

BBC Proms: Everything you wanted to know (but were afraid to ask)

The BBC Proms, which start tonight, are the world's greatest music festival. But they can seem forbidding. Jessica Duchen tells you how to be an instant expert

Friday, 18 July 2008

If you want a musical night to remember in London between now and mid-September, look no further: the BBC Promenade Concerts kick off tonight. The annual musical jamboree is in its 114th year; if you've never been before, now is the perfect time to try.

Back in the late 19th century, the Proms were held at the Queen's Hall, a beautiful art nouveau rotunda on Upper Regent's Street. It was subsequently flattened during the Blitz. All the concerts were conducted by Sir Henry Wood, whose bust now presides over the series at the Royal Albert Hall.

The BBC stepped in to save the Proms when they nearly went bust in 1927, and they've never looked back. The mission was simple and remains the same: to provide top-quality music for everybody, in egalitarian surroundings, at affordable prices. Today, the scale and variety of the event are second to none – and this year's Proms promise to be the most festive for a good while.

The issue of what it is that makes the Proms a festival, rather than just a series of concerts, has been exercising the decision-makers. The central concept is festive in its own right: the Albert Hall's stalls seats are cleared away and the space becomes an Arena with standing room only, into which the "Promenaders" cram, queuing on the night, to listen to everything and anything that counts as classical music, and some things that don't – from the rarified world of Italian Baroque opera to new commissions from the best young composers, from the Blue Peter Prom to Daniel Barenboim conducting the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, and excursions towards jazz, Indian ragas and the odd Dalek. Bring friends, bring sandwiches, wear your comfiest sandals.

But there's extra bells and whistles this season, partly the result of a fresh pair of eyes. A new boss is on board: Roger Wright, controller of Radio 3, who programmed this year's Proms with the outgoing director, Nicholas Kenyon. The concept of a season "theme" has been ditched, and instead there's a something-for-everyone feeling. Tomorrow's second night welcomes the superstar violinist

Nigel Kennedy for the first time in 20 years, performing the Elgar Violin Concerto. The seats sold out within a day – but if you queue, you can still get in to "prom".

For folk fans, there's a day of celebrations featuring not only the first-ever free Prom, but the series' first ceilidh in the Arena. The Doctor Who Prom on the morning of 27 July, the Daleks' Albert Hall debut, promises to be a fun event for all the family, though you'll have to hide behind the Arena's fountain rather than a sofa. Even Margaret Hodge – the culture minister who suffered a case of foot-in-mouth this year when she claimed that people of different backgrounds didn't feel "at ease" at the Proms – should be pleased by that.

Composers' anniversaries are thick on the ground. That of Ralph Vaughan Williams (the 50th anniversary of his death) has brought an especially uplifting response. Vaughan Williams is enjoying quite a renaissance as the all-round Good Bloke of British music; the great-nephew of Charles Darwin and a champion of English folk songs, he avoided the pomp and circumstance of Elgar, the social climbing of Walton and the chilly glumness of Britten to create symphonies of originality and power, as well as several iconic pieces of British music: The Lark Ascending, for violin and orchestra, the Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis and the Serenade to Music, which sets words from Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice for 16 solo singers and orchestra. You can hear the last two plus his "masque" Job and his Ninth Symphony in one deliciously dedicated evening.

If you prefer something slightly wackier, 2008 marks the centenary of Olivier Messiaen. The true heir to Debussy and Ravel, Messiaen forged a musical language all his own, drawing on influences as diverse as Indian ragas, the Indonesian gamelan, the force of his Catholic faith, and patterns he transcribed from birdsong. His copious quantities of organ music are at the heart of the new series of afternoon organ recitals at the Proms, but there are also opportunities to hear his roof-busting Turangalîla Symphony – a 10-movement bonanza from the 1940s celebrating love, sex, God, nature and the Tristan myth rolled into one overwhelming whole – and his rarely performed sole opera, Saint Francis of Assisi – the ultimate topic for any birdsong enthusiast – which will be given in a concert performance by the Netherlands Opera.

