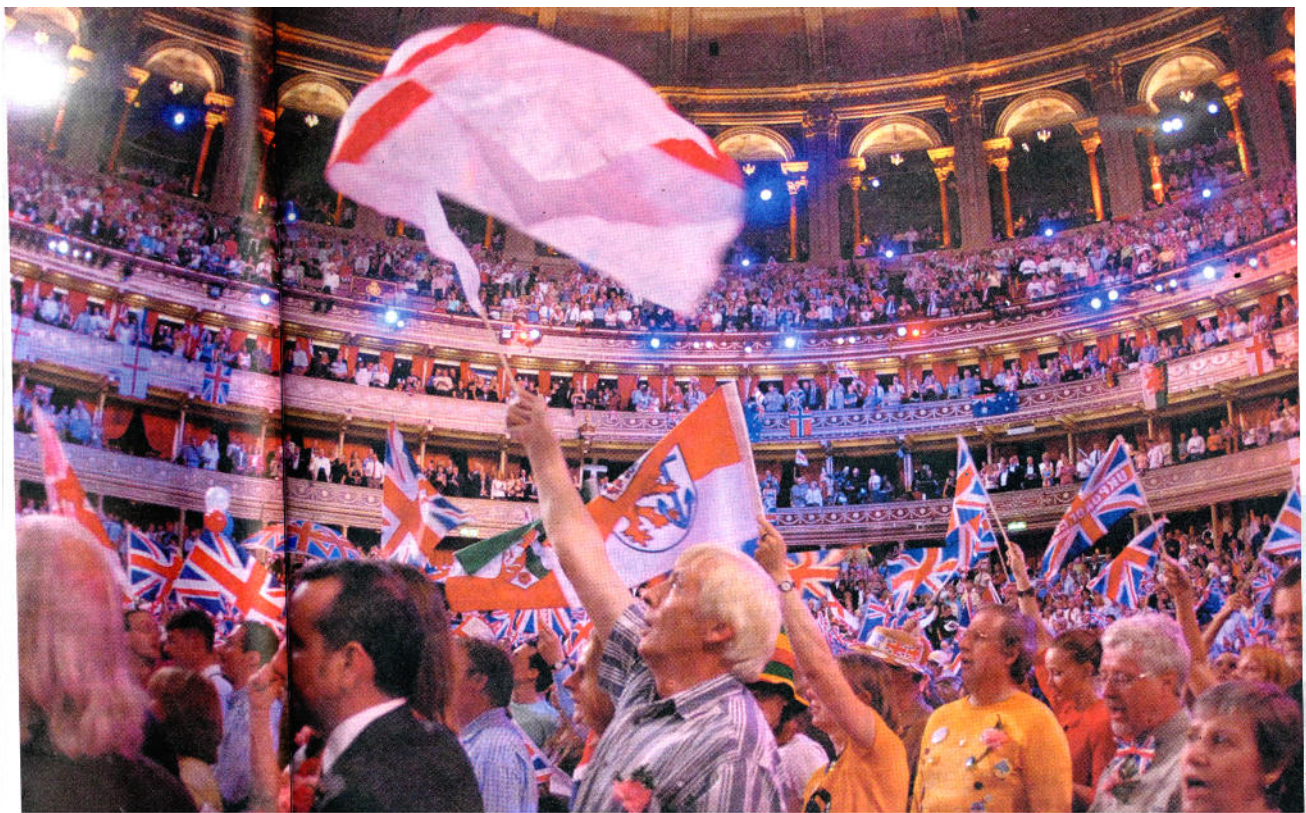


# All change: a new era at the Proms

This year's concerts will feature some of the starriest names in classical music. In the background, though, director Roger Wright is preparing to step aside. He shares his thoughts on the event's future with **Jessica Duchén**



Hope and glory: can this year's Proms – the last under the directorship of Roger Wright – match the huge success of the past two years? (CARL COURT/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

On 18 July the Royal Albert Hall opens its doors for the annual BBC Promenade Concerts, known simply as the Proms: two months of world-class classical music at which standing places cost just £5 a pop. There is nothing else quite like it – either here or abroad. Once you've experienced the queues of prom-naders snaking down Prince Consort Road with sandwich boxes and comfy shoes, sampled the relaxed but excited atmosphere inside the hall, and witnessed evenings as thrilling as last year's *Ring* cycle, when thousands listened rapt to Wagner's gigantic tetralogy at the feet of the conductor Daniel Barenboim – the chances are you'll be hooked too.

