

28 June 2026

FIRST NIGHT

Knussen CO/ Wigglesworth review — a new viola concerto with a bright future

At the Aldeburgh Festival, the conductor Ryan Wigglesworth unveiled his new Viola Concerto, beautifully composed for Lawrence Power



The British violinist Lawrence Power with the Knussen Chamber Orchestra



Richard Morrison, Chief Culture Writer

Sunday June 28 2026, 10.00pm, The Times

At the Aldeburgh Festival, where Benjamin Britten premiered so many works tailor-made for his friends, Ryan Wigglesworth has now done the same for one of his. His new Viola Concerto is beautifully composed for Lawrence Power, and it's hard to think of anyone who could champion it better. Its first performance, with Wigglesworth conducting the Knussen Chamber Orchestra (comprising predominantly students from the Royal Academy of Music), cast a perceptible spell over the Snape Maltings Concert Hall.

In part that was because it reversed the expected shape of a concerto, so its half-hour span began and finished in tranquillity with only its middle movement supplying fire and fury. Nevertheless, there was a subtler sort of dramatic tension running throughout — between the soloist who always seemed to be striving for expression and lyricism, and the orchestra which was more grounded in chorale-like harmonies and textures that were continually shape-shifting. The orchestra was also unusually divided, with a small group of players — harps, celeste, piano and tuned percussion — supplying what Wigglesworth called a “continuo” of magical tinkles and strums.



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It was all impeccably calculated to allow the viola — not the world's most naturally flamboyant instrument — always to be in the foreground, and Power played with a glorious sonority in unaccompanied rhapsodies that reminded one of Shakespearean soliloquies, and in the fizzing middle movement where, at the end, the soloist's passagework literally outruns the chasing orchestra.

It's a concerto that deserves many performances. And it was fittingly introduced here by another little gem for viola and orchestra, [Wigglesworth's](#) new, lushly elegiac arrangement of a late Brahms canon, *Einformig ist der Liebe Gram*, which itself quotes the haunting final song in Schubert's *Winterreise*. Fascinating to hear three composers communing, spiritually at least, across the centuries.

Wigglesworth still seemed to be in the grip of reverie when he started conducting Brahms's Second Symphony, at a very expansive tempo indeed. Had he forgotten the England football match kicked off at 10pm? Happily, he let the handbrake off halfway through the first movement and the orchestra responded with verve and perhaps relief.

★★★★☆