

Power of the Proms: The diverse 115th season features many highlights from Stravinsky and Purcell to...Goldie

By Jessica Duchon

Thursday, 16 July 2009

The Proms are here again! Summer in London wouldn't be the same without the annual extravaganza of classical music that fills the Royal Albert Hall for nearly two months, and the queues of Promenaders waiting in all weather, sometimes for hours and more, to grab the best places and stand yards away from the planet's greatest soloists and conductors, all for but a fiver. It's surely not only the world's largest music festival, as the BBC likes to bill it, but also its most beloved.

But this year, is the icy wind of recession blowing through the portals of the Royal Albert Hall? At first glance, the season looks ever so slightly lacklustre. It's been noted this week that there are no visiting American orchestras, for the first time since 2004. Last summer, the Philadelphia Orchestra decided to cancel a European tour projected for about now that would have included a Prom. But I'm assured that the Americans will be back in force next year. The Proms office admits that this year's situation is more down to bad luck regarding available dates than anything else, since most star orchestras would have been booked for 2009 aeons before the words "global recession" were even a glint in David Cameron's eye. To add perspective, apparently Proms controller Roger Wright's office is currently booking orchestras as far ahead as 2013.

One element that really has gone, though, is the grand "themes" that dominated while Nicholas Kenyon was head honcho. There's still the predictable-enough marking of composer anniversaries – this year, heaps of Haydn and Handel, a pinch of Purcell and a mention of Mendelssohn, and, alongside that, some series-within-the-series that seem to exist simply for the heck of it. Stravinsky's ballet music is one such strand, marking the centenary of 1909, when Diaghilev first introduced his Ballets Russes to the West. Another is Stephen Hough, the UK's national treasure of a pianist, playing all three Tchaikovsky piano concerti. And why not?

Hough is not the only treasure aboard: almost every concert has a glister all its own, with enough stars to keep the Milky Way looking bright all summer. This season, the Proms welcome some of the most exciting soloists on earth, among them Martha Argerich, Gidon Kremer, Susan Graham, Magdalena Kozena and

Thomas Quasthoff. On the roster of conductors are Daniel Barenboim, Valery Gergiev, Bernard Haitink, Vladimir Jurowski and, if you're a baroque aficionado, William Christie and Harry Christophers. As for visiting orchestras, we may miss the American big boys, but with Euro-glories such as the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam, the Dresden Staatskapelle, the Budapest Festival Orchestra and the Vienna Philharmonic, and to top it all Barenboim's groundbreaking West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, we really shouldn't complain.

Not that it's all about star-spotting. One of the Proms's most important remits has always been to commission new music, and provide a forum for world, UK and London premieres. This year is no exception, with high-profile contributions from luminary composers such as Unsuk Chin, Osvaldo Golijov, Michael Nyman and Peter Maxwell Davies. One concert is devoted to the music of Philip Glass, featuring Gidon Kremer in his Violin Concerto and then the UK premiere of his Seventh Symphony, intriguingly subtitled "A Toltec Symphony"; and there's a new violin concerto from the distinguished American Augusta Read Thomas, someone we should hear far more of on these shores, which will be played by the super German violinist Frank Peter Zimmermann.

Contemporary British music is amply represented by such figures as Sir Harrison Birtwistle and James MacMillan, as well as commissions from young up-and-comers like Anna Meredith, Ben Fosskett and the hot young jazzier Tom Arthurs. As for older British music, there's enough Elgar, Finzi, Holst and Delius to fill a festival of its own.

What about those Big Four composer anniversaries? Some fare better than others. Handel leads the way, with complete evenings devoted to performances of Messiah, Samson and Partenope, as well as plenty of arias, concertos and anthems (Zadok the Priest among them) and nods towards the Water and Fireworks musics. Haydn, by contrast, has only one Prom all to himself, though it's a marvellous one: The Creation, with a world-class line-up of singers and a brand new translation from the German by Paul McCreesh. Am I the only person, though, who thinks it actually sounds better in German?

Purcell is treated to the Glyndebourne Prom, with that opera house's highly acclaimed new production of The Fairy Queen in concert performance, as well as a programme almost to himself in the Proms Chamber Music lunchtime series at Cadogan Hall. Mendelssohn, however, is in the shadow of all three. There's a chance to hear all of his five symphonies and the Violin Concerto and his works pepper the chamber music series; but couldn't they have ditched just one full-evening Handel work and replaced it with Elijah or the neglected and beautiful oratorio Paulus? Well, you can please some of the people some of the time...

