

The Proms think big: Can the world's leading classical festival hold its own in an Olympic year?

As a vital part of the London 2012 Festival, the pressure's on the Proms this year – and, writes Jessica Duchen, they deliver on their own terms

7th July 2012

If you were superstitious, you might approach the start of the 2012 BBC Promenade Concerts – on Friday 13 July – with a little trepidation. The long-established music bonanza, packing the Royal Albert Hall with “promenaders” every summer, is habitually laden with superlatives, but this time there's more than usual at stake: it now has to live up to the Olympic Games as well. In a recent radio interview, Ruth Mackenzie, director of the London 2012 Festival, declared that this year's Proms – a major component of the festival – can be called “a once-in-a-lifetime experience”. Oh yes? Is that so?

Thank goodness this Proms season is not particularly Olympic in content – we do need somewhere to go to get away from it all. Aside from opening night, when four British conductors will pass the baton vaguely à la torch, plus, later in the season, a new commission from the composer Eric Whitacre taking its title from the traditional Olympic motto, “Higher, Faster, Stronger”, the Games have had little impact on programming. Any links are more philosophical than material. And, one senses, more coincidental than anything else.

“There's no one event that's tied to the Olympics,” says Roger Wright, director of the Proms. “But we're happening throughout the Olympic and Paralympic Games and, as their ideals are similar to those of the Proms – aspiration, excellence, internationalism, there's a neat connection where the plans meet. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, Daniel Barenboim and the National Youth Choir of Great Britain on the opening night of the Olympics is a good example. But if you opened the Proms programme you mightn't guess that the Olympics are happening at the same time. The key is that this is a Proms season unlike any other, because every Proms season should be a season unlike any other.”

Calling the 2012 Proms a “once-in-a-lifetime experience”, therefore, could be to protest too much. And let's hope that expression doesn't show its dark side as London's transport system and roads try to respond to Olympic-scale

pressure. Nevertheless, this is a season of grand ambition: a real example of thinking big, with plenty of the weird, wacky and risky alongside an extraordinary number of blockbusters.

For instance, John Cage gets an evening to himself to mark his centenary, while Delius – still a case of misunderstood musical Marmite 150 years after his birth – pops up no fewer than eight times. The towering figure of Debussy, likewise born in 1862, clocks up the same number, and it is nothing less than his sole opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, performed complete, that steals his show.

A focus on youth makes this season stand out from the crowd. Daniel Barenboim's West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, a celebrated symbol of music as a unifying force for humanity in the Middle East, is spending five evenings tackling all nine Beethoven symphonies, complemented by the music of a living genius, Pierre Boulez. The National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain is aboard for Messiaen's gigantic *Turangalila Symphony*; and there's the new Aldeburgh World Orchestra, an international ensemble of advanced students and young professionals convened at Snape under the baton of Sir Mark Elder. Add to that the National Youth Orchestras of Scotland and Wales, the Ulster Youth Orchestra of Northern Ireland, plus youth wind orchestras, brass bands, jazz ensembles and choirs galore from around the country, and this celebration of young people making music starts to look seriously heart-warming.

Even some of the composers are teenaged: The Proms' Inspire Young Composers' Competition has found three winners: Freddie Meyers, Alex Woolf and Sarah Gait. Their triumphant works are performed in a special Prom at the Royal College of Music on 4 August, and each of them wins a BBC commission.

On the other hand, the habitual visits of great international orchestras are a tad limited: one suspects malign economic factors behind the scenes. We can look forward to the Vienna and Berlin philharmonics and the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, among a scant handful that remain – and the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, of course. Still, the limited number of grand-scale overseas visitors does indicate that this Proms isn't more or less memorable than any other – just different.

Better news in the new-music department: more than 30 premieres and new commissions, plus high-profile events such as John Adams conducting two of his own works, notably the opera *Nixon in China*. There's the London premiere of the *Symphony No 9* by the irrepressible Master of the Queen's Music, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies: a rip-roaring anti-war work, heard first in Liverpool earlier this summer. And new pieces by some of the UK's biggest names – including Sir Harrison Birtwistle, James MacMillan and Thea Musgrave – rub shoulders with choral adventures from the increasingly popular figures Whitacre and Bob Chilcott, plus younger luminaries like Charlotte Bray, Emily Howard, Nico Muhly and many more.

But one premiere has attracted more attention than any other: the much-trumpeted Wallace and Gromit Prom features My Concerto in Ee, Lad by, er, Wallace himself. Isn't there someone to lend him a helping hand? Wright is giving nothing away.

