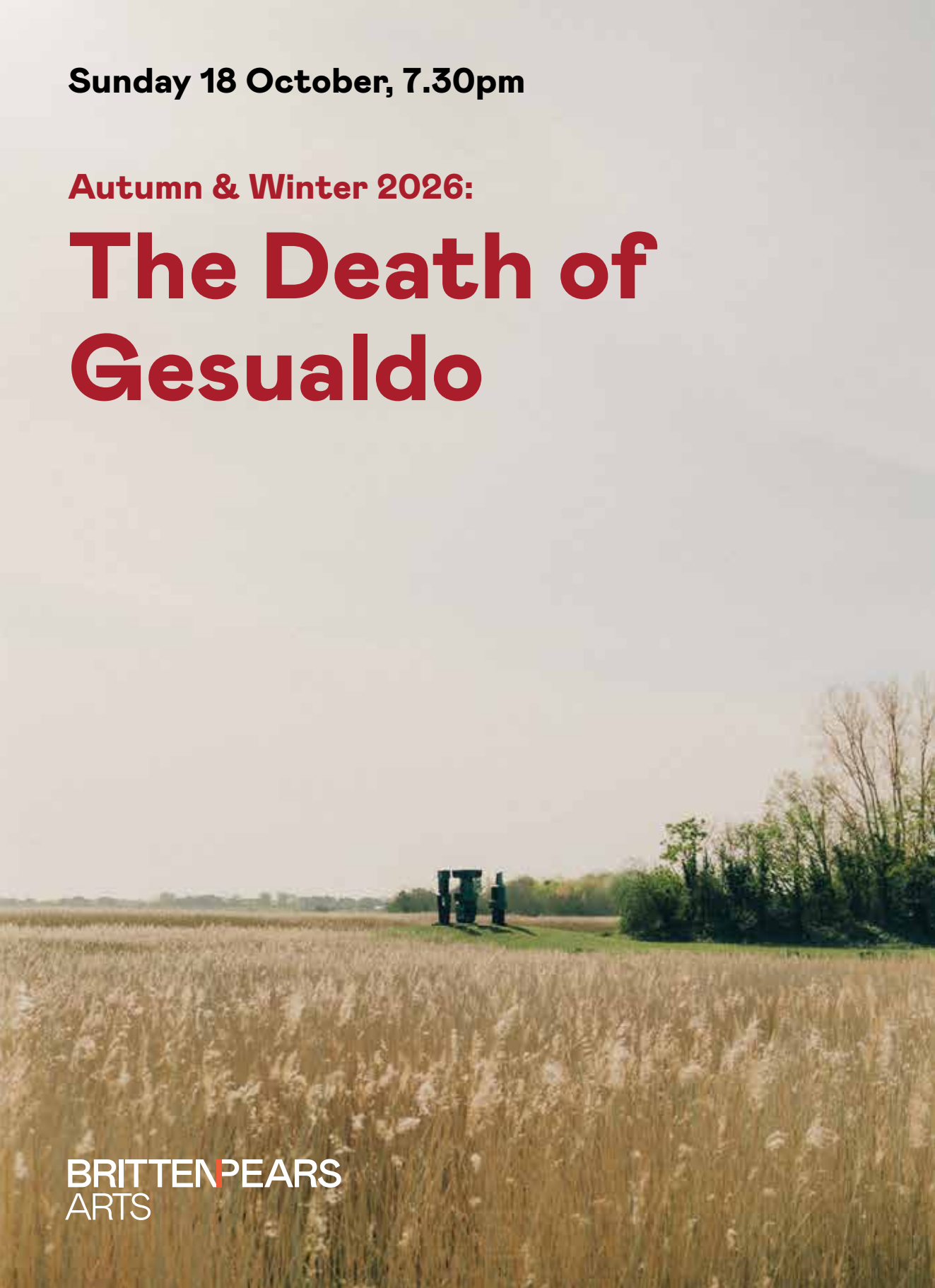
Sunday 18 October, 7.30pm

Autumn & Winter 2026:

The Death of Gesualdo



BRITTEN PEARS ARTS

Welcome

Thank you for joining us for our autumn and winter season at Snape Maltings. It's wonderful to welcome you for what promises to be a rich and varied programme of concerts.

This season sees a particularly significant anniversary. We are marking 50 years since the death of Benjamin Britten in December 1976, and our **Britten 26** commemoration offers an opportunity not only to celebrate his extraordinary musical legacy, but to reflect on how his vision continues to shape everything we do today. Britten believed passionately in the power of music to enrich lives, in nurturing the next generation of musicians, and in creating opportunities for people of all ages to experience and participate in music. Those convictions remain at the heart of our work, from our concerts and festivals to our programmes for young artists, schools and communities. Britten 26 is as much about looking to the future as remembering the past.

