

## Proms mania: The 12 concerts you can't afford to miss

The Proms begin next Friday with Stars, Night, Music, and Light, an apt opening for two months of imagination and grand vision. Jessica Duchon welcomes the festival and selects her highlights

*Friday, 8 July 2011*



Flying the flag: Conductor Jiri Belohlavek conducts the orchestra during last year's Last Night of the Proms

It's high summer, and the title of the first piece in the 2011 BBC Promenade Concerts says it all. Stars, Night, Music and Light is a new work

commissioned for the occasion from Judith Weir – and it's a perfect launch-pad for a glittering musical celebration on a grand scale.

From next Friday until mid-September, the Royal Albert Hall is home to this legendary festival. With the seats ripped out of the stalls, the Proms pack in standing listeners for the grand sum of £5 per ticket. Simply queue for places on the day and, if you arrive early enough you can be just metres away from the world's finest classical musicians while they do their stuff.

Since 1895, when the conductor Sir Henry Wood founded the series, the Proms have been based on the admirable ideal of offering the highest-quality music to the widest possible audience. Today the egalitarian nature of "Promming" combines with broadcast on the radio of every concert; many are also on television, with a prime-time spot on BBC2 on Saturday nights. Satellite venues at Cadogan Hall and the Royal College of Music host lunchtime chamber-music Proms, pre-concert talks, literary events and more. This year's programme was mapped out around three years ago, before cuts could bite, and we can look forward to a dizzying array of treats.

The emphasis falls firmly on variety, exploration, communicative performers and works on a thrilling scale that turn the cavernous nature of the Royal Albert Hall into an asset. As Roger Wright, director of the Proms, likes to remind us, this is a festival; he wants the concerts to fit the bill by being fun, attractive, enjoyable and distinctive. The 85,000-odd tickets that were snapped up in the first nine hours of advance booking seem to indicate that he's succeeding.

The focus of the programming has changed since Wright took over in 2007. Gone are the high-falutin', season-long "themes" – maybe they were more enjoyable for the planning department than for the audience. But broad threads and connections remain; and among innovations is the notion of "featured artists", soloists who each make two or more appearances during the season. The idea is that the audience can get to know their work better through hearing them in different contexts. The soprano Susan Bullock, for instance, will appear first in a Comedy Prom, but later transforms herself into Wagner's Brünnhilde to sing the end of *Götterdämmerung* on the Last Night.

But still, is there a sense that risk-taking is slightly down this year? There's nothing to compare with, for instance, the Stockhausen Day, three years ago: a huge gamble that fortuitously proved a triumph. I put this to Wright, who suggests that risky programming is not diminished – just different. After all, the Proms include many more new and little-known pieces of music than your average summer festival; this is one of its special capabilities and, in his view, a major attraction. "This year, for instance, we have Bax's Symphony No 2, a number of pieces by Frank Bridge, and the Havergal Brian Gothic Symphony," Wright says. "I'm not making any great claims for these works' quality, but it is great to have a chance to hear them played live. People are often too ready to dismiss certain music as second-rate, but that usually turns out to be a reiteration of received opinion. Most have never actually heard a performance of the works they're talking about. So let's hear some."

Impassioned specialists, each wanting the Proms to feature their pet offbeat composer, used to write in to grumble about the lack of one niche figure or another. "We don't get many of those letters any more," Wright says, pointing to the efforts of the Proms in recent years to resuscitate little-heard works by composers like Parry, Vaughan Williams and John Foulds.

He's taking some personal pride in bringing British music and musicians strongly to the fore. The first night is a case in point, beginning with the Weir premiere and continuing with a concerto played by one of the UK's most exciting young pianists, Benjamin Grosvenor, who at 19 is the youngest soloist ever to perform on opening night. Best of British is only part of the picture, of course. Rarities from many lands pepper the programmes. Watch out for surprise gems like Glière's Concerto for Coloratura Soprano or Saint-Saëns's "Egyptian" Piano Concerto No 5 with Stephen Hough as the soloist. And an all-Rachmaninov concert – unusually for that composer, without a solo piano – features the Russian composer's rarely played choral symphony The Bells.

Grand-scale favourites are bound to pull in the crowds. One of the first Proms to sell out was the Verdi Requiem, and we'll be treated several complete operas in concert – Handel's Rinaldo from Glyndebourne, Rossini's William Tell conducted by Tony Pappano, and Weber's Der Freischütz in a rarely heard version with recitatives written by Berlioz. There's even a complete ballet: the Mariinsky Orchestra with Valery Gergiev on the podium will offer Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake without a pointe shoe in sight. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the RAH is also hosting performances by just one musician: the ever-popular violinist Nigel Kennedy is playing solo Bach, and the Canadian virtuoso pianist Marc-André Hamelin gives a late-night recital devoted to Liszt.