A rarer kind of centenary is that of the American composer Elliott Carter, born the day after Messiaen in December 1908 but is still with us and still composing. The creator of dizzyingly complex yet aesthetically breathtaking works, he will be featured in four concerts, including the opening night when Pierre-Laurent Aimard, today's leading exponent of contemporary piano music, will take a solo spot to play Caténares.

If this is still not way-out enough, try Karlheinz Stockhausen, who died last December – a composer who has to be heard to be believed. His works amount not only to music, but to conceptual art. V C While his personality alienated many by sheer arrogance – he once said: "What I achieved in the last half-century is more than has been achieved in the last 700 years of musical history" – he was a tremendous influence on 20th-century music, from the radical avant-garde to pop giants such as Brian Eno and even The Beatles (he's on the Sergeant Pepper

cover). He was an intellectual and a mystic, applying serialism to spirituality and helicopters to a string quartet; and though tackling his works for the first time can be a tad daunting, if the Proms can't make him approachable, then nothing can. Experience total immersion at the Stockhausen Day.

Speaking of new music, several years ago the Proms took some hard knocks for not including enough music by women composers. This time, they seem to be trying to cut a musical Gordian Knot by commissioning a young composer, Anna Meredith, to write a new work for the Last Night.

Meredith has an impressive track-record; she was composer-in-residence with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and works both acoustically and electronically. Reviewing her work *Torque*, *The Independent's* critic called her style "assured, confident, effective"; she'll need to be all of those when the spotlight falls upon her on 13 September. Her work is one of 20 premieres from living composers that feature throughout the season.

But there's another astonishing woman composer to discover; Dame Ethel Smyth, born 150 years ago, whose *Concerto for Violin, Horn and Orchestra* is played by the violinist Tasmin Little and the horn player Richard Watkins. Smyth, famously eccentric and an uncompromising individualist in terms of musical voice, wrote operas on a near-Wagnerian scale and did time in jail for her suffragette activities. Her rehabilitation is not before time.

These days, there's much more to the Proms than just the Proms. The lunchtime chamber music series at the nearby Cadogan Hall, a gem of a venue, has proved so successful that it's been expanded. This year, too, for the first time, every Prom will be given a curtain-raising talk, mainly at the neighbouring Royal College of Music, the eclectic mix including the Archbishop of Canterbury discussing Dostoevsky. There's a Proms Literary Festival, and sessions involving performers and composers interviewing each other, and more – all free of charge to those with concert tickets.

And that's not to forget the great performers. As usual, many of the world's top orchestras, conductors and soloists will be present, including Barenboim conducting the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic with Lorin Maazel, and the Berlin Philharmonic with Sir Simon Rattle. There's a host of impressive rising stars, and some much-loved artists who are returning to the Proms for the first time in two decades – not only Kennedy, but also the great American pianist Murray Perahia.

The Proms are the perfect place to try a classical concert for the first time. The atmosphere is festive and informal, but there's a certain mystique, too – one that has developed its own slightly peculiar traditions. So make sure you are armed with our Bluffer's Guide to the Proms...

The BBC Proms, Royal Albert Hall, London SW7 (0845 401 5040; www.bbc.co.uk/proms), today to 13 September

How to behave at The Proms

DO...

- * Take some water. The Arena is hot, sweaty and low down. The Gallery is hot, sweaty and involves a lot of stairs.
- * Wear comfortable shoes. If you go in high heels, you'll regret it – take it from one who knows.
- * Arrive early; the further ahead you are in the queue, the better the spot you'll get. Good manners are mandatory when Promming; queue-jumping is a real no-no.
- * Feel free to go to a Proms Plus talk; the stewards will give you a numbered ticket to keep your place in the queue.
- * Chat to your waiting neighbours. Never mind heaven, marriages have been made in the Proms queue.

DON'T...

- * Worry about a dress code. There isn't one.
- * Take flags, silly hats etc, to any Prom except the Last Night.
- * Attempt to infiltrate a Promming spot after the interval if you weren't there before it – those around you will leave you in no doubt that you are A Very Bad Person.
- * Talk, eat, snog or slurp while the music is playing.
- * Clap between movements – unless you really, really want to and everyone else is doing it too. Otherwise, it's the fastest way to make people think you're a philistine, so do try to curb your enthusiasm.

