



BBC Proms

Nicholas Kenyon, Director, BBC Proms; Chairman, EBU Radio Committee

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Great music for everyone.

Over a century ago, an adventurous music impresario, Robert Newman, and a talented young conductor, Henry Wood, met in an Italian restaurant in central London, and decided to launch a series of popular classical music 'Promenade Concerts'. They could not possibly have imagined that 108 years later their concert series would be a jewel in the crown of European public broadcasting and the envy of the musical world.

The Proms are so called because from the beginning those members of the audience who paid least had the best places standing in the 'promenade' area on the floor of the hall: their enthusiasm has always been the focus of the occasion. The aim of the first Promenade Concerts was to attract audiences to classical music, to educate and entertain them with the widest mixture of great classics and what Henry Wood called his 'novelties', the new works he promoted. The concerts began at the Queen's Hall, in London's Regent Street, which from the 1930s was just next door to the BBC's new home at Broadcasting House. After the Hall was bombed in 1941, the Proms moved to the Royal Albert

Hall in South Kensington where the concerts have happened every summer since. There the same arrangement of standing in the arena (as well as in the top gallery) has continued, and standing places still cost only £4 today. Queuing is a popular pastime, especially when the summer weather is good, and many friendships and even some marriages are made in the Proms queues.

It was when Robert Newman's Proms were in financial difficulties in 1926 that the BBC became involved. The new broadcasting organization's aim to popularize great music through the radio fitted well with the aims of the Proms, so from 1927 the BBC became the organizer and promoter of the Proms, with incalculable results for the development of musical culture in Britain. Henry Wood was positive and visionary about the BBC's involvement: he declared that with the advent of broadcasting his aim of bringing great music to all could now be realized.

Others were far less hopeful, believing that the broadcasting of concerts would kill live attendance



and ruin musical life. The opposite turned out to be the case: as well as being a broadcaster the BBC turned out to be a patron and a catalyst for the best of music. It founded its own BBC Symphony Orchestra in 1930 (on full-time contracts, then unheard of in Britain) which Henry Wood conducted at the Proms, and employed programme planners who brought important new music and world-famous soloists to the concerts. When Wood died in 1944, the BBC took over the sole responsibility for the Proms and has since developed them into the leading international festival of orchestral music.

These developments owed a great deal to successive BBC Proms planners (who were usually Controllers of Music for the BBC) who pushed forward the agenda of the Proms. It was William Glock in the 1960s who introduced the best of new European music to the season, with adventures from Messiaen and Berio to Boulez and Stockhausen, making the Proms a beacon for all that was most lively in the music culture of the time. He also supported the revival of early music, brought opera to the Proms with performances from Glyndebourne and Covent Garden, and for the first time gave prominence to the commissioning of new pieces for the season, nurturing a whole generation of composers like Harrison Birtwistle and Peter Maxwell Davies, now internationally renowned.

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Under Glock's successors, Robert Ponsonby and John Drummond, the scope of the Proms broadened hugely in recent decades, with a growing internationalism in performers and programmes. From being a purely British festival with at first only one orchestra involved, and then a small number of UK orchestras, it grew to invite orchestras from around the world, frequently including the leading broadcasting orchestras from European countries alongside great ensembles from Berlin or Vienna, Chicago or Boston.

My own aim has been to develop new formats like special days and weekends, enliven the programming with annual themes, explore more neglected works, and above all to make the Proms ever more universally accessible and available. We now mount the Proms in the Park on the last weekend of the season, drawing crowds of 40,000 people in Hyde Park to live music and a relay of the Last Night from the Albert Hall, and then many families the next afternoon for the Children's Prom in the Park. Now

these Proms in the Park are mounted around the country, and this year will for the first time be in all the UK nations: Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland on a single evening, all reflected in the television broadcast. Over 70 concerts are now promoted in the season between mid-July and mid-September, with regular weekly chamber music concerts, pre-Prom talks, education projects and a major annual Proms Lecture.

At first broadcast on radio on various different BBC networks, the Proms are now completely associated with BBC Radio 3, our principal partner which broadcasts every concert live. The concerts are increasingly broadcast on television, and the famous Last Night of the Proms has become one of the most famous occasions in the musical world through its worldwide television broadcasts. In the last couple of years, digital television has increased that coverage considerably, with interactive elements which enable the audience to contribute views and opinions – and this year for the first time to choose part of a Proms programme. On the Internet all the concerts are webcast, and another new initiative is the availability of audio-on-demand recordings during the season on the Proms website.

In making the Proms as widely available as possible to listeners, the BBC's collaboration with the EBU has been vital, and the many concerts have been offered live or recorded through the invaluable summer festival programme of the EBU's music exchange. When the events of September 11 caused the 2001 Last Night of the Proms to be changed, it was possible at short notice to arrange for over 200 radio stations in the United States to receive the broadcast, a remarkable achievement.

In 2003 the BBC Proms, as they are now universally known, offer a





typically varied and challenging programme with anniversary celebrations that include complete concert performances of Berlioz's *The Trojans* and Prokofiev's *War and Peace*. Greek myths provide a thread running through the programmes, with operas such as Tippett's *King Priam*, Strauss's *Elektra* and Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* heard alongside many other concert pieces on Greek themes. The world's greatest conductors come regularly to the Proms, so alongside the BBC's own ensembles, led by the BBC Symphony Orchestra under its chief conductor Leonard Slatkin, we welcome this year the Berliner Philharmoniker in its first Proms appearance under Simon Rattle, the Vienna Philharmonic collaborating with the unique American composer/conductor/singer Bobby McFerrin, and a galaxy of other talent including Mariss Jansons, Valery Gergiev, Zubin Mehta and Christoph Eschenbach.

At a time when classical music has many economic challenges to its operation, especially in the recording business, the importance of a public service organization such as the BBC running the Proms is clear. The financial support from the BBC helps to keep ticket prices reasonable, so the concerts are available to the public who want to attend, and the BBC's continuing commitment to the season means that advanced artistic planning is possible without the many uncertainties caused by sponsorship or fundraising. This is a privilege in the 21st century and a demonstration of the most enlightened activity of public service broadcasting – that of nurturing and developing culture. In return, the BBC receives wide recognition for its role in the concerts, and a nightly vote of confidence from a live audience: an excellent bargain.

So a typical day at the Proms for a visitor to London this year might

include lunchtime chamber music at the Victoria and Albert Museum, a stroll up the road to join the Prommers queue, a pre-Prom talk at the Hall on an interesting element of this evening's programme, and then the unique atmosphere of a concert with a premiere, a rarity and a masterwork, in the marvellous circular setting of the Albert Hall which envelops its audience and draws them together with the orchestra in a uniquely involving and emotional experience. On some days there will also be a late-night concert of contemporary music, early music, or smaller-scale events. This year we have a four-hour world music marathon which will end at 2 a.m., yet another new frontier for our audience.

The response of the Proms audience is remarkable for its concentrated attention and unbuttoned enthusiasm; it is little wonder that musicians compete to return to the Proms, where they receive such a high quality of listening. The text that is traditionally sung to Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1* on the Last Night includes the words 'wider still and wider': they may no longer apply to the British Empire, but they do apply to the Proms as we strive to offer the very best in music-making to a worldwide audience. Join us!

Details of this year's BBC Proms including online booking: www.bbc.co.uk/proms



PROMS

18 JULY - 13 SEPTEMBER 2003



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