This season also marks another important moment in Snape Maltings' history. These will be our last concerts in the much-loved Concert Hall before it closes for several months for a major programme of improvements. We will be making the building more accessible, comfortable and sustainable, and creating greater flexibility for future performances, while carefully protecting its unique character and celebrated acoustics.

One change I know audiences will particularly welcome is the refurbishment of the hall's seating. You can try out examples of the new seats in the Concert Hall foyer, and even play your own part in the building's next chapter by sponsoring a seat or brick in support of our capital campaign. You'll find details on the inside back cover of this programme.

The Concert Hall will reopen for the 2027 Aldeburgh Festival, 60 years after Britten and Pears first opened it in 1967. It feels especially fitting that, as we celebrate Britten's legacy, we are also investing in the remarkable place he created, ensuring it can continue to inspire audiences and musicians for generations to come.

Booking for the Festival opens early in the New Year, so do keep an eye on our website for further details.

In the meantime, thank you again for joining us. I hope you enjoy the performance.

Andrew Comben
Chief Executive

Enjoyed the performance? Tell us all about it.
We'd love to hear about your impressions of tonight's concert and your time at Snape – share your experience and pictures on social media and don't forget to tag us!

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Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

The Death of Gesualdo

The Gesualdo Six:
Guy James, Alasdair Austin
Joseph Wicks, Josh Cooter
Simon Grant, Owain Park

Actors:
Bill Barclay, Doria Bramante
Ivy Corbin, Markus Weinfurter
Siân Williams, Ryan Winkles

Bill Barclay director & creator
Owain Park music director
Will Tuckett choreographer
Janni Younge puppet designer
Arthur Oliver costume designer

Production/Stage Management:
Esther Malkinson, Sara Stackhouse

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featuring the following works by
Carlo Gesualdo (1566–1613)
edited by Bill Barclay

Prologue
O vos omnes

Act I
Tristis est anima mea
(excerpt: Et ego vadam)
Unus ex discipulis meis
(excerpt: Melius illi erat)
In monte Oliveti (excerpt: Vigilate et orate)
O dolce mio tesoro
Resta di darmi noia

Act II
In più leggiadro velo
Ecce vidimus eum
(excerpt: Ecce vidimus eum)
O crux benedicta
Tirsi morir volea
Itene, o miei sospiri

Act III
Hai rotto e sciolto
Dolcissima mia vita
Se così dolce è il duolo
(excerpt: Ma s'avverrà)
Eram quasi agnus
(excerpt: Eram quasi agnus)
Unus ex discipulis meis

Act IV
Mentre madonna il lasso
(excerpt: Ahi, troppo saggia nell'errar)
Una hora non potuistis
(excerpt: Vel Judam)
Beltà, poi che t'assenti

Act V
In monte Oliveti
Felice primavera
Piagne e sospira – by **Claudio Monteverdi**
Qual fora, donna, un dolce 'ohimè'

Act VI
Ahi, disperata vita
Deus, refugium et virtus
Languisce al fin
In monte Oliveti (excerpt: Vigilate et orate)
Moro, lasso, al mio duolo
Languisco e moro, ahi, cruda

Epilogue
Tristis est anima mea
(excerpt: Et ego vadam)

Duration: approx 75' with no interval
This performance is surtitled

Director's note

Carlo Gesualdo wrote some of the most darkly sublime music of the late Renaissance. He also savagely murdered his wife and her lover in their bed. Now be honest: which would you like to discuss first?

The art will always be secondary to the atrocity, however magnificent the madrigals and sacred music. Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa, had been cuckolded by the Duke of Andria in a long-running tryst that had become the scuttlebutt at court. The premeditated double murder of 1590 was a truly grisly affair, concluding in the public display of their mutilated bodies on the steps of the palazzo for several days.

Gesualdo's biography is often reduced to this act, yet his own end, too, was harrowing. Twenty years on, the prince had retreated to his estate to indulge in a life of ritualistic agony, reportedly employing servants to beat him thrice daily to ease sleep and constipation. This domestic nightmare included the presence of two concubines accused by his second wife of witchcraft against him. Their ghoulish testimonies, elicited under torture, suggest a household that had descended into a gothic psychosis.