Last night survival kit

Queue: All day recommended.

Essential: Water, sandwiches and something sugary for energy – you're going to need it!

Optional: Flag – any flag that means something to you, not just Union flags; silly hat; football rattle; party-poppers; teddy bear; "Hello Mum" banner; noise-reducing earplugs.

Five rising stars

Yevgeny Sudbin (piano): 24 July

The young sultry-eyed Russian star makes his Proms debut with Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No 1. Try to look at his fingers, not just his cheekbones.

Julia fischer (violin): 4 & 5 August

The German violinist has her work cut out with an entire lunchtime recital as well as the Brahms Concerto the next day, but she'll be helped along in both by the conductor and pianist Yakov Kreizberg, which should help lessen the arduousness.

Han-Na Chang (cello): 8 August

The Korean-born prodigy, a Rostropovich protégée, will be appearing in a late-

night Prom playing the "Three Meditations" from Leonard Bernstein's Mass. This isn't the place to explain the whole Mass – be glad they're only doing the best bits.

Gweneth-Ann Jeffers (soprano): 11 August, 1pm, Proms Chamber Music

Jeffers has risen through the ranks of the Royal Opera House's Young Artists' Programme and sings one of the best song-cycles of the 20th century, Messiaen's Harawi. Show off to your neighbours pondering the funny words amid the French by telling them that they're in the Quechua language, from Peru.

Martin Frost (clarinet): 13 August

The charismatic young Swede gives the UK premiere of Swedish composer Anders Hillborg's Clarinet Concerto, with the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra conducted by Gustavo Dudamel.

Smart promming

Promenading tickets cost £5; you queue up and buy them on the night. You can "Prom" in the Arena (the stalls without the seats), which has much the best acoustics but can literally be a pain in the neck if you are short. Alternatively, the Gallery provides a bird's-eye view. Queue at Door 11 for the Arena and Door 10 for the Gallery.

Buy a season ticket if you fancy going every night – designated queuing at doors 1 and 2 gets you the best spots and the cost works out at less than £2.25 a night. Season tickets are non-transferable, so don't attempt to disguise your friends as you with wigs and taches. If you want the good places without forking out for the whole season, get Weekend Promming Passes.

If you can't go in person, listen live on BBC Radio 3. If you can't even do that, each concert will be available on Listen Again on the channel's website for a week. There's absolutely no excuse for missing a Prom.

When to catch it on TV

BB2: First Night and Last Night, plus Proms on Saturday nights (not always live) from 26 July until the end of the season.

BBC1: Broadcasts the last part of the Last Night on 13 September.

BBC4: Proms on Sundays and Mondays for seven weeks, plus a few special extras in mid-season – notably the concerts conducted by Daniel Barenboim and Pierre Boulez.

Who's who of the TV presenters

Charles Hazlewood

Spiky-haired and flamboyant-shirted, Hazlewood is principal guest conductor of the BBC Concert Orchestra and a regular presenter of The Culture Show as well as on BBC Radio 3. Tries endearingly hard to conceal his public-school origins

behind self-conscious cool, but knows his music and has gathered a fond following.

Suzy Klein

The new face of the Proms on BBC2. Like Hazlewood, she's a frequent contributor to Radio 3; she's also a producer, notably of last year's docudrama Tchaikovsky: The Creation of Greatness. She made her way from the back of the camera to the front three years ago and is much praised for her fresh, friendly approach.

Petroc Trelawny

The suave-voiced, personable presenter of Radio 3's Music Matters and In Tune, Trelawny is a broadcaster with a solid pedigree. He's fronted the Cardiff Singer of the World and the Leeds International Piano Competition broadcasts in the past, and this year will be lathering on the Cornish charm for a bunch of BBC4 Proms in August.

