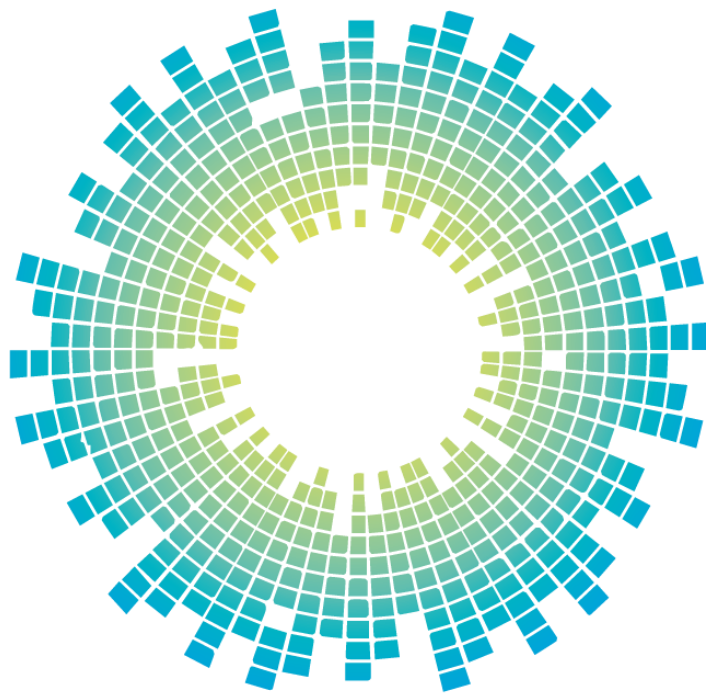




Commissioning Brief



Commissioning Brief No. 31281

The Essay

For BBC *Radio 3* for April 2026 - September 2027

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SECTION A: EDITORIAL OPPORTUNITY

Commissioning Brief ID / Title: 31281: The Essay

Commissioning Editor	Matthew Dodd
Commissioning Contact	Matthew Dodd/David Ireland
Commissioning Brief Title	The Essay
Network	Radio 3
Guide Price	£9,500 - £11,500, depending on format of programmes
Genre	Factual – Arts, Culture and the Media
Duration	14'
No. of Episodes	c.31 weeks x 5 programmes per week
Transmission Period	April 2026- September 2027
Slot Day	Monday - Friday
Slot Time	2145-2200
Production Location	No restriction
Commissioning Round	2026/27 – Round 1 (Speech Programming)

Important Points to Note:

Short Proposals and your responses to the **Production Eligibility Questionnaire** must be submitted via PiCoS, **using Commissioning Brief 31281: The Essay, and Commissioning Round 1 2026/27**, before the deadline at **noon on Thursday 9th October 2025**.

- This title will be commissioned under the Audio Terms of Trade.
- Proposals must be submitted in accordance with the requirements contained in this document and on the commissioning website. Proposals not complying may be rejected by the Commissioners whose decision in this matter will be final.



The **Production Eligibility Questionnaire** can be found in **Appendix 1**. This is the first part of your submission and it will be considered as part of the process. Please only complete if you've not previously been commissioned by the network, otherwise enter "N/A".

More information relating to all commissioning briefs and rounds, regardless of Network can be found on the [‘Pitching Ideas’](#) page of the Radio Commissioning Website.

1. About BBC Radio 3

BBC Radio 3 is the BBC's classical music station, also offering a range of broader cultural programming to entertain and absorb audiences. Classical music leads its daytime schedule, complemented by a host of live concerts and live performance every day. Alongside this are distinctive programmes on jazz, world music, as well as documentaries and speech programmes.

Network Editorial Strategy & Objectives

Cultural programming is a central part of Radio 3's mission.

- We believe classical music is for everyone. We aim to create an inclusive, welcoming space for all listeners that brings people together through shared experience and understanding, providing a place of inspiration, and a means to navigate a complex world.
- We pride ourselves on being a commissioner of distinctive classical music programmes, shining a new light on well-loved artistic works and investing in new talent.
- We are one of the most significant commissioners of contemporary classical music anywhere in the world and the biggest broadcaster of live classical concerts including the BBC Proms.

Diversity

Diversity & Inclusion is a priority for all of us. We want BBC Content to be demonstrably the best organisation in the audio sector to work for and with; one which reflects the diversity of the UK; and where people feel welcomed, appreciated, respected, and can be themselves and produce their best work.