This year's season marks the end of Roger Wright's seven-year tenure as director of the Proms. He is also stepping down as controller of Radio 3, a post he has held since 1998. His successors – the roles are to be split – have yet to be appointed.

Wright is taking the top job at the Aldeburgh festival, and the day after that news broke it was announced that Bob Shennan, the controller of Radio 2, is to become the corporation's overall director of music. The timing struck many as intriguing. Restructuring is inevitable at the BBC in the current climate, but it's unlikely that Wright would have been too happy at

having someone brought in over his head. Meanwhile, whoever takes over Wright's roles will undoubtedly have to implement funding cuts and deal with whatever may emerge from the new licence fee settlement in 2016.

Wright bids farewell to the Proms after the opening night. "Elgar's *The Kingdom* will be the last music I hear as Proms director," he says. "I'm sad to be leaving the team, of course, but to have had the fun of working with them, and knowing the Proms are in such safe hands, is terrific."

He does not mince his words, though, when it comes to uncertainties regarding the future. "The Proms have been singled out for reinvestment, so I think there's a real understanding of their importance, right at the top of the organisation," he says. "But the biggest question is the future of BBC funding overall. We don't know what the licence fee settlement is going to be in 2016-17 onwards. You can't separate out the future of anything to do with the BBC from those decisions."

For generations of music-lovers, summer without the Proms has been as unthinkable as Halloween without pumpkins or Christmas without carols. This year marks the series' 120th anniversary; it has been run by the BBC since 1927 and has been resident at the Royal Albert Hall since 1941.

And thanks to the BBC's efforts the concerts have never been as ac-

cessible as they are now. If you can't get there in person, every concert is broadcast live on Radio 3, and there are plentiful TV broadcasts and online facilities to let you enjoy performances by a dizzying range of musicians, from the Berlin Philharmonic under the baton of Sir Simon Rattle to the Pet Shop Boys. The latter are creating a new work for orchestra and electronics that pays tribute to Alan Turing, the Bletchley Park computer pioneer who was persecuted for his homosexuality.

There is much to live up to at the Proms, especially after the last two years. In 2012 it was absorbed into the Cultural Olympiad and featured some extraordinary moments – whether the arrival of the British athletes at the festivities of the Last Night, or Barenboim walking into the Olympic opening ceremony, as one of eight great humanitarian figures carrying the Olympic flag, straight from conducting a Prom.

Last year's Wagner bicentenary season included star-studded concert performances of seven of his operas; and the Last Night was conducted for the first time by a woman, Marin Alsop. Staging these festivals received vision and chutzpah, and paid off handsomely in terms of audience figures: last year's average attendance filled 93 per cent of the Albert Hall, and 57 of 75 main concerts sold out completely. But without quite

such special events to raise the roof, can this year's programme match that success?

The agenda contains just about enough celebration to keep the mood upbeat. The 150th anniversary of Richard Strauss's birth is marked with three of the composer's finest operas: *Salome*, featuring the Swedish star soprano Nina Stemme (Brünnhilde in last year's *Ring* cycle), followed 24 hours later by *Elektra*, in which Strauss creates the ultimate in hair-raising musical Expressionism. Earlier in the season, Glyndebourne brings in the cast and crew of its controversial production of *Der Rosenkavalier* for a semi-staged concert performance.

Alongside big names such as the Berlin Philharmonic, the Cleveland Orchestra and the Budapest Festival Orchestra, a number of ensembles are making their first visits to the Proms, among them orchestras from Turkey, Iceland, China, South Korea, Lapland, Australia and Qatar.

