

Power of the Proms: How the world's greatest classical music festival is changing

A West End star, a Soweto ensemble and Nitin Sawhney are appearing at the 2007 Proms. Classical snobs may sneer, but if the renowned concert season is to become more adventurous – and Jessica Duchen believes that it should – this is not a bad way to start

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The queue outside the Royal Albert Hall meanders down the stone stairs into Prince Consort Road, past the Royal College of Music and the ice-cream vans. People of all varieties perch on the parapets; some are first-timers, others turn up every day, every summer. Anoraks muddle together with posh frocks; golf umbrellas rub spokes with Woolworths' finest. The doors open, and there's a civilised stampede as the Promenaders surge in to bag the best spots.

The central ethos of the Proms, which open tonight, is the same as ever: cheap tickets for standing places to hear great music-making. The result is a celebratory atmosphere in which a flood of enthusiastic takers each pay less than the price of a one-day travelcard on the Tube.

Still, nothing stays still in the Proms. The annual season keeps on growing, rethinking, reassessing its contents, trying to please as many people as possible without losing track of its *raison d'être*. With concerts aimed at everyone from children to fans of Modernism, and technology bringing ever-wider dissemination, the Proms have become more available and more inclusive than ever before.

This season, a certain freshness is sweeping through the Royal Albert Hall. Among the most striking events will be concerts by young musicians for whom playing at the Proms represents a triumph beyond their dreams. The first is on Sunday, when Sir John Eliot Gardiner presides over a truly exceptional evening.

In the 1990s, Rosemary Nalden, a violinist with Gardiner's English Baroque Soloists, became involved in a project in Soweto in South Africa to offer string instrument teaching to local children. She and her friends set about raising money for the project by busking; the resulting organisation, Buskaid, celebrates its 10th anniversary this year. Twenty-three young musicians from its performing group the Buskaid Soweto String Ensemble, ranging in age from 15 to the early twenties, join Gardiner and the EBS to perform excerpts from stage works by Rameau. The event promises to mix dance styles as well as music, offsetting historical choreography from Paris with the young South Africans' own contributions.

Rameau, the French 17th-century genius, may seem an unlikely choice, but Gardiner believes he and the Soweto Strings are a perfect match. "Rameau's music possesses a

tremendous élan that has an affinity with the way that they play," he says. "They're so spontaneous and uninhibited that they take possession of the music."

Two of Buskaid's former recruits are now studying at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. The project has uncovered some wonderful talent that otherwise might never have emerged. "This annihilates any notion that this is a Eurocentric, elitist, middle-class pursuit that good Africans shouldn't be doing," Nalden says. "Such things have been said by adults, whether black or white, but if you say them to the children who flock to our centre in Soweto, they look at you in blank amazement." Nalden and Gardiner will give a special introduction to the Soweto Strings Project before the concert, at 5pm.

In similar vein, but on a larger scale, the Simon Bolivar National Youth Orchestra of Venezuela represents the fruits of its country's own phenomenally successful project, El Sistema, which for 30 years has taught music to disadvantaged children, with a view to lifting them out of poverty.

This young orchestra's passion and enthusiasm has been noted, and 23 countries have been inspired to create music education projects in response. Later, its conductor Gustavo Dudamel will be taking the podium for the orchestra's first visit to the Proms. Its programme includes Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony, Bernstein's Symphonic Dances from West Side Story and a selection of Latin American works. That afternoon, the Proms film season will screen a documentary about the orchestra.

Closer to home, the same strong thread of engagement with youth has sparked one of this year's most interesting and innovative Proms commissions. The composer Rachel Portman is widely celebrated for some superb film scores (including Emma and Chocolat) as well as her enchanting opera, The Little Prince. Now, she has written H2hOpe: The Water Diviner's Tale, with words by the poet and playwright Owen Sheers – a "dramatic musical piece for all ages", which centres on the topic of global warming.

In the story, a group of children are separated from their families during a natural disaster after their city has ignored the warnings of a mystical water diviner; together, he and the children set out to change the future. Professional singers will perform alongside massed youth choirs and a 40-strong children's ensemble, chosen in a nationwide talent-hunt. This heart-warming project displays a relatively new willingness on the Proms' part to engage with issues that concern young people, besides giving the lucky 40 the chance to work with musicians of the calibre of the BBC Concert Orchestra and conductor David Charles Abell. And it is notably different from anything the Proms has commissioned before.