Gesualdo wrote madrigals, but not the sunny pastoral ones that defined his English contemporary Thomas Morley ('Now is the month of Maying', 'It was a lover and his lass'). Were those kind of compositions his, we might successfully disentangle the art from the artist. Yet Gesualdo was a musician whose sombre works ('Ahi, disperata vita': Ah desperate life; 'Moro, lasso, al mio duolo': I die, alas, in my suffering) could easily score a film of his own sordid life. The music and the man easily form a singular, haunting synthesis – the aural diary of a degenerate.

At this juncture during the creation of the piece I was forced into a moment of moral pause. Is it appropriate to half-valorise a murderer whose music and stature would be obliterated online today?

For me, the art is almost always separate from the artist, odious or not. We can't locate antisemitism in Wagner's actual scores. To eliminate *Guernica* from the canon because of Picasso's abuse of women is a punishment unbefitting of the crime.

To take a less extreme example, if I'm upset by J.K. Rowling's stance on trans issues, banning her books from my daughter's bedroom only closes a door for both of us. We know way too much about artists today – we are swimming in their private biographical details – and are thereby unwittingly complicit in this contamination of their art. To make matters worse, the facts and the fictions are increasingly blurred – an artist who is young and famous today will be forced to consider that someone may have already created deepfake pornographic material of them.

Allow me to present myself as an example. In my production, I attempt to tackle these issues by mapping Gesualdo's tortured harmonies on to the painful episodes of his life, connecting his musical hallucinations with his descent into psychosis. Patterns are fun to find and dots thrilling to join. Of course, I vainly hope this reveals something new and valuable about him.

But high art at best is a Rorschach test – an ink blot. It isn't meant to reveal the artist, it is meant to reveal us. A staging of *Hamlet* tells us little about Shakespeare, frankly. It hardly tells us much about Hamlet. If it's an excellent production, it might remind me that it's been 17 years since I've lost my dad, and I really, really miss him.

This is what makes Gesualdo such a valuable case study in 2026: here was that rare artist before celebrity culture taught us how to obsess. Centuries before the internet, this great-nephew of Pope Pius IV was born into a life

of transparency. His second wife was Eleonora d'Este of the prestigious northern Court of Ferrara, a 'Music City', and a cultural nexus of 16th-century Europe. All murders aside, his nobility, wealth and role as a leading composer made him the subject of constant gossip – about his sexuality, intelligence and more – for his entire life.

The homicides were a festering scandal, yet perhaps more shocking is they were perfectly legal; for an Italian prince of his day, an 'honour' killing was an expected rite of restoration. This is why he evaded punishment and formed a second strategic alliance with the Court of Ferrara. But there the whispers intensified, and perhaps as a result, he devoted himself to the solitude of composition. His later years were marked by another retreat – this time by a fixation that he was being hunted by the families of his victims.

In *Death of Gesualdo*, the composer's fragile psyche forms a toxic alchemy with the public glare that fuels his psychosis even as it yields astonishing music. His final years culminated in the *Tenebrae Responsoria* of 1611 – an apparent self-requiem that conflates Christ's suffering entirely with his own. One hears guilt, atonement and isolation in the sublime dissonances of this haunting masterpiece. He died two years later, a man broken by the very status that had protected him.
But are any of these connections true?

Truth be told, Gesualdo's chosen forms – the madrigal – were quite typical for his day. He was not among the *avant garde* in Florence, nor was he inventing opera with Monteverdi in Mantua, he was writing mannerist madrigals, a late form on its way out. Mannerism relied on artificiality, complexity, chromaticism and dissonance. No one understood that assignment better than our dark prince. A musicologist must be honest that 'psychopathic composer' is an irresponsible elision. But we have allowed his bloodlust to define his music, haven't we, and that is the problem and the opportunity.



Anon, 16th century: portrait of Carlo Gesualdo

In travelling my own road through this work, I have concluded that punishing odiousness in artists by erasing their art is the wrong lesson from the 2020s. Artists must realise there is a sharp danger of their work becoming contaminated with their reputation. Audiences must realise that double-clicking on another's suffering is a step too far. As for *Death of Gesualdo*, it may reveal nothing about him. It could reveal something about me. If it's any good, neither should matter, because it will reveal something truly important about you.

Bill Barclay © 2026

The Death of Gesualdo was commissioned by St Martin-in-the-Fields









The Red House, Aldeburgh

Discover the creative home of Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears. Open until 2 November.

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SNAPE MALTINGS

Take a seat

These seats are examples of the refurbished seating that will be installed in our Concert Hall.

Please try our replica seats in the foyer and share your feedback using the box provided.