If something lighter is more your vodka and tonic, don't miss the concert performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's Patience, led by the legendary G&S supremo Sir Charles Mackerras. And certainly don't miss the bonanza of MGM

Musicals on 1 August, which stars the singers Kim Criswell, Sarah Fox and no less a personage than Sir Thomas Allen. Incredible to think that the MGM studio allowed all the orchestral parts for scores like *High Society* and *The Wizard of Oz* to go AWOL when its music library was knocked down to make way for a car park. Nothing daunted, though, the dizzyingly gifted John Wilson, who conducts the concert, has reconstructed the scores himself by ear. It's no mean feat.

For families there's a delicious and totally free Prom – a warm welcome into the classical world with Chopin, Holst, Elgar, Saint-Saëns and, of course, Britten's *A Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*. But the really big family event this year is two morning concerts entitled *Evolution! A Darwin-Inspired Extravaganza for Kids*, featuring big screens, prehistoric monsters galore and a guest appearance from Sir David Attenborough. The music is all nature-inspired, from Delius to John Williams's music for *Jurassic Park* and there's a new Darwin-focused piece by the drum-and-bass producer Goldie.

It's worth noting that some of the best events aren't in the main Proms at all. Over the years, the Proms have acquired a whole clutch of satellite events that are making the festival first of all more festive, secondly more varied, and thirdly about more than just standing in a very hot arena. The chamber music series at Cadogan Hall, a beautiful and desperately undersung venue off Sloane Square, is replete with delights, including a long weekend of continuous concerts devoted to the young artists past and present of Radio 3's BBC New Generation Artists scheme, which celebrates its 10th birthday this year. Then there's the Proms Plus series: a wonderful collection of pre-concert talks, film screenings and, best, the Proms Literary Festival where you can hear luminaries such as Philip Pullman, Andrew Motion and Roy Hattersley in presentations and discussions at the Royal College of Music. The film shows are held some afternoons at the Royal Geographical Society and include Tony Palmer's portrait of Stravinsky and a chance to enjoy *Singin' in the Rain* without actually having to do any yourself.

So, while the world still feels an uncertain place, the Proms remain as solid a presence as ever. If you're anywhere other than London, hear them on the radio, the TV, or the internet, where you can catch each concert for a week after the event on Radio 3's Listen Again facility. But if you're in reach of the hall, take some water and a cushion, bring your friends, arrive early to get a good spot – and prepare to be carried away.

17 July to 12 September (0845 401 5040; www.bbc.co.uk/proms)

My Proms: Ian Bostridge, tenor

The greatest thing about the Proms is its audience. There is nothing more thrilling for me as a singer than to stand up in that vast, noble auditorium, where prize fighters have sparred and horses cantered, and deliver great English music – Britten's *Serenade* or his *Nocturne* – to a completely committed audience of

nearly 6000 people, young and old, of all backgrounds, brought together only by their love of music.

The contribution of an audience to any live performance is not to be underestimated. And the Proms audience, beyond the crude measure of its consistent size over a whole summer of often difficult music, is really committed to listening and contributing, and not just on the carnivalesque Last Night.

The strangest night at the Proms for me was the eve of Princess Diana's funeral, Kensington Gardens full of unaccustomed mourners with their candles, sparse Renaissance music in that vast monument to mourning, the Albert Hall, and a helicopter bearing the body circling above. Followed by the premiere of Henze's *Venus and Adonis*. This year I look forward to taking my son to Prom 17, to hear late-night Bach with John Eliot Gardiner and the Monteverdi Choir on 28 July.

The critic's choice: Top 10 Proms

1 PROM 2 (18 JULY)

Haydn: *The Creation*

Rosemary Joshua (Gabriel), Sarah Tynan (Eve), Mark Padmore (Uriel), Neal Davies (Raphael), Peter Harvey (Adam), Chetham's Chamber Choir, Gabrieli Consort & Players, Paul McCreesh (conductor)

A heartwarming celebration of nature, life and love in the Enlightenment spirit, aided and abetted by three angels performed by an stunning line-up of singers.