The work arrives not a moment too soon. Some of the public, and some musicians too, have long been muttering about the way a BBC commission is most likely to be a shortish orchestral piece with a descriptive title, written in self-conscious atonality and overcomplicated, ever-changing time signatures by an earnest, white British or European male. V C That's a terrible generalisation, of course. Commissioning can only produce hits by risking misses; for every masterpiece in every century, there have been dozens of duds. Besides, the Proms commissions that have endured don't often conform to that stereotype, or any other. Still, last year matters came to a head when a female composer pointed out that the season did not include a single work by a woman, let alone a living one.

The issue hasn't gone unnoted. This year, five female composers are represented, out of a total of 118 notesmiths dead and alive (the statistic of 4.25 per cent may seem tiny, but it's definitely progress in this context). Two women besides Portman are contributing brand new works: Thea Musgrave, the doyenne of British composers and long resident in the United States, who has written a double concerto for the percussionist Evelyn Glennie and the oboist Nicholas Daniel; and Judith Bingham, whose fanfare Ziggurat opens an entire day devoted to the celebration of brass music in all its forms, from Yorkshire to Uzbekistan. Elsewhere, music by Judith Weir can be heard, and that of Elizabeth Maconchy, whose centenary falls this year.

Carte blanche has been given to a radical contemporary icon who has achieved the rare distinction of stardom in the classical, world and pop genres alike: Nitin Sawhney, who will be

bringing his specially created London Under Sound Orchestra to the Albert Hall for a concert devoted to his music. It's a multifaceted event, involving musicians from both East and West, plus dance from the choreographers Akram Khan and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. The concert has an edge of political relevance, too: Sawhney is keen to highlight the fact that this year marks the 60th anniversary of the partition of India and Pakistan, the effects of which have left deep, enduring scars on both populations.

Earlier this year, the Proms director Nicholas Kenyon gave the massed journalists at the Proms launch quite a surprise, by declaring that the Proms' brief is to "cover the whole waterfront". That concept hasn't always been conspicuous; it's not so long since critics bristled with horror at the idea of the King's Singers programming Beatles songs, which were hardly avant-garde rock in that year, 1997. Ten years on, Kenyon was justifying his reasons for giving a whole Prom to Michael Ball, who will sing a selection of Broadway numbers.

Kenyon stuck to his guns, insisting that Ball is "one of the great, intelligent singing artists alive today". As for the prospect of Andrew Lloyd Webber's music gracing the Proms, Kenyon argued that it has "memorability; it is music that sticks in the mind". That's one way of putting it. The evening will doubtless attract a large and potentially new audience, but the idea has been somewhat less welcome among cultural forecasters than the Prom in which Cleo Laine and John Dankworth are to celebrate their 80th birthdays.

But does this mean that the Proms are selling out on their traditional classical outlook? Heavens, no. The inclusion of a handful of events less than strictly classical has inevitably spawned some snorts from purists, but others wonder whether such concerts represent a covering of any waterfront at all in a music world of such ear-boggling diversity. Besides, a more substantial part of this season's BBC Proms is devoted to celebrating – well, the BBC Proms themselves.

And there is plenty to celebrate. The marriage of concerts and broadcaster dates back to 1927, when the BBC rescued the series at the Queen's Hall after its backer Chappell pulled the plug. To mark that 80th anniversary, the 2007 programme includes a selection of the works that the Proms have commissioned, premiered in Britain, or both, over eight decades.

The roster is phenomenal, including such marvels as Walton's Viola Concerto, Ravel's Piano Concerto for the Left Hand, Shostakovich's Symphony No 7, Rachmaninov's Symphonic Dances, Witold Lutoslawski's gorgeous song cycle *Chantfleurs et chantfables* and James MacMillan's percussion concerto *Veni, veni, Emanuel* – one of the most successful Proms commissions ever. Another memorable event was the performance at the Last Night in 1995 of *Panic* by Harrison Birtwistle, which inadvertently induced the unsuspecting TV audience to do exactly what its title suggested. All these works, and more, are forming a proud parade through the season ahead.

