

BBC PROMS 2011

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Another disappointing season in some respects but with some super highlights. Obviously, I did not listen to all the Proms.

I also hope that the BBC will take note of this essay, which has taken a lot of time and dedication, and will put right their gaffes, including getting rid of Charles Hazlewood!

There is room for the BBC to make improvements and they really must do so!

We began on 15 July with Jiri Belohavek and the BBC SO. The opening item was Judith Weir's 'fanfare' Stars, Night, Music and Light for chorus and orchestra with a few lines by George Herbert which were repeated... but it was not a fanfare.

The real joy came with Brahms's Academic Festival Overture ending with the chorus praising colleges. It was good to hear this and the choir sang without music or words. This was very uplifting.

Benjamin Grosvenor, just 19, was the soloist in the Piano Concerto no 2 by Liszt. He was without nerves and technically secure but there was no maturity in his performance. He did not bring out what the composer wrote. It was technically sound, but rather cold and clinical. When you compare him with Yuja Wang and Khatia Buniatishvili, he is not in their class.

Janacek's Glagolitic Mass is a tough work. The choral parts do not seem to belong and the most successful movements are the last two, a splendid organ solo and an orchestral postlude. When Belohavek was asked why do you like this piece? he replied, "Because it is Janacek!"

The announcer, Katie Durham, referred to Brahms and Liszt and said, "I promise you that that is the only time I will make that joke!"

What joke? What is she talking about?

The BBC must do something about the stupid remarks made by announcers and guests.

The other main matter which the BBC must address is that television sound is inferior to Radio 3. All that I know agree with me.

The organist David Goode was excellent and the soloists were fine: Hibla Germava, Dagmar Peckova, Stephan Vinke (especially good) and Jan Martinik.

I did not hear the second night of Rossini's opera William Tell or Stephen Farr's organ recital.

I did sit through Havergal Brian's Symphony no. 1 known as the Gothic. This was 110 minutes of sheer boredom. There was nothing memorable in the work, nothing to hold on to. It was incoherent and melodic nullity. It was a long awaited performance and created some hype, but the quality of the music did not merit a performance.

The sixth Prom reminded us of a recurring BBC problem and that is with the sound. The Capucon brothers played the glorious Concerto for violin, cello and orchestra by Brahms.

And, as shown on the television broadcast, we had a microphone 'up the cellist's nose' and no microphone adjacent to the violin so, what we had, in effect, was a cello concerto. The conductor,

Myung-Whun Chung, gave good performances of Weber's Oberon overture and Stravinsky's Rite of Spring.

Prom 9 introduced the Halle Orchestra under Mark Elder, an orchestra vastly improved following the years of decline under Barbirolli. The Sibelius, Historic Scenes Suite 2, and the impressive Symphony no 7 came off very well but Andras Schiff did not have the measure of Bartok's Piano Concerto no 3. It lacked the Bartok style and did not hang together. The overall structure was missing.

There is another interesting factor for us all to consider. Of the seven main British orchestras, only three of the principal conductors are British namely Mark Elder at the Halle, Donald Runnicles at the BBC Scottish SO and Keith Lockhart at the BBC Concert Orchestra. The Royal Philharmonic has Charles Dutoit, the London SO has Valery Gergiev, the London PO has Vladimir Jurowski, the National Orchestra of Wales has Thomas Sondergard, the BBC Philharmonic is about to say goodbye to Gianandrea Noseda.

If we go back to the days when Glock was in charge of the Proms and, in fact, the saviour of the Proms ([see separate article on this site](#)), we had British conductors with people like Norman Del Mar and John Pritchard who gave performances of unusual British music, not just the usual fare.

The next concert was very poor. Juanjo Mena conducted a Spanish programme with the BBC Philharmonic. There were two movements from Debussy's Images which pieces only set an atmosphere and have no real thematic material. Ravel's Rhapsodie Espagnole only starts in the final movement and Alborada del gracioso is another damp squib. And why is it that such a good pianist as Steven Osborne is wasting his time on Falla's Nights in the Gardens in the Gardens of Spain a work of inactivity and a non-event.

There is one really justifiable complaint we are watching a pianist and looking forward to see how he is going to play a difficult passage and when it comes the cameras are on the audience, the conductor, someone in the orchestra or the roof and we do not see the pianist's hands.

Prom 11 gave us music from the BBC programme the Hidden Planet. Why? This is supposed to be a festival of real and worthy music and the conductor was the trendy and grossly irritating Charles Hazlewood.

Sir Roger Norrington, now 77, is a very fine conductor and made his farewell appearance with the Stuttgart Radio SO with another long-winded and tedious work, the Symphony no. 9 by Mahler. If that was not enough, he introduced an encore by a 'great English composer'... some bloke called Elgar and they played his Elegy for strings.

Concerts are spoilt by such personal comments. All we need is the work introduced without comments, appraisals or the verdicts of guests.

Some good was redeemed with Prom 15 when Vladimir Jurowski conducted the London SO in Kodaly's Dances of Galanta with an excellent solo clarinetist and a super finale and, at last, a pianist who understands Bartok. Jean-Efflam Bavouzet was truly superb in the Piano Concerto no 1 surrounded by the percussion, but the Faust Symphony of Liszt was the third big work that was a bore. Three bores in the first 15 concerts!

Prom 18 was a joy. The BBC National Orchestra of Wales under Thierry Fisher gave us a terrific performance of Beethoven's darling Symphony no. 1 with the timpanists using the right sticks. The brilliant flautist, Emmanuel Pahud, gave us Marc-Andre Dalbavie's super Flute Concerto full of life and colour and the welcome Flute Concerto of Elliot Carter. The concert ended with another masterpiece by Beethoven, his Symphony no. 7 in A. It deserved the bravos and proved again that Beethoven is 'the greatest of us all'.

Prom 19 included one of our greatest singers, Claire Booth in Berg's *Der Wein*. What a marvellous piece this is which only highlights that no British composer has written any quality work for soprano and orchestra in the last 200 years which can compare with this Berg work. There are very many more famous singers who would never be able to sing this challenging work. She is building an international reputation which is justly deserved.

One recalls the disappointing 2009 Prom season where the only really magnificent performance was Brahms's *Alto Rhapsody* sung sublimely by Alice Coote.

Oliver Knussen, being a first class musician, excelled in this work by Berg and in Bridge's *There is a willow grows aslant a brook* and Niccolò Castiglioni's magical *Inverno-in-ver* of 1972 which captures winter with its snow and ice so much better than Vivaldi could. A truly remarkable piece which some ignoramuses will dismiss as modern and therefore rubbish but it was very attractive.

We cannot understand why the BBC has to put on trendy concerts. For two years, we had annoying *Dr Who* concerts and yet this 'greatest musical