By naming a seat, you can become part of the story of Snape Maltings and help support the refurbishment of the Concert Hall.

To find out more visit: brittenpearsarts.org/nameaseat
Email: nameaseat@brittenpearsarts.org

SUN 6 SEPT

Suffolk County Music Service presents: Gala Concert, 5pm

WED 9 SEPT

Open Rehearsal: Composition and Performance, 4pm

THUR 10 SEPT

Composition and Performance, 1.30pm

Alde Valley Academy Celebration Evening, 6pm

SAT 12 SEPT

End of Course Concert, 4pm

SUN 13 SEPT

Breakfast Club with Live Jazz, 9am

TUE 15 – SUN 20 SEPT

Heritage Open Days

SAT 26 – SUN 27 SEPT

Aldeburgh Food & Drink Festival

FRI 2 OCT

Michelle Hromin, 6.30pm

Willow Hazell – The Dreaming, 8pm

SAT 3 OCT

Snape Sessions: Charlie Dark, 7pm

FRI 16 OCT

Verity Monroe, 7pm

SUN 18 OCT

Death of Gesualdo, 7.30pm

FRI 23 OCT

Samrat Majumder, 12pm

SAT 24 OCT

My Father Cannot Speak, 7pm

SUN 25 OCT

Breakfast Club with Live Jazz, 9am

THUR 29 – FRI 30 OCT

Spooky Sounds, 11am, 12pm, 2pm & 3pm

FRI 30 OCT

AERA Ensemble, 12pm

John Biddulph – The Sonic Microscope, 4pm

ETO: Orpheus and Eurydice, 7.30pm

SAT 31 OCT

ETO: Ariadne | Dido and Aeneas, 7.30pm

SUN 1 NOV

An afternoon in memory of Anne Cuddigan, 4pm

FRI 6 NOV

Lydia Shariff and Francesca Lauri – Into The Gathering Dark, 12pm

SUN 8 NOV

Family Concert: The Littlest Yak, 11.30am & 2.30pm

FRI 13 NOV

Kleio Quartet, 12pm

SAT 14 NOV

Christ Church Cathedral Choir at 500, 7pm

THUR 19 NOV

Christmas Shopping Day, 10am – 7.30pm

FRI 20 NOV

Ewan Millar, 12pm

A Christmas Miracle, 6.30pm

SAT 21 NOV

A Christmas Miracle, 3pm & 6.30pm

SUN 22 NOV

Britten's Birthday: The Red House Open Day

Breakfast Club with Live Jazz, 9am

FRI 27 NOV

London Chamber Soloists, 12pm

Can you hear the alarm?, 7pm

SAT 28 NOV

Aldeburgh Music Club presents: Christmas Oratorio, 7pm

FRI 4 – SUN 6 DEC

Britten's Legacy Tours

FRI 4 DEC

Timothy Ridout and James Baillieu – Schubert, 12pm

Tiresias², 4pm

Guy Johnston and Melvyn Tan, 7pm

SAT 5 DEC

Breakfast with Father Christmas

Study Morning with Dr Lucy Walker, 11am

Winterreise, 4pm

Saint Nicolas, 7pm

SUN 6 DEC

Breakfast with Father Christmas

Britten Oboe Quartet, 12pm

Service of Thanksgiving, 3pm

Isolde Films presents: NOCTURNE, 5pm

A Celebration of East Anglia's Young Musicians, 7pm

MON 7 DEC

78th Aldeburgh Festival Launch, 6pm

TUE 8 DEC

Scratch Choir: A Ceremony of Carols, 11am

THUR 10 DEC

Christmas Wreath Making at The Red House, 10am & 2pm

FRI 11 DEC

A Festive Friday Night is Music Night, 7pm

SAT 12 DEC

Christmas Afternoon Tea, 9.30am

Christmas Wreath Making at The Red House, 10am & 2pm

The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse with Live Orchestra, 11am & 2pm

Britten: Canticles, 7pm

SUN 13 DEC

Breakfast with Father Christmas

TUE 15 DEC

Carols at The Red House, 10.30am & 2pm

FRI 18 – WED 23 DEC

Co-op Juniors Theatre Company presents: Magic of Christmas

MON 21 DEC

Father Christmas sails into Snape Maltings, 10.30am

TUE 22 DEC

Christmas Farmers' Market, 9.30am

The Family of Man (1970), Barbara Hepworth

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Britten Pears Arts is a registered charity (no. 261383) and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (no. 980281).
The right is reserved to substitute artists and vary the advertised programme if necessary. Information is correct as of October 2026.