When the doors close at the end of the Last Night, though, the moment will mark a new stage in the Proms' history. It has long appeared that the reward for any gentleman (yes, they are all men) who has done his time as controller of BBC Radio 3 is to become, subsequently, director of the Proms. Nicholas Kenyon followed this path and has held the post since 1996. Now, he's stepping down to run the Barbican Centre. The current Radio 3 chief, Roger Wright, is about to step into his shoes, intending to do both jobs at the same time. He could feel he's been awarded the best Lego set on the shelf: the world's greatest music and musicians are at his beck and call, waiting to be mixed and matched.

Still, it's not easy to control a season involving 90 concerts, the majority in a venue accommodating more than 5,000 a night, with a lunchtime chamber series, the Proms in the Park, a series of film matinées at the Royal Geographical Society, numerous pre-concert talks, high-profile TV broadcasts and the inevitable tussles over whether the "jingoistic" Last Night should be axed. The big question is, as ever, how to please most of the people for as much of the time as possible. Kenyon can take pride in some fantastic achievements and innovations. Nevertheless, a few questions maybe need to be asked.

The bestselling Proms Guide displays a symptom of an endemic problem. Here, each concert is assigned a number: a reader can look up his or her favourite artists or composers in the index and find the numbers of the Proms in which they appear. But anyone looking for "Prom 16" must be careful not to confuse the concert's number with its date, which is 25 July, or its page number, 99. Worse, anybody looking for "PSM5" could be forgiven for not knowing that the letters stand for "Proms Saturday Matinée", while the number shows that it's the fifth concert in that sub-series, which you don't need to know if you're only intending to go to this one. Its location in the book, meanwhile, remains too mysterious. For the public, this inward-looking system carries whiffs of the bureaucracy that the BBC has never been able to shake off.

And, as a BBC production, the Proms remain essentially safe. At a gargantuan, globally famous festival, staged by a publicly accountable national broadcaster, substantial risk-taking is perhaps unlikely to be a priority. That's not to say that the programmes aren't varied, fresh and interesting – they're frequently the most imaginative to be heard in London all year – and new commissions, of which there are plenty, always carry an element of risk. Nevertheless, the Proms' biggest advantage, the BBC, could also be its one snag: at times, one feels that opportunities to think outside the box can be missed while some official angle takes precedence.

This year, while the BBC and the Proms pat one another's backs for their own anniversary, there's nothing to mark the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade, which should have been worthy of notice in grand style at the Albert Hall. Elgar's 150th anniversary is feted in no fewer than nine concerts – one-tenth of all the Proms. Sibelius runs a close second, with five concerts marking the 50th anniversary of his death. Yet the Viennese maverick Erich Wolfgang Korngold, who like Sibelius died in 1957, is awarded only a nod, even though his most famous opera, *Die tote Stadt*, has never yet had a professional performance in the UK and is on a lavish scale that would have suited the hall and the Promenaders to perfection. Elgar may not be as interesting or unusual as this year's other anniversary composers – but he is English.

Likewise, there's some good material to mark the centenary of WH Auden's birth, notably in settings of his poems by his friend Benjamin Britten in the cantata *Our Hunting Fathers* and their joint film effort *Night Mail*; but a much larger programming strand is devoted to "Shakespeare and music". That idea is always a winner, as the Bard's works have probably inspired more music than any other writer's, and it provides a good excuse to enjoy Verdi's rip-roaring *Macbeth* fresh from Glyndebourne under the baton of Vladimir Jurowski. Few season themes, though, could be safer or more British.

This year's roster of gifted youngsters and forward-looking composers is full of encouraging signs. There really is "something for everyone" in the Proms season ahead, which in many ways has achieved an excellent balance between the traditional and the innovative. The Proms are evolving, changing, freshening – but they can afford to go further. If the season's biggest risk is that Michael Ball might just sing some Andrew Lloyd Webber, doesn't that suggest it's time to bring in a sense of real adventure?