Radio 3 is dedicated to improving diversity and inclusion across the station through a long-term strategy which will lead to an even richer musical and cultural offering. Radio 3 monitors representation across the network through the BBC 50:50 initiative and has launched several creative initiatives on diversity – including our partnership projects with the Arts and Humanities Research Council to support research on and performance of



composers from diverse backgrounds and the Open Music scheme designed to bring creatives and musicians of all genres, styles and backgrounds from across the UK to the BBC.

The station is part of BBC Radio's Diversity and inclusion commitment, looking for new approaches to evolve listener engagement which will broaden the appeal of the network to new audiences. And contributing to a more diverse and inclusive classical music industry as a whole, as well as other genres of music and culture. We are interested to hear your inclusive content ideas and how they might be expressed across the music played, stories told and voices heard. You may wish to consider how your proposal might contribute to the expanded 50/50 Diversity initiative and how your company already aligns with our D&I Commissioning Commitments, or could do so in future (See Appendix 1).

2. The Editorial Opportunity

The Essay is Radio 3's late night programme for thoughtful reflection and imaginative personal stories about music and the arts. It's a place for high quality contributors and leading figures who are keen to convey their ideas to a music and arts-loving audience. The Essay uses simple treatments built around a single voice. With a duration of only 14 minutes, these programmes need to be focused and full of character.

Recently, we've been broadening the format of the slot beyond the traditional scripted episodes – and we've now commissioning as many editions that are built around interviews and featurised conversations. We're also integrating music into the programmes.

But in all these programmes, it's important that the tone remains one of personal enquiry, personal insight, and individual artistic achievement and passions. This is not a place for reports, journalistic overviews or factual surveys of a topic.

Simplicity and economy in format and style are essential.

Across the year, the strand is music-led – but with room for the other arts, for science, for history and for philosophy, especially in the way they relate to music, or are seen through music's perspective.

The Essay is commissioned by weekly broadcast, in groups of five programmes on a single theme. But this might involve one contributor across all five programmes – or several contributors across the week.

We also welcome proposals linked to anniversaries, major events or seasonal moments like Easter and Christmas.



We're looking for three types of proposals:**1. Scripted Essays**

These are scripted talks, usually read by the author, with an emphasis on storytelling about music and the arts. We're particularly interested in historical stories about music, memoir about music, biographical stories about music.

These series usually include short musical extracts in the programmes – and possibly archive and sound effects. Scripted talks can include an additional guest contributor – but the programme should be built around the presenter.

All programmes, whatever the topic in this slot, are personal stories, intimately told – based on personal experience, individual research or particular perspectives. The personality of the presenter should shine through the programmes. They are imaginatively written, with wit and panache and a writerly structure. The sound should be the opposite of rarefied, stiff or precious – instead their attraction should rely on clear language, wit and humour, and twists and turns in the storyline.

We pay particular attention in proposals to the certainty that the presenter can read a script with a dynamic and attractive delivery – and not sound stiff or awkward. This is not the place for academic lectures, objective surveys or textbook explanations. Nor is it a place for soap-box opinion. These are informed reflections, shared with generosity and often playfulness. Listeners should feel real pleasure and enjoyment when listening, as well as learning something new.

We're very keen for proposals on the broader world of culture and science – but across the year we're aiming for the slot to be dominated by music.

We're always interested in ideas for some longer series across several weeks that tackle larger musical topics – or attempt something more comprehensive than five parts allow. These could be authored by a well-known figure from the world of music – or a celebrated public figure with a strong interest in classical music.

Recent examples include:

Full Moon on Progress St: Dr Rommi Smith examines a turning-point moment in the life of Black female musicians, revealing lesser-known aspects of their life and work, going behind stereotypes. Ella Fitzgerald, Big Mama Thornton, Billie Holiday and Nina Simone.

Uchronias: Five fictional, counterfactual histories of the lives of composers Chopin, Sibelius, Stravinsky, Beethoven and Satie- as you've never heard them before. From the imagination of Spanish writer Martín Llade, and hosted by producer Nicholas Jackson



Musicians on the Couch: Writer and music lover Amanda Dalton’s childhood was dominated by her love of playing the piano and loathing of the intensive psychoanalytical psychotherapy she underwent for five years. Coupled with her long personal interest in how the brain and the body work together, this series takes an unusual look at music.

