

Sir Henry Wood: The first knight of the Proms

Sir Henry Wood dreamed of bringing classical music to the masses - and did just that. But a new history of the concerts reveals what the effort cost him personally. Jessica Duchen delves into the private life of a public hero

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His photograph is striking: the regular features, the trademark beard, the wide, intent eyes; a man whose public image had to be strong, but whose inner life was illuminated by something essentially unworldly. This was Sir Henry Wood, the first, and for decades the only, conductor of the Proms.

Summer in London has become unimaginable without the Proms. The annual jamboree of concerts at the Royal Albert Hall has made such an impact on the country's musical life that it's now being celebrated with a meaty new book, *The Proms: a New History*, and a conference that begins today at the British Library. The concerts were the brainchild of the impresario Robert Newman, but it was to the young Wood that he turned to transform his idea into reality.

Wood became the public face of the Proms, remaining their ceaseless champion and the person who kept the series going at moments of crisis when they might have folded. The fact that he stayed in post from 1895 right through to 1944 is itself testimony to his astonishing tenacity.

Who was Wood? The violinist Yehudi Menuhin described him in a BBC interview as "ebullient" and "vigorous". "I can't imagine anyone who had a broader base," Menuhin added, "and that came through not only in talking to him, but simply by his presence; he was a broad man... who spread space and strength about him."

Wood's base was broad in many senses: he was a true "man of the people". Unlike his rival Sir Thomas Beecham, he was no child of privilege. Beecham, born into the wealthy pharmaceutical family, had the wherewithal to found his own orchestra. Wood, born on 3 March 1869 in Hitchin, Hertfordshire, grew up in a cottage behind the shop on Oxford Street where his father sold model steam engines.

The boy Henry's passion for music was much encouraged by his family. He attended the Royal Academy of Music, intending to become an accompanist and vocal coach. Later, he cut his conducting teeth on opera in the provinces, doing Gilbert and Sullivan in seaside resorts for a pittance, often giving seven performances a week. His intense work ethic never left him, and he expected the same from his musicians (with varied results). He prided himself on never being a minute late. Once, in 1912, when his taxi crashed en route to a concert, he simply bandaged his injuries and went on with the job. "Henry Wood, and did," quipped a cartooning colleague's drawing of the battered maestro.

Newman approached him in 1894 with the concept of promenade concerts. "I am going to run nightly concerts to train the public in easy stages," he said. "Popular at first, gradually raising the standard until I have created a public for classical and modern music." A wealthy doctor, George Cathcart, agreed to fund the series on condition that Wood alone conducted. The venue - the Queen's Hall, at 1 Langham Place, London W1 - was brand new, full of Art Nouveau curlicues and cupids.

Those Prom programmes bore little resemblance to today's. Typically, a concert would last around three hours, involving an eclectic mix of popular orchestral and instrumental pieces and solo songs, starting at the serious end, lightening up later, possibly sandwiching a premiere between two popular favourites. With promenade tickets priced at a shilling, and an informal atmosphere - you could eat, drink and smoke - the stage was set for an "omnibrow" music festival for all. Wood's task was to take music to the people, in the expectation that sooner or later the people would go to music.

Wood's autobiography, *My Life of Music*, is peppered with pithy stories of his encounters with the great and good as they trooped through the portals of the Queen's Hall. There were happy visits from Sibelius, Elgar and Grieg (though the Norwegian composer fell over on his way on to the platform), and misunderstandings with Schoenberg over the first UK performance of his *Five Orchestral Pieces*, which were hissed. At Wood's Golden Jubilee celebration concert in 1938, Sergei Rachmaninov played his own *Second Piano Concerto*; the event also featured the premiere of Vaughan Williams's *Serenade to Music*, written especially for the occasion.

Between 1889 and 1944, Wood conducted the world or British premieres of no fewer than 716 works by 356 composers. The list includes such classics as Janacek's *Sinfonietta*, Kodaly's *Dances of Galanta*, four of Mahler's symphonies and Tchaikovsky's opera *Eugene Onegin*. To the restive orchestra, rehearsing Schoenberg's *Five Orchestral Pieces*, Wood remarked, "Stick to it... this is nothing compared to what you'll be playing in 25 years' time!"

