



The pianist who wants you to laugh at his playing

Danny Driver is performing at the first ever 'Comedy Prom' this week

By Jessica Duchon, August 11, 2011

Driver is a descendent of the founder of mystical Chasidism, the Baal Shem Tov. "I feel a connection," he says

When the pianist Danny Driver steps onto the Royal Albert Hall platform tomorrow, it will be no ordinary evening, either for him or for his audience. First of all, it is his debut at the BBC Promenade Concerts; secondly, it is the first time that this summer series has offered a "Comedy Prom". Driver is part of a distinguished line-up for the event that includes the cabaret duo Kit and the Widow, the soprano Susan Bullock, the BBC Concert Orchestra and comedians Tim Minchin and Sue Perkins.

Driver will be navigating his way through a piece of music that, although few have heard of it or its composer, will apparently sound more than familiar. It is the Concerto Popolare by Franz Reizenstein (1911-68) - a merciless spoof based on a number of great romantic piano concertos. Its composer's life was less amusing: Reizenstein was born Jewish in Nuremberg, and came to Britain as a refugee from the Nazis in 1934.

"The piece is a mixture of famous piano concertos thrown together and was created for the first Hoffnung Festival in 1956," Driver says. "What makes it particularly clever is that the pianist and the orchestra can't seem to agree at any moment which piece they're supposed to be playing!"

Gerard Hoffnung, the much-loved German-Jewish humorist, instigated Hoffnung Festivals that offered comedy in music; they ended with his death in 1959. Today too few concerts focus on musical humour. Driver suggests that this inspired Prom comes not a moment too soon.

"It's a wonderful idea," he declares. "Classical music is a serious thing in many ways and it deals with many serious issues of human experience. But even so, across the whole spectrum of styles and composers, there's a lighter, humorous side."

As examples, he points to some of Haydn's symphonies and string quartets, Bartok's side-swipe at Shostakovich in the Concerto for Orchestra, and Bach's light-hearted Coffee Cantata.

Classical music is a serious thing, but there's a lighter side

A Proms debut is a landmark for any soloist and Driver needs no reminding of its significance. "I've played at the Royal Albert Hall before, but the Proms are something special," he says. "They're for everyone -- you can go and hear world-class artists and orchestras night after night for only £5 a concert. It's truly the highest quality classical music at a price available to everybody.

"I've been to the Proms every year since I was a teenager and I've many wonderful memories. I once went to an incredible Parsifal conducted by Simon Rattle - it was a five-hour performance and we stood up through the whole thing because it was so extraordinary. The Proms are always inspiring."

Growing up in London, Driver had constant access to excellent concerts, but he was able to enjoy music at home, too. His father was a keen amateur violinist and some of Driver's first experiences of chamber music involved playing Beethoven violin sonatas with him.

His mother is Israeli, and Hebrew was therefore his first language. He says: "Israel was the focus of my Jewish connection more so than the religion itself - I don't come from a particularly religious household. But my wife and I are both descended from the Baal Shem Tov." His wife is Rebecca Miller, an American conductor; the couple, who live in north-west London, have worked out that they are "11th cousins, or possibly 10th cousins once removed".

We enjoy a brief diversion to discuss the differing philosophies of the Baal Shem Tov (founder of the mystical and ecstatic Chasidism) and the Vilna Gaon (a lynchpin of the 18th-century's Jewish Enlightenment). Driver feels that the Baal Shem Tov's outlook was similar to that of many types of artist, "particularly the sense of being inspired by nature and indeed by everything around you. I feel there may be some connection between that and my musical life. There's a strong connection between music and mystical realms, many things that are intangible - that old cliché about music beginning where words end."

Driver, who took a degree in natural sciences at Cambridge before studying at the Royal College of Music and winning the BBC Radio 2 Young Musician of the Year in 2001, certainly enjoys exploring fascinating byways, musical as well as philosophical.

His recordings for Hyperion - a label famed for the quality of its piano catalogue - include unusual repertoire such as the six piano sonatas of York Bowen, a distinguished yet shockingly under-recognised British composer of the early 20th century. The project won Driver a nomination for a Gramophone Award.

His next CD, due out next year, is of two gritty, Bartokian concertos by the Scottish composer Eric Chisholm (1904-1965), which Driver feels have long awaited adequate attention.

But for now he is focused on making his Proms audience laugh. "Classical music is not just about tragedy or conflict. It can also be about having a good time," he says.

All seats for the 'Comedy Prom' are sold out, but standing places are available for people queueing on the day