Signs of the times can be spotted among the visiting orchestras. One – the mighty Philadelphia Orchestra – is officially bankrupt. The Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra is fighting for recognisable life against proposed extreme funding cuts to culture by the right-wing Dutch government. And the Israel Philharmonic will appear despite a high risk of controversy, and need special security.

But hope for the future is exemplified by the inclusion of many enthusiastic young players: the Gustav Mahler Jugendorchester, the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, a number of youth choirs, the award-winning young Aurora Orchestra and the galvanising performers of the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra from Venezuela. Heart-warming, too, is a startling initiative from the Budapest Festival Orchestra and its conductor Ivan Fischer: in a late-night Prom they will ask their audience to choose the programme from a substantial list of pieces. It's an orchestral librarian's nightmare and has never been tried in the UK before, but at home in Hungary it apparently goes down a treat. The Comedy Prom, too, is an entirely new feature that should prove great fun. It involves, besides the star turn from Susan Bullock, an appearance by the brilliant Kit and the Widow, plus a spoof Romantic piano concerto by Franz Reizenstein, who has a centenary to mark.

If you were hoping for another Dr Who Prom, though, it's not going to happen. Bringing Daleks into the Albert Hall was such a runaway success two years ago that the Proms did it again. Were it to take place a third time, though, it would risk becoming a fixture, says Wright: "We don't want to slip into programming to a formula."

Instead, the annual Family Prom will be devoted to the increasingly popular Horrible Histories series – and parents will be glad to hear that admission is free. The BBC, admittedly, isn't entirely averse to blowing its own trumpet: the Dr Who and Blue Peter Proms certainly served that purpose. Now the spotlight transfers to Horrible Histories plus The Human Planet, which has a Prom to itself featuring music by Nitin Sawhney.

Clearly, programming the Proms involves a tricky balancing act. But one area in which balance remains virtually impossible is the question of women composers, or lack of them. We can't realistically expect this to change in a hurry. Women would-be composers were continually discouraged during the 18th and 19th centuries, the repertoire of which still occupies the lion's share of classical-concert time. Kicking off the season with a new commission from the splendid Weir is probably as good as it gets; as for Weir, she should soon be due for a damehood. Commissions, too, for several other women composers this year: Stevie Wishart, who in *Out of This World* has set texts by Hildegard of Bingen, the 12th-century abbess, probably the first woman composer known to history; Sally Beamish's *String Quartet No 2*, *Reed Stanza*, to be premiered in the Proms Chamber Music lunchtime series; and *Prom No 3* involving the world premiere of *The Everlasting Crown* by Judith Bingham.

New commissions are a vital part of the Proms' remit. What seems unusual about the premieres this year, though, is that the young composers on whom the Proms have often taken a punt are mainly conspicuous by their absence. Wishart aside, most of this year's commissionees are well-established international names, such as Kevin Volans, who has written a new piano concerto for Barry Douglas, and two composers – George Aperghis and Pascal Dusapin – who, though infrequently performed in the UK, are hugely admired in the contemporary music scene worldwide. Rising stars like Thomas Larcher and Graham Fitkin are tried and tested, even if not necessarily familiar to the entire audience. More high-profile contemporary music includes a late-night Prom with Steve Reich and his ensemble, a new *Violin Concerto* from Sir Harrison Birtwistle, and a *Flute Concerto* by Elliott Carter, who is still composing, aged 102.

Composer anniversaries are a less risky business than new commissions and this year's chief jamboree is the bicentenary of that grand Romantic, Franz Liszt. The Hungarian pianist-composer's two piano concertos appear respectively in the first and last nights; the London Philharmonic's all-Hungarian Prom with Vladimir Jurowski features the *Faust Symphony*; there's a rare airing for the *Dante Symphony* by the BBC Philharmonic conducted by Gianandrea Noseda, and the Budapest Festival Orchestra includes two of their compatriot's works in their main Prom.

Sure-seller Gustav Mahler takes up yet more anniversary space, as his second celebration year on the trot draws to its end (the centenary of his death follows the 150th birthday). Already some of us are Mahler-ed out. If anyone can make us hear him afresh, though, it's the National Youth Orchestra and the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra, united under the baton of Gustavo Dudamel in the Second Symphony, the "Resurrection".

There's a rare treat of an anniversary in a late-night Prom devoted to the Spanish Renaissance composer Tomas Luis de Victoria, marking 400 years since his death; his magnificent choral works should sound amazing in the Royal Albert Hall. But the centenary of Gian Carlo Menotti, the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer of the celebrated Christmas opera Amahl and the Night Visitors, passes without so much as a squeak.

My personal tub-thump for a neglected composer who deserved more centenary fuss goes to Bernard Herrmann (1911-1975), who scored most of Alfred Hitchcock's finest films. He wrote plenty of concert music but, because he is "tainted" with cinema, it is rarely performed. A Film Music Prom includes selections from The Man Who Knew Too Much, Citizen Kane, North by Northwest and Psycho. Better than nothing – but couldn't we have heard his opera, Wuthering Heights?