The Proms are the best possible advocate for classical music as a relevant, vibrant force in the modern world. So might there be scope for the new director to stick his neck out, reach beyond the ivory tower, engage more often with wider world issues and, now and then, dare to dream big dreams? Concerts such as John Eliot Gardiner's evening with the Soweto Strings, the Nitin Sawhney Prom and Maxim Vengerov's incipient tangoing prove that there are creative ways to involve dance, multimedia and different musics, using the hall's substantial space more imaginatively; much more could be made of that.

Why not involve theatrical elements further – especially with Shakespeare, whose words complement some of the music this season, but only in the small Cadogan Hall chamber events (microphones needn't be anathema in the RAH)? Why stick with themes that celebrate safe, dead English luminaries instead of tapping into issues that concern everybody and could galvanise the young, idealistic and curious?

In the past, Proms themes have included Man and God (1998) and Music in Exile (2001), but it seems that as the world has become more volatile the Proms have tended to look the other way. Last year, the main thread was simply the year's two biggest musical anniversaries, Mozart and Shostakovich; in 2005, focuses included The Sea and Fairy Tales. But why not explore the positive effects of travel and migration on the arts, or composers' work when faced with political injustice?

This year's appearances by the Soweto Strings and the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra, besides Rachel Portman's new work, could have been highlighted with a clear public focus on the way in which music can transform lives – a missed opportunity indeed. Ahead, there lies the potential for a brave new century of Proms. This is the time to begin.

BBC Promenade Concerts, Royal Albert Hall, London SW7 and other venues, 13 July to 8 September (box office: 020-7589 8212)

Five unmissable proms

This year, for the first time, The Independent is producing exclusive daily podcasts covering the full season of Proms concerts. Visit the website independent.co.uk/promcast and join the Independent writer Nicola Christie as she talks to composers, musicians and Promenaders before each concert. You can also listen online to the music being played at the BBC Proms 2007.

WAGNER: GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG (12 August)

The Proms have offered a concert performance of an opera from Wagner's Ring for the past three years. Götterdämmerung, the fourth and last opera, is considered by many to be the greatest. The respected Wagner conductor Donald Runnicles heads the BBC Symphony Orchestra, and Christine Brewer, Stig Andersen and Sir John Tomlinson sing.

BUSKAID MEETS BAROQUE (15 July)

The Buskaid Soweto String Ensemble join forces with Sir John Eliot Gardiner, the Monteverdi Choir and the English Baroque Soloists for an exceptional evening of Baroque music. Dazzling dance sequences choreographed by Compagnie Roussat-Lubek of Paris are promised; following a stunning evening in Paris earlier this year, African dance meets Baroque rhythm in a dynamic encounter that may include gumboots. The concert also includes the beautiful Messe de Requiem by André Campra.

VIENNA PHILHARMONIC/DANIEL BARENBOIM (3 and 4 September)

Barenboim and the Vienna Phil go Austro-Hungarian in two Proms. First, an all-Viennese evening with Schubert's intimate Fifth Symphony and Bruckner's colossal, shimmering Fourth; the next night, Hungarian and Romanian composers feature with Bartok's Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta, Ligeti's Atmosphères, Enescu's Romanian Rhapsody No 1 and Kodaly's Dances of Galánta.

JAMES EHNES RECITAL (Cadogan Hall, 23 July, 1pm)

The stunning young Canadian violinist (right) and the pianist Eduard Laurel perform a recital of Mozart's Sonata in E minor K304, the world premiere of a new work by Aaron Jay Kernis commissioned by the BBC and written especially for them, and Elgar's exquisite yet rarely performed Violin Sonata in E minor, one of the composer's valedictory chamber works composed towards the end of the First World War. Ehnes also plays the Violin Concerto by Samuel Barber on 25 July.

ANNE SOFIE VON OTTER/LES MUSICIENS DU LOUVRE - Grenoble (29 July)

The French ensemble under Marc Minkowski perform 19th-century music from their home country, with Fauré's suite from his incidental music to Shylock. Anne Sofie von Otter (left)

sings Berlioz's *Les nuits d'été* and the concert ends with Bizet's incidental music to *L'Arlésienne*.