The world premiere of Elgar's Pomp and Circumstance Marches was a different story. At the end of No 1, Wood wrote in his autobiography, "The people simply rose and yelled... Little did I think then that the lovely, broad melody of the trio would one day develop into our second national anthem - 'Land of Hope and Glory'." The Last Night of the Proms, in which it is, of course, an annual fixture, originated in a 1905 concert marking the centenary of the Battle of Trafalgar. For it, Wood composed his Fantasia on British Sea Songs and programmed Arne's "Rule, Britannia", never imagining that his public would demand a rerun of both every year.

Wood apparently retained a hint of "the lower middle class" in his accent. In rehearsal, he once demanded "Horns, what are you a-doing of?" Later, someone gently told him that this was grammatically incorrect. Next time, he called out, "Horns, what are you a-doing?" only to hear the entire orchestra chorus back: "OF!" His great rivalry with Beecham, spiced with class warfare, he simply ignored in his autobiography (as Beecham ignored him).

Wood's book, though, missed out much more than that - notably, the truth about his private life. His first wife, Olga, was a Russian singer; Wood described her in his autobiography as Princess Olga Ouroussoff (apparently this was a tad exaggerated and her real name was Mikhailov). The couple led an idyllic life, but Olga died in 1909 and when Wood remarried, it was to Muriel Greatrex, his personal assistant: the daughter of an army major, she nurtured a passion for travel, but little appreciation of either music or domesticity. They had two daughters, Tania and Avril.

In 1939, Wood unburdened himself in a startling document entitled "My Confession". "For nearly 20 years," he wrote, "I went through the most trying and difficult life that any married man could possibly endure. My wife (Muriel M Wood) certainly possessed one of the worst and most difficult tempers imaginable..." Several pages later came perhaps the most painful line: "Muriel always hated and despised musicians."

Eventually, after two decades masking private misery with typical tenacity, Wood encountered the woman who had been his favourite singing pupil in the 1900s, Jessie Linton, née Goldsack, now a widow. Their renewed friendship, incorporating the kinds of discussions about music that Wood missed with Muriel, soon deepened. In 1935, Sir Henry walked out on Muriel in Rome. He demanded a divorce; she refused. He was not free to remarry. He and Linton hoped to set up home with Wood's daughter Tania as a third party to make the arrangement respectable, but Tania backed out, instead travelling with her mother to Japan, where Muriel's brother, Cecil Greatrex, was the British consul in Nagasaki.

Wood and Linton moved in together anyway, a daring step in those days. Linton even changed her name by deed poll to "Lady Jessie Wood". Fortunately, no one

seems to have begrudged the couple their happiness - except Tania; after the rift, Wood saw her again only once.

Even Muriel's brother was sympathetic to Wood. A letter from Cecil Greatrex to Tania in 1936 chronicles his horror at the revelation of "a household where father and daughters were united in submitting... to a reign of continual petty tyranny ... everyone has marvelled that your father managed to stick it all these years."

Wood remained a brusque individual, hypersensitive about his advancing age, loathe to lighten his schedule even when his health demanded it. His tenacity proved its worth. Three days after the declaration of war, the BBC decided it could not continue to fund the Proms. Wood was determined to find alternative backing for the 1940 and 1941 seasons, and succeeded so well that, the following year, the corporation came crawling back. His beloved Queen's Hall, though, was gone for good, taking a direct hit during the Blitz. Wood was photographed standing atop the rubble, defiant. He did not live to see the war end. He conducted his last concert on 28 July 1944; three weeks later, he was dead.

Every year at the Last Night of the Proms, a bronze bust of Wood is ritually crowned with a laurel wreath. It's a touching tribute to a man whose mission was to bring music to the people, and the people to music. Henry Wood could, and did.

'The Proms: a New History', edited by Jenny Doctor and David Wright, is published by Thames & Hudson, priced £24.95. To order your copy for £21.95 including postage and packing in the UK only (overseas costs on request), call 0845 058 5878 with credit card details, quoting 'Independent Offer'