Finally, the Proms round off with a Last Night led by Ed Gardner, the youngest conductor to take on the task since Henry Wood himself. He will put the BBC Symphony Orchestra through its familiar paces, aided and abetted by Susan Bullock and the Chinese superstar pianist Lang Lang – who also appears in the Proms in the Park the same night and will have to dash between concerts across Kensington Gore, perhaps in a pair of his special edition Lang Lang Adidas trainers (buy some and you can wear his name in Chinese on your heels).

A warning: the future is far from guaranteed. At the Proms' launch, Wright pointed out that we cannot take for granted the level of the BBC's support. "The whole of the BBC is being asked to think about how things might look with a 20-per-cent cut," he tells me. "We're just one part of the BBC."

It doesn't seem likely that the Proms would follow the chunk of the institution that's being moved to Salford – no need for a brick-by-brick reassembling of the Royal Albert Hall. But this year is a chance for everyone who loves the Proms to get down to Kensington or tune in nightly to demonstrate their passion for this extraordinary and very British musical phenomenon.

*BBC Proms, Royal Albert Hall, London SW7 (0845 401 5040; [www.bbc.co.uk/proms](http://www.bbc.co.uk/proms)) 15 July to 10 September*

## **SOUND AND VISION: 12 PROMS NOT TO MISS**

### **Opening Night**

**Prom 1, 15 July, 7.30pm**

The season starts British, bright and big. A Judith Weir premiere (British); Benjamin Grosvenor plays Liszt (bright); and the BBC Symphony Orchestra's principal conductor Jiri Belohlavek conducts Janáček's Glagolitic Mass (very big indeed).

### **Havergal Brian's Gothic Symphony**

**Prom 4, 17 July, 7pm**

Featuring in the 'Guinness Book of Records' as the longest symphony ever written, this extraordinary work from the 1920s lay unplayed until 1961. It features more than 1,000 performers. Martyn Brabbins conducts.

### **Verdi's Requiem**

**Prom 13, 24 July, 7pm**

Semyon Bychkov conducts an all-star line-up in Verdi's Requiem, including the sensational Maltese tenor Joseph Calleja, along with Marina Poplavskaya (soprano), Mariana Pentcheva (mezzo) and Ferruccio Furlanetto (bass).

### **Tasmin Little Plays Elgar**

**Prom 24, 2 August**

The violinist Tasmin Little's CD of the Elgar Violin Concerto won a Classical Brit this year: hear her play this perennial Proms favourite live. The programme also includes music by Percy Grainger and Richard Strauss.

### **Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra and National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain**

**Prom 29, 5 August, 7.30pm**

Gustavo Dudamel conducts the massed forces of two stupendous young orchestras in Mahler's Symphony No 2, 'Resurrection', with Swedish soloists Miah Persson and Anna Larsson. Expect the roof to rise.

### **National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain**

**Prom 30, 6 August, 6.30pm**

Vladimir Jurowski conducts the NYO in the music of grandson and grandfather Prokofiev – Gabriel's Concerto for Turntables and Orchestra (starring DJ Switch), and a selection from Sergei's 'Romeo and Juliet'. Plus Benjamin Grosvenor in Britten's Piano Concerto.

### **Nigel Kennedy**

**Prom 31, 6 August, 10pm**

The genre-bending 'People's Violinist' is back to perform solo Bach, alone in the Royal Albert Hall.

### **Chamber Orchestra of Europe**

**Proms 47 and 49, 19 August, 7pm, and 20 August, 7.30pm**

Two all-Brahms feasts, each concert containing a piano concerto and a symphony by Brahms. Luxury casting with Bernard Haitink conducting and Emanuel Ax as soloist.

### **Budapest Festival Orchestra**

**Proms 63 and 64, 2 September, 7pm and 10pm**

Ivan Fischer leads his magnificent Hungarian orchestra in music by Liszt, plus Mahler's Symphony No 1. Then in the late-night Prom, the audience will be asked to choose the programme.

### **Philadelphia Orchestra**

**Prom 72, 8 September, 7.30pm**

The great Philadelphia Orchestra, financially beleaguered but musically resurgent despite this, arrives with conductor Charles Dutoit and violinist Janine Jansen to perform works by Sibelius, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov and Ravel.

### **Der Freischütz**

**Prom 73, 9 September, 7.30pm**

An operatic landmark of German Romanticism, performed complete with late additions by Berlioz. John Eliot Gardiner conducts. Cast includes tenor Andrew Kennedy and soprano Sophie Karthäuser.

### **Last Night**

**Prom 74, 10 September, 7.30pm**

Edward Gardner presides over the Last Night of the Proms with all the usual fun: highlights include a new work by Master of the Queen's Music, Wagner with Susan Bullock, and Chopin and Liszt with Lang Lang.