

Edinburgh International Festival 2014: 15 of the best

Not a top ten? Well, with the sheer richness of the 2014 Edinburgh International Festival programme, picking out 15 of the best events just seemed fairer. Its war-and-peace theme provides one of the boldest programmes in recent years, and it's by no means all doom and darkness, looking instead at the ability of the arts to soothe and inspire in the most difficult of circumstances. Here, in no particular order, are 15 of the most inspirational events.

[The James Plays](#)

Last year, Festival director Jonathan Mills hinted that the EIF wouldn't address the independence debate – but he's now revealed a subtle, sideways approach to considering the wider issues of Scottish culture and history. Rona Munro's trilogy of new plays looks at three generations of 15th-century Scottish Stewart Kings – and cast members Blythe Duff and Sofie Grabol (of *The Killing* fame) will no doubt be big draws.

[Berlioz's Les Troyens](#)

The Festival's big, spectacular operatic offering should be just that, in what promises to be a sumptuous production from St Petersburg's Mariinsky Opera of Berlioz's epic (yes, it's over five hours long) operatic retelling of the ancient Greek legend of the Trojan horse, Aeneas's flight to Carthage, and much more. EIF honorary president Valery Gergiev conducts.

[Greyfriars Kirk concerts](#)

The early-evening Greyfriars concerts are back this year, with an appealing blend of early music, choral music and world music that should make full use of the warm, resonant acoustics of the church. Messiaen's powerful *Quartet for the*

End of Time, written while he was a prisoner of war in Silesia, opens the series; elsewhere, there's Oriental Christian chant from Sister Marie Keyrouz, the exceptional chamber choir Collegium Vocale Gent in Lassus's profoundly mournful *Tears of St Peter*, and Monteverdi madrigals from *Concerto Italiano* under Rinaldo Alessandrini.

[Ubu and the Truth Commission](#)

William Kentridge's Handspring Puppet Company are now world-famous because of their work on *War Horse*, but the EIF brings an earlier, far more radical work that sets Alfred Jarry's shocking, anarchic play among the goings-on of South African's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

[Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra](#)

It's hailed as one of the world's greatest orchestras, and two Festival concerts under chief conductor Mariss Jansons will give you a chance to see why. In the [first](#), Jean-Yves Thibaudet is the soloist in Ravel's exquisite Piano Concerto, and in the [second](#), violinist Leonidas Kavakos plays Wolfgang Rihm's *Lichtes Spiel*, alongside Brahms and Strauss.

[Ganesh Versus the Third Reich](#)

Described by Festival director Jonathan Mills at the launch as possibly the strangest thing among this year's offerings (personally, I'd award that accolade to something else – see below), this theatre piece from Australia's Back to Back Theatre describes Hindu god Ganesh's attempt to reappropriate the swastika from the Nazis.

[Delusion of the Fury](#)

A real oddity, unclassifiable, and exactly the kind of bold, spectacular offering you'd hope to see at an international arts festival – as well as surely the EIF's strangest event this year. Harry Partch was a maverick American composer who

rethought music from its most basic principals, creating strange, sculpture-like instruments to convey the radical reinvention of the tonal system he devised. His *Delusion of the Fury* mixes music, theatre, mime, song and dance in a ritualised drama about anger and conflict, based on tales from Japan and Ethiopia.

[Alban Gerhardt & Steven Osborne](#)

As well as being among the 20th century's most accomplished British composers, Benjamin Britten and Michael Tippett were both convinced pacifists. German cellist Alban Gerhardt and Scottish pianist Steven Osborne play solo and duo music by both composers in what looks set to be a moving recital – along with Beethoven's sublime Cello Sonata in C, op.102/1.

[Exhibit B](#)

Brett Bailey's large-scale installation in the Playfair Library is a set of 13 uncompromising tableaux vivants exploring themes of racism, slavery and colonialism. Prepare to be shocked and enthralled in equal measure.

[Hesperion XXI, Le Concert des Nations & La Capella Reial de Catalunya](#)

Catalan viol player and conductor Jordi Savall is one of early music's tireless explorers, his pioneering research opening up fresh new perspectives on ancient and traditional music from around the Mediterranean. For what promises to be a spectacular and instructive event, he gathers his three performing groups for a survey of war and peace in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, and the role that music played in it.

[Ute Lemper & Scottish Chamber Orchestra](#)

The sultry German songstress joins the Scottish Chamber Orchestra for decadent songs from Weimar Germany, which she's

made very much her own – from Kurt Weill’s famous ‘Mack the Knife’ and ‘Surabaya Johnny’ to Marlene Dietrich’s ‘Falling in Love Again’.

[Scottish Ensemble & Commonwealth Strings](#)

It’s not all war, war, war. There are plenty of Commonwealth-themed celebrations in the 2014 Festival programme, too – not least of which is the crack Scottish Ensemble’s collaboration with Commonwealth Strings, a group specially assembled from top international players. Together they play English classics as well as evocative music from Down Under, from senior Aussie composer Peter Sculthorpe and New Zealander Gareth Farr.

[Inala](#)

A cappella sextet Ladysmith Black Mambazo are among South African’s most vibrant musical exports, and they collaborate with dancers from Rambert and the Royal Ballet on a brand new dance-and-music piece – getting its world premiere at the EIF – combining Western dance with African celebration.

[Daniil Trifonov](#)

If you want to experience truly spellbinding, old-school piano virtuosity, look no further than the astonishing young Russian player Daniil Trifonov – who makes his third Festival appearance in as many years, playing (of course) some of the most challenging piano music ever written: Ravel’s *Miroirs* and Liszt’s *Transcendental Studies*.

[BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra](#)

Director Jonathan Mills has waited until the final concert of his final festival to put on a piece of his own, but we’ll have a chance to hear his dark *Sandakan Threnody*, themed around the northern Borneo death marches during the Second World War, on 30 August. From darkness to light: the concert closes with the shining colours of Janacek’s celebratory

Glagolitic Mass, sure to end the Usher Hall's Festival offers with a bang.