“Wallace hasn't told me that he's got any help,” he declares. “It's obviously a risk commissioning anybody, and it's particularly exciting commissioning Wallace because he's known to be slightly unreliable...” Less unsuspected but no less inventive delights can be sampled in the satellite concerts at the nearby Cadogan Hall, which houses the Proms' chamber music and Saturday matinée series.

The former, on Mondays at lunchtime, features treats like the violinist Nicola Benedetti with the pianist Alexei Grynyuk and cellist Leonard Elschenbroich in solo (Bach), duo (Korngold) and trio (Brahms) formation. One Saturday afternoon Sir Roger Norrington recreates the legendary orchestra of 24 violins from the court of Louis XIV. Late-night Royal Albert Hall performances involve anything from early music to a special celebration of Ivor Novello with Simon Callow. And Proms Plus events offer plentiful pre-concert lectures, discussions and literary chats, this time at the Royal College of Music.

In these times of cutbacks, though, can the Proms carry on thinking this big? Next year brings a multiple whammy: major anniversaries for Verdi, Wagner, Britten and Lutoslawski, all of which will throw the festival a starter-for-10 challenge. The good news is that the BBC has earmarked the Proms for continued investment: apparently the sizeable subsidy (around £5m) remains assured for the time being.

Maximum access to maximum quality is what public subsidy for the arts used to be all about. Here, it still is; as a result, the Proms remains the single most exciting annual concert series in the UK. And its audience knows it. More than 97,000 tickets were snaffled this year on the day that booking opened and with modest ticket prices (the promenaders' standing places are £5 a go) and extensive distribution on the radio, TV and Internet, nobody need miss out. As the queues build up along Prince Consort Road, detractors of the principle of state funding may watch and weep.

It's not impossible, though, that other factors could impact indirectly upon the Proms' fortunes. A recent report into the BBC's performing ensembles, while not suggesting that any should close, has recommended certain types of reorganisation that would affect the modus operandi of the BBC orchestras. Whether that will happen, and how, and what the knock-on effects will be, are still unknown quantities.

But in the meantime, even if “once in a lifetime” is a bit of an exaggeration, this is a corker of a season, with a magnificent range of music familiar and unfamiliar, apparently the bigger the better. Here come some of the greatest names and heftiest works that London will see this year. Forget the Olympics if you want to. The Proms – higher, faster, stronger? – are all you need.

*The BBC Promenade Concerts begin on 13 July at the Royal Albert Hall
(0845 401 5040)*

The unmissable prom

Prom 1, 13 July, 7.30pm Four British conductors – Edward Gardner, Sir Roger Norrington, Sir Mark Elder and Martyn Brabbins – pass the baton, Olympic style.

Prom 3, 15 July, 7pm Debussy's opera 'Pelléas et Mélisande'. Anniversary composer's masterpiece, conducted by Sir John Eliot Gardiner, starring Karen Vourc'h, Phillip Addis and Laurent Naouri.

Proms 9, 10, 12, 13 and 18, 20-27 July West-Eastern Divan Orchestra with Daniel Barenboim in the complete Beethoven symphonies; modern classics by Pierre Boulez.

Prom 11, 22 July, 4.30pm Berlioz's five-hour marathon 'Les Troyens', imported from the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Sir Antonio Pappano is the conductor.

Prom 20, 29 July, 3.30pm Family fun with Wallace and Gromit, including world premiere of Wallace's 'My Concerto in Ee, Lad'.

Prom 29, 4 August, 7.30pm The National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain with conductor Vassily Petrenko and pianist Joanna MacGregor tackle Messiaen's mega-symphony 'Turangalila'.

Prom 30, 5 August, 4.30pm Massed choruses perform the world premiere of new choral commission 'The Angry Planet' by Bob Chilcott.

Prom 47, 17 August, 7.45pm. John Cage night, with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Exaudi and conductor Ilan Volkov, among many others.

Prom 55, 24 August, 7pm English National Opera joins the Proms' operatic line-up with Britten's 'Peter Grimes', conducted by Edward Gardner and starring tenor Stuart Skelton.

Proms 63 & 64, 30 & 31 August The Berliner Philharmoniker conducted by Sir Simon Rattle in eclectic programmes of late-19th and 20th century music.

Prom 72, 5 September, 7pm John Adams conducts his opera 'Nixon in China'; BBCSO with singers including Kathleen Kim, Alan Oke and Gerald Finlay.

Prom 76, 8 September, 7.30pm Last Night of the Proms, with all the usual fun. Star soloists are Nicola Benedetti (violin) and Joseph Calleja (tenor); Jirí Belohlávek conducts.