The Qatar Philharmonic has existed for only seven years, and its music director is Han-Na Chang, the former cello prodigy and protégé of Mstislav Rostropovich, who has reinvented herself as a force to be reckoned with on the podium. The orchestra, Chang says, includes musicians of 30 different nationalities, and their Prom will include a work by the Iranian-born composer Behzad Ranjbaran. "The

musicians are incredibly excited – it's such a privilege for us to be making our Proms debut," Chang says.

She is one of four women conductors at this year's Proms, along with Sian Edwards, Rebecca Miller and the returning Alsop – which is not a lot, but a gentle shift in the right direction. Women are relatively well represented among this year's composers, notably with a Proms debut for Roxanna Panufnik, a new BBC commission by Judith Weir, London premieres for Sally Beamish and Helen Grime and works by Unsuk Chin and Dobrinka Tabakova. Not least, a late-night Prom is devoted to an appearance by the singer-songwriter Laura Mvula, who has crossed all boundaries with apparent ease.

Commemoration rather than celebration is the order of the day where

**"We don't know what the licence fee will be from 2016. You can't know the future of the Proms after that"**

the music of the First World War is concerned. The tragedy of war has inspired numerous musical masterpieces, and the Proms, besides scheduling some of the most famous, such as Britten's *War Requiem*, is also airing rare gems such as the *Elegy for Stravinsky in Memoriam Rupert Brooke* by the Australian composer F.S. Kelly, who died at the Battle of the Somme, and songs by the much-loved poet and composer Ivor Gurney. One Prom is themed around Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse*, with a visit from the National Theatre's Handspring Puppets.

British music has long been an enthusiasm of Wright's and beyond the works associated with the First World War there is plenty of it to enjoy, including the Violin Concerto by EJ Moeran, a surprise recent hit

in the classical charts. The range of UK composers extends from Elgar and Walton to the gritty modernism of Sir Harrison Birtwistle and Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, who both turn 80 this year.

It has not escaped the notice of the Twitterverse, though, that what the BBC Proms seems to celebrate above all this year is, well, the BBC. Quite a few events draw upon the broadcaster's wider brand, including a Sports Prom and a CBeebies Prom for the under-fives. Traditionalists have predictably been snorting about such things – not to mention the occasional presence of pop musicians in the country's premier classical festival.

But Wright sees the trend as "hugely positive" in terms of reaching new audiences. "After all," he points out, "it's the BBC licence-fee payer

who pays for the Proms. The range of the audience becomes greater and greater the more we can play to different audiences. The Sports Prom is a great example: for a Prom to be live on Radio 5 Live for the first time is a really big deal, as is the late-night 'Battle of the Bands', looking back to the Swing era of the 1930s and 40s, which is on Radio 2. It's always been the agenda to reach new audiences for classical music. That's absolutely what the Proms do."

For the moment, it's time to put any anxiety about the future aside and get ready to enjoy the music. All you need are open ears, an open mind and comfortable shoes.

**BBC Proms, Royal Albert Hall, London SW7 (0845 401 5040) 18 July to 13 September**

## Proms 2014 Five to see

**Prom 1, 18 July 7.30pm**  
**Elgar, *The Kingdom***

This Unesco Concert for Peace includes a Proms debut for British composer Roxanna Panufnik, music from Strauss's *Die Frau ohne Schatten* and Mahler's *Symphony No. 6*.

**Prom 8, 23 July 10.15pm**  
**Pet Shop Boys**

Featuring the world premiere of *A Man for the Future*, a tribute to Alan Turing by Neil Tennant and Chris Lowe (right).



should build on the success of previous Proms musicals.

**Prom 46, 20 August 7.30pm**  
**West-Eastern Divan Orchestra**

**Prom 21, 2 August 7.30pm**  
**Cole Porter's *Kiss Me Kate***

The fizz of this classic musical

Mozart and Ravel, they perform the



UK premieres of works by Kareem Roustom and Ayal Adler.

**Prom 66, 6 September 7pm**  
**Bach, *St Matthew's Passion***

A performance by the Berliner Philharmoniker and Berlin Radio Choir, under Simon Rattle, with an all-star cast of soloists including Mark Padmore in the part of the Evangelist and Christian Gerhaher as Christ.