Verity Sharp

A former cellist with eclectic musical tastes, she's been presenting BBC Radio 3's Late Junction for five years and has scooped the Silver Sony Music Broadcaster Award. She often presents The Culture Show and as a former producer has been involved with a variety of programmes on Radio 3. If she lives up to her name, you will hear from her the truth, incisively told.

Sara Mohr-Pietsch

A twentysomething Cambridge graduate, and former academic and arts administrator, Mohr-Pietsch won a BBC talent competition to become a classical music presenter in Scotland in 2005. A lover of music ancient and modern, she sings, has studied African music in The Gambia and claims to play the viola da gamba "incredibly badly".

Clive Anderson

Not exactly a music regular, Anderson steps in to join Klein at the Last Night – presumably as a face that viewers of BBC1 might actually recognise.

What the promenaders are chanting – and how to join in

When the piano is wheeled in for a concerto, if you're in the Arena, shout "Heave!" as the lid is being lifted; if you're in the Gallery, respond to "Heave!" with "Ho!" And when the piano's A sounds for the orchestra to tune to, clap hard. Don't ask why.

Foreign orchestras are often greeted with a chant in their own language – this year, expect Swedish, German, French, possibly Hebrew and Arabic.

Longer chants often concern the collection of funds for musical charities. Don't worry about joining in these ones, but it's nice to put a coin in the buc-ket on your way out – the Promenaders raise thousands of pounds for good causes. Last year, donations totalled more than £67,000.

Top ten concerts

Prom 2

Nigel Kennedy plays the Elgar Violin Concerto; Andrew Kennedy (no relation) sings Finzi's Intimations of Immortality. The late-night Prom has the Nigel Kennedy Quintet from Krakow – top-notch jazz with a powerful Polish accent.

Tomorrow

Prom 4

Folk Day, with everything from Kathryn Tickell to Hungary's Muzsikás and a spot of Berio. The afternoon Prom is free, and begins at 3.30pm. Arrive at 10am to join either the Proms Folk Family Orchestra or the Chorus to learn folk songs; unwind at Folk in the Park in Kensington Gardens at noon. Bella Hardy, Martin Simpson and Bellowhead give the evening concert – and the ceilidh is at 10pm.

20 July

Prom 19

The Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, conducted by Vassily Petrenko, making his Proms debut with a Kenneth Hesketh premiere, Rachmaninov's Symphonic Dances and Beethoven's Piano Concerto No 4.

1 August

Prom 20

Stockhausen Day. Feeling brave? Take in the whole mini-festival, starting at 1pm with a double bill of films, then a discussion, and two concerts featuring the BBC Symphony Orchestra (David Robertson conducting) and, at 10pm, the Theatre of Voices and Paul Hillier in Stimmung.

2 August

Prom 38

Daniel Barenboim conducts The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, his band of young musicians drawn from Israel and Arabic nations. They give two concerts: the full orchestra in Haydn's Sinfonia Concertante, Schoenberg's Variations for Orchestra and Brahms's Symphony No 4, and, in the Late Night Prom, Boulez's Mémoriale and Stravinsky's L'Histoire du Soldat. Arrive extra early.

14 August

Prom 46

The London Symphony Orchestra play the complete music of Tchaikovsky's Sleeping Beauty.

20 August

Prom 50

Bach's St John Passion, with the Monteverdi Choir and English Baroque Soloists, conducted by Sir John Eliot Gardiner. At 10pm cellist Jian Wang plays three Bach suites, and there's an all-Bach organ recital by Simon Preston at 4pm.

24 August

Prom 54

Vaughan Williams galore; the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Andrew Davis play the Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis, Job: A Masque for Dancing, the

Serenade to Music and the Ninth Symphony.

26 August

Prom 68

The London Philharmonic Orchestra pairs Rimsky-Korsakov's one-act opera Kashchey the Immortal with Stravinsky's The Firebird. Expect wizardry from conductor Vladimir Jurowski.

5 September

Prom 70

A rare chance to hear Messiaen's opera Saint Francis of Assisi, with the Netherlands Opera and The Hague Philharmonic. Messiaen's ornithological obsessions make this a twitcher's delight.

7 September