

**PROM 60:
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra,
Charles Dutoit / Martha Argerich,
Royal Albert Hall, London**



A sublime solo in a night of stars

Reviewed by Jessica Duchon

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A good concert programme is a little like a gourmet menu: you want flavours that complement one another to just the right degree. The RPO's prom, with its recently appointed artistic director and principal conductor, Charles Dutoit, at the helm, neatly hit the jackpot with this feast of French, Russian and French-Canadian works.

The most recent came first, with the UK premiere of Orion by the Montreal-born Charles Vivier, not exactly a familiar name in this country, though better recognised in France and Eastern Europe. Orion, composed in 1979, is a starscape rich with pulsating textures, supernovas of sound heaving in the percussion and brass, and pairs of instruments – two high trumpets or solo violins – reflecting one another like mirrors catching the light.

Dutoit conducted the piece's premiere 30 years ago. This, the second of Vivier's only two works for orchestra, was a promising beginning, but, tragically, he died in 1983 at the age of only 34.

What the packed house had really come to hear, one suspects, was the piano concerto. Martha Argerich (who was briefly married to Dutoit some 40 years ago) had originally scheduled both Ravel's G Major Concerto and Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No 1, but then decided to drop the latter. Still, Argerich is famed for cancelling her performances, and to hear her at all is a rare treat. The Ravel contained more than enough mesmeric magic to compensate for the missing Prokofiev.

Argerich is one in a million: a free spirit who can toy with the timing in Ravel's jazzy melodies as if she's singing them in Ronnie Scott's. The biting rhythms are as oxygenated as lifeblood, while she injects every note with incandescent energy and a glorious luminosity of tone. Her Scarlatti sonata encore, a shower of baroque fireworks, brought the house down: here was all of that matchless technique and white-hot inspiration that her fans adore. It's not for nothing that she is often nominated as today's greatest living pianist.

But this joyous paeon is for Argerich herself, rather than the concerto as a whole. The orchestral playing was little more than workaday throughout the concert, its energy levels some way below the soloist's, but worse problems ensued when some dislocation of orchestra and piano disrupted the last part of the concerto's slow movement: it grew gradually more and more sluggish until I worried that the excellent cor anglais player might run out of puff. The last movement never quite regained the requisite panache; again, Argerich was exemplary, but the orchestra sounded insecure, hanging together by a thread, as if its sections could not hear one another properly across the platform. A pity; it all began so well.

Prokofiev's suite from his opera *The Love of Three Oranges* was a good choice to replace the missing concerto, its music full of fairy-tale fantasy and piquant flights of virtuosity; here Dutoit's wry smile to the strings before the dizzying final movement goaded them to their best efforts. And so to the union of Russia and France in Ravel's orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Mussorgsky wrote the piece, originally for piano solo, as a memorial to his friend Viktor Hartmann, the artist and architect whose works were the original "pictures". He felt it was inhabited by the same fervour that had fuelled his opera *Boris Godunov*, and later Ravel's technicolour imagination virtually doubled the original's power.

But Dutoit and the RPO brought us only a strict, no-nonsense account, decently played yet lacking the intense tingle-factor that Mussorgsky's feverish visions – grotesque gnomes, skull-laden catacombs, demoniac witches – absolutely demand. Seven stars to Argerich, three to the rest.