Books for Brighter Blackouts: Emma Smith tells five stories which paint a picture of the world of books and the real experience of readers during the Second World War.

Unsung Heroes: Stephen Wyatt champions the essential but often overlooked contribution that librettists and lyricists make to great operas and musicals. Why does nobody remember who they are, even on the great classics?

2. Interview series.

In these episodes, the Essay uses its fifteen-minute slot to strip one interview or several interviews across the week. In this commissioning round, we’re keen to increase the number of episodes in this format.

The Essay might be one guest taking us through their life-story in episodic parts from Monday to Friday. Or it might be a different guest each night, all united by a single theme. Like the strand overall, these interviews will be music-led, but not uniquely about music – we’ve already had excellent editions with a poet and an actor. They’re not the place for promotional interviews about someone’s latest performance, new release or publication. They will need to find more thematic topics and take the form of a reflective conversation about more long-term topics.

Even if the guest interviewee is the same across the week, every episode needs to have a single theme and be free-standing. We’re looking for intellectual and cultural exchanges between fascinating speakers for a late-night slot. We’re interested in a range of ideas about who the presenters for these interviews might be – for example, there might be returning presenters and we welcome voices new to Radio 3.

Examples include:

An Actor’s Life – Kenneth Cranham: Actor Kenneth Cranham expounds entertainingly on a life in acting in conversation with friend and colleague Neil Dudgeon. From an early performance in the 1968 film *Oliver* to winning an Olivier award for the title role in the hit play *The Father* in the West End, Cranham has worked with an amazing array of writers, directors and actors over his sixty-year career. Cranham’s account of his life and work offers a thrilling perspective on the last sixty years of British drama

Instrumental: Alan Hall talks to five musicians about the intimate nature of their relationship to their chosen instrument. Including trumpeter Kim Moore, bass guitarist Yolanda Charles, oboist Timothy Rundle, table player Gurdain Rayatt and cellist Zoë Martlew.



Healing Musicians: Kate Kennedy meets musicians who, like her, had to stop or pause playing after injury and reshape their lives. With Julian Lloyd Weber, Stephen Marquiss, Robin Graham, Ludwig Quandt, Rebecca Toal and Hattie Butterworth.

3. Featurised conversations and simple features

These are simple but imaginative and creative features suited to late night radio. They have a small number of voices – usually no more than three, including the presenter. They should have the feel of vignettes, portraits or short stories. There should always be one key presenter who has a strong presence and leads us through the story.

This format is not intended to be for journalism or head-on factual programming – like all the programmes in this slot they should have a strong feel of personal storytelling.

Music in Bloom: A second series in which Katie Derham delves into the surprising connections between classical music and plants – by talking to musicians and gardeners who help feed their cross-fertilisation.

The Song Detectorists: Folk music-lover Matthew Bannister travels across England to find out about the music discovered in County Record Offices and reimagined for the 21st Century by the folk musician Nancy Kerr. With episodes in Norfolk, Wakefield, Cornwall, Hampshire and Newcastle.

Erland Cooper's Mythic Mountains: In his second series, composer Erland Cooper turns his attention once again to the mythical world. This time he embarks on five imaginary journeys to mythic mountains from around the world, scored by Erland's own music. Accompanying him are writers and storytellers who know all about these legendary locations – with writer guests including Elif Shafak.

Vivaldi in a Warming World: In the anniversary year of Vivaldi's Four Seasons, Kate Molleson talks to musicians and composers about writing and performing music inspired by nature, in a world tackling climate change.

The programmes in the Essay slot should appeal to all intelligent listeners – no matter their particular expertise. Please don't presume their knowledge of your topic. The Essay has a strong on-demand following – which means listeners from a broader range of backgrounds. This slot should be sought out by audiences on BBC Sounds.



3. Sustainability

The BBC is committed to informing and inspiring listeners about how they, as individuals, can take steps towards more sustainable living.

Your proposal should consider how the editorial and production methods contribute towards the BBC's Net Zero strategy – you can read about this [here](#).

Where appropriate sustainability themes should be woven into the editorial – either implicitly or explicitly. Unsustainable portrayals should be avoided in favour of showing more sustainable practices, e.g. if the narrative allows maybe a character takes a train journey instead of a flight, or presenters use re-usable cups instead of disposable ones.