2 PROM 19 (30 JULY)

Berlioz: *Benvenuto Cellini*, *Overture*; *La Mort de Cléopâtre*

Mendelssohn: *Symphony No.2, 'Lobgesang'*

Susan Graham (mezzo-soprano), Sally Matthews (soprano), Sarah Castle (mezzo-soprano), Peter Auty (tenor), Hallé Orchestra, Choir and Youth Choir, Sir Mark Elder (conductor)

After the fabulous Francophile Susan Graham takes centre stage in an all-Berlioz first half, this is a rare chance to hear Mendelssohn's *Second Symphony*, which is in fact a gargantuan cantata-symphony written to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Gutenberg's invention of movable type! Don't miss rising star soprano Sally Matthews.

3 PROM 31 (8 AUGUST)

Tchaikovsky: Piano Concerto No.1; Lutoslawski: Concerto for Orchestra
Respighi: Roman Festivals

Stephen Hough (piano), NYO, Vassily Petrenko (conductor)

Tonight, Britain's finest teenage musicians tackle the challenging work of Lutoslawski and the Italianate, highly coloured soundworld of Respighi, and raise the roof with Stephen Hough in this ever-popular Tchaikovsky concerto.

4 PROMS 32 AND 33 (9 AUGUST)

Multiple Pianos Day: artists including Katia and Marielle Labèque, Philip Moore and Simon Crawford-Phillips, the Britten Sinfonia, the London Sinfonietta, and conductors Ludovic Morlot and Edward Gardner.

A major treat for pianophiles! First, an afternoon with the Labèque sisters, including music by Fauré, Mozart, Lutoslawski and Saint-Saëns. Then an evening with music by George Antheil and John Adams, Bartók's magnificent Sonata for two pianos and percussion and Stravinsky's Les Noces, which uses four grands.

5 PROM 44 (18 AUGUST)

Prokofiev: Overture on Hebrew Themes Bartók: Violin Concerto No.2 Dvorák:
Symphony No.7

Leonidas Kavakos (violin), Budapest Festival Orchestra, Ivan Fischer (conductor)

The orchestra's bond with its founder, the ever-dynamic Ivan Fischer, is one of the strongest in the world. Fabulous East-European programme, fabulous soloist and intensely alive musicianship.

6 PROMS 48, 49 & 50 (21 & 22 AUGUST)

The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra conducted by Daniel Barenboim

This inspiring orchestra, founded by Barenboim and Edward Said to bring together young musicians of Arab and Israeli origins, makes a welcome return. The first concert has Liszt and Wagner, highly contentious in Israel, and ends with Berlioz's glorious Symphonie fantastique. The next night an all-star cast including Waltraud Meier and Adriana Kucerova join them for Fidelio, Beethoven's hymn to love, freedom and justice.

7 PROM 52 (24 AUGUST)

Schnittke: Nagasaki (UK premiere); Shostakovich: Symphony No.8 in C minor

Elena Zhidkova (mezzo-soprano), London Symphony Orchestra & Chorus,
Valery Gergiev (conductor)

If hearing Gergiev conduct Shostakovich's devastating Eighth Symphony isn't enough, then seeing this young Russian mezzo should be. Stunning.

8 PROMS CHAMBER MUSIC NOS 7-18 (29, 30 & 31 AUGUST)

BBC New Generation Artists at Cadogan Hall

The culmination of the chamber music series brings together a fabulous range of young musicians including pianist Simon Trpceski, the Pavel Haas Quartet, singers Jonathan Lemalu, and Christine Rice and violinists Alina Ibragimova and Jennifer Pike.

9 PROM 60 (30 AUGUST)

Vivier: Orion (UK premiere)

Ravel: Piano Concerto in G major; Prokofiev: Piano Concerto No. 1

Mussorgsky/Ravel: Pictures at an Exhibition

Martha Argerich (piano), Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Charles Dutoit
(conductor)

Considered by many to be today's greatest living pianist, Martha Argerich is an elusive character; persuading her to play isn't easy. So to find her playing two concertos in one evening is not so much a treat as a miracle.

10 PROM 61 (31 AUGUST)

Sibelius: Symphony No.1 Duparc: Songs for mezzo-soprano and orchestra
Ravel: Daphnis et Chloé, Suite no.2

Magdalena Kozena (mezzo-soprano), Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Mariss Jansons (conductor)

It doesn't get much better than this. The golden-toned Kozena, aka Mrs Rattle, meets a different kind of match in the rich strings of the Concertgebouw with the revered Jansons presiding. An evening of power, sensuality, contrast and colour.