more than promising features the multi-award-winning Chaos String Quartet who return to the festival for a second year. They'll present a blend of classic and contemporary works comprising Haydn's String Quartet in G minor, No.3, Francesca Verunelli's String Quartet No.2 and Beethoven's String Quartet in G major, Op.18, No.2.

In the majestic surrounds of St Peter Mancroft (17 May) the Gurdjieff Ensemble will play and preserve music from a variety of ancient folk traditions coming from Armenian, Greek, Arabic, Assyrian, Kurdish, Persian and Caucasian cultures. Their haunting, mysterious and atmospheric performances reflect a clear contemporary vitality with one foot firmly planted in the here and now and resonances echoing through past, present and future.

Celebrating their 30th anniversary in a concert tailor-made for the Octagon Chapel (19 May) the iconic contemporary ensemble, Apartment House, well known for their advocacy of experimental and avant-garde music, meld together a rarely-heard work by Philip Glass (*Music in Eight Parts*) heard alongside John Cage's subtle, graceful hymnal piece, *Harmonies*.

Awarded the Royal Philharmonic Society's prestigious Ensemble Award in March 2024, the BBC Singers celebrate their centenary this year and, of course, are always welcome visitors to the festival. Their all-embracing programme at the Roman Catholic Cathedral of St John the Baptist, Earlam Road (23 May) directed by Sir James MacMillan

comprises Britten's *Hymn to the Virgin*, Taverner's *Hymn to the mother of God*, Judith Weir's *Ave Regina Caeloru*, Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli* plus two lovely pieces by James MacMillan - *The Culham Motets* and *O Virgo Prudentissima*.

Lighting up the stage focuses on Britten Sinfonia's principal trumpet, Imogen Whitehead (24 May, Norwich Cathedral) who'll perform Johann

Hummel's Trumpet Concerto in E major which was first performed on New Year's Day 1804 to mark Hummel's entrance into the court orchestra of Nikolaus II, Prince Esterházy, as Haydn's successor.

The programme also includes Beethoven's sparkling first symphony and the haunting work, *Fratres*, by the eminent and well-loved Estonian composer, Arvo Pärt, now in his 90th year, while a rare performance of Wagner's stunningly beautiful *Siegfried Idyll*, composed as a birthday present to his second wife, Cosima, after the birth of their son, Siegfried in 1869, will also be heard.

The work was first performed on Christmas Day morning 1870 (Cosima, in fact, was awoken to its opening melody) by a small ensemble of the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich on the stairs of the Wagners' Swiss villa at Tribschen, now part of Lucerne. Conductor Hans

Richter learned the trumpet to play the brief trumpet part and, reportedly, sailed to the centre of Lake Lucerne to practise so as not to be heard.

Over the past years the immensely popular Adnams Spiegelent in Chapel Field Gardens has built a fine, fierce and glowing reputation for staging awe-inspiring circus shows. This year is no exception and sees Upswing present their brand-new show 'Showdown' (14-25 May), a heavy mix of circus skills and thrills

peppered with cheeky humour witnessing six contestants battling it to the top spot in a fast-paced gameshow-style competition.

Be mindful!

Norwich's own, Alex McAleer, is about to read your mind. This man possesses the uncanny ability to apparently tap into his audiences' minds and read their thoughts at will. Therefore, over a couple of mesmerising

and entertaining shows (Adnams Spiegelent: Tuesday 20 May, 7pm / Wednesday 21 May, 9.30pm) Alex will show off his mind-boggling skills in an unbelievable demonstration of psychological skill as he combines contemporary mind reading with sharp wit and a flair for showmanship.

Another pertinent strand in this year's programme celebrates our country's diverse coastline - home to communities,

nature, industry and endless stories. As part of this strand 'River of Hope' (9-25 May) explores the Norfolk rivers which empty into the North Sea bringing together the work of around 500 young people in a large installation while in the delightful North Norfolk coastal town of Cromer one can enjoy 'Sea Like a Mirror'

(15-26 May), an ambitious national partnership programme led by Cement Fields and commissioned to mark the 200th anniversary of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. At the heart of the project is 'White Horses' - a brand-new artwork by Ivan Morison.

I'm glad to see that Cinema City (St Andrew's Street, Norwich) is being used as a festival venue for the first time hosting a 'free' event (booking required) entitled 'MONSTERS' (Wednesday, 21 May, 11.30am) a joint commission

by Norfolk & Norwich Festival, Ipswich-based SPILL Festival, Lowestoft's First Light Festival, Nene Park Trust and Sheringham Little Theatre and supported through public funds from the National Lottery through Arts Council England.

The work has been created by Andy Field and Beckie Darlington and features children from Gladstone Primary Academy (Peterborough), Sheringham Primary School (Norfolk), Rushmere Hall Primary School (Ipswich) and Somerleyton Primary School (Suffolk).

A post-apocalyptic East Anglian fairytale 'MONSTERS' focuses on an event that hasn't happened (yet) created by and starring dozens of ordinary children from across the East Anglian region. In derelict barns and abandoned theatres they've imagined a world very different to our own and what they would need to do to survive in it.

Therefore, in the film they'll tell one about the world they imagine, a world after monsters have arrived, exploring survival, change and uncertainty. The film blends fantasy and reality, reinterpreting disaster tropes through the eyes of a generation familiar with crisis. A real story in an imaginary world or an imaginary story in the real world? Go and find out!

■ You want more! There's more, of course, so click on www.nnfestival.org.uk to open up a treasure-chest of cultural activity like no other!

Box office: 01603 531800; online: nnfestival.org.uk; in person: Norwich Guildhall by the marketplace.



Showdown © Andy Phillipson



Chaos String Quartet © Davide Bertuccio



Lotte Betts-Dean
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