Production methods should demonstrate good practice – minimising negative environmental impacts (e.g. from energy, waste, travel) and where possible making a positive contribution.

For further information please discuss sustainability with the Commissioning Editor, and see our Radio Commissioning site [here](#).

4. Key Deliverables

Audio four weeks ahead of broadcast; Proteus description that is designed for BBC Sounds; readiness to co-operate with BBC Radio 3 Comms and Marketing teams.

Music is central to these programmes, and the proposals commissioned in this slot will need to align with the BBC's music policy guidelines for availability beyond 30 days on BBC Sounds, and potentially on the RSS feed. The policy is available here [Using Music in BBC Speech Audio Content](#). The commissioning editor is keen to ensure those music guidelines work effectively for your proposal, so please don't hold back or restrict the scope of any idea because you are uncertain of what can be achieved within them. If your short proposal is selected for development, the music element can then be discussed.

5. Success Measures

Clear audience impact; strong on-demand performance on BBC Sounds – particularly for over-45s; critical and press attention; Reinforcement of The Essay as an appointment to listen.

6. Compliance and Editorial Guidelines

You will be required to deliver programmes that are in line with the BBC's Editorial Guidelines and be able to adapt to the BBC's changing editorial and business needs during the period of the commission.



SECTION B: PROCESS, ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION

STAGE 1: Short Proposal and Shortlisting

Step 1: Production Experience

- Review the Production Experience Questionnaire section in Appendix 1.
- Enter your responses in the 'Production Experience' section in PiCoS.
- The questionnaire is designed to allow the BBC to understand more about your company and your experience of producing Radio 3-style programmes.
- The evaluation team (see full list below in Section 2), will review all production questionnaires against the editorial brief set out in Section A before evaluating the Short Proposal.
- Note: your short proposal may be declined at this stage if the information provided indicates you do not meet the criteria, so please answer these questions carefully.

Step 2: Short Proposal

- Suppliers who performed best on their production questionnaire (by best demonstrating their experience and capability in producing (inset network/department) style programmes) will have their Short Proposal assessed and a shortlist will be compiled.
- Your Short Proposal should be no more than 250 words and summarise your specific ideas. (PiCoS will allow you to enter more words but you should still stay within the word count for this commissioning round in order for your proposal to be fully considered) The proposal should demonstrate your ability to produce the programme, and answer the editorial objectives and other requirements as set out in the Editorial Opportunity.
- Enter your proposal in the 'Short Proposal' section in PiCoS before the deadline at noon on Thursday 9th October 2025.

Step 3: Shortlisting notification

You will be notified of the outcome of Stages 1 & 2. Shortlisted suppliers will be asked to submit a Full Proposal. No feedback will be provided for unsuccessful proposals at this stage.



STAGE 2: Full Proposal

Step 1: We may issue further relevant programme production information to all producers reaching this stage. If sensitive information is being released then producers will be asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA).

Step 2: Producers will be invited to provide Full Proposals, via PiCoS, responding to this commissioning brief, which includes all the elements outlined in Section D (“Full Proposals”). For guidance, your Full Proposal should not exceed **two sides of A4** when printed using Arial font, size 11. (Any scripts or samples can be in addition).

Step 3: Producers will be offered the opportunity to discuss the programme brief with Radio 3 Head of Speech prior to submitting their Full Proposals.

Step 4: We will evaluate all full proposals against the editorial brief, as given above, and commission those we feel most successfully fulfil the brief and help to make up the most varied and balanced season of The Essay.

Step 5: Producers who are successful will be notified on PiCoS. Feedback for rejected proposals will be also be given here. Further feedback can be requested at a later stage.

Note: At any stage of the process, we may need to come back to you to seek clarification. Your answers will be factored into the evaluation process as appropriate.

STAGE 3: Commission Awarded and Contract Signed

THE EVALUATION TEAM

The following people may be involved in the evaluation of your proposal at various stages:

Sam Jackson, Controller, Radio 3

Matthew Dodd, Head of Speech Programmes, Radio 3

David Ireland, Senior Planning Manager, Radio 3

Subject matter experts (e.g. production experts, network management, diversity, finance, etc.) may also be consulted.



SECTION C: THE COMMISSIONING TIMETABLE

The commissioning process for this opportunity consists of a number of stages, as set out in the timetable below:

Stage	Timings	Activities
Launch	Tuesday 2nd September 2025	Publication of commissioning brief documentation and round opens in PiCoS.
Commissioning Webinar	Friday 12th Sept 2025	An online briefing from commissioners (full details to follow)
Short Proposals and shortlisting	Noon on Thursday 9th October 2025	Deadline for Short Proposals to be submitted via PiCoS.
	Tuesday 4th November 2025	Suppliers shortlisted, notified of outcomes and asked to prepare Full Proposals.
Full Proposals and shortlisting	10th November – 5th December 2025	Opportunity to discuss commissioning brief with Commissioners prior to submitting Full Proposals.
	Noon on Tuesday 9th December 2025	Deadline for Full Proposals to be submitted via PiCoS. Evaluation panel shortlists Full Proposals.
Conditional Commissions offered	Late January 2026	Commissioning decisions made, subject to contract. Editorial specifications agreed. Feedback submitted on PiCoS.

We will assess your proposal according to this timetable. **Late submissions cannot be accepted.**

If you have any questions about this commissioning brief that need answering before you submit your Short Proposal, please ensure you email them to david.ireland@bbc.co.uk by 3rd October 2025 at the latest.



SECTION D: FULL PROPOSALS AND REFERENCE INFORMATION

Please refer to this [important information](#) on the Radio commissioning website, regarding submission of your full proposal, including guidance on how to set out your budget.

Proposals must be submitted in accordance with the requirements contained in this commissioning brief and on the commissioning website. Proposals not complying may be rejected by the Commissioner whose decision in this matter will be final.

All the information required should be included in the two pages of your proposal (plus any supporting information).

The BBC reserves the right at any time prior to award of a commission, and without incurring any liability to the affected suppliers, to accept or reject any proposal, or to annul the commissioning process, rejecting all proposals.

More information relating to all commissioning briefs and rounds, regardless of station, can be found on the [Pitching ideas](#) page of the Radio commissioning website.

APPENDIX 1: Production Eligibility & Experience



Guidance

The Production Eligibility Questionnaire is the first part of your submission that the BBC will consider as part of the process. Please only complete it if you have not previously been commissioned by the network. Otherwise just insert “N/A”.

Once completed, please copy and paste your responses into the ‘**Production experience**’ section of the Create Proposal page in PiCoS (maximum 1,000 words).

Questionnaire**Part 1: Production Eligibility & Experience**

Please outline your relevant production experience, using recent examples, in the following areas:

We require a production base with relevant experience and staffing depth in national radio production.

[Insert details]

We require a production base with an understanding of the importance of multi-platform content, and recent company/production team experience of producing engaging content for online/on demand and social platforms.

[Insert details]

We require a production base with relevant production team experience of talent management to the level required and the ability to build those relationships quickly and effectively.

[Insert details]

Part 2: Partnerships

Complete Part 2 ONLY if you plan to submit a full proposal as part of a partnership.

Please list each partnership and describe the responsibilities each partner will take.

[Insert details]

Please indicate the lead company with whom the BBC will contract.

[Insert details]

Please include the key personnel responsible for the production and delivery of the programme and details of the partnering company they are currently contracted to.

[Insert details]

APPENDIX 2: Diversity & Inclusion

We want BBC Radio & Music to be the best organisation in the audio sector to work with and for - with an inclusive culture, diverse teams and representative programmes. That's why, across radio and television, we are prioritising £80m annually of our commissioning budget on commissions that meet our criteria for diverse and inclusive content.

Programmes must meet two of the three criteria to count towards the commitment:

- Diverse stories and portrayal on-air: Representing all audiences around the UK
- Diverse Production Leadership: Influential roles off-screen or off-air involved in shaping and making programmes for the BBC
- Diverse Company Leadership: Senior roles involved in shaping and leading production companies making programmes for the BBC

There will be opportunities throughout the commissioning process to discuss how programme-makers and suppliers are meeting the criteria. This will not affect whether or not your commission is accepted, and our commissioning teams will be on hand if you need any further support or advice. It is important to note that this commitment is not a commissioning criteria, but rather a way for us to invest a proportion of our existing commissioning budget to increase representation both on and off air.

The full definitions supporting each priority can be found [here](#) and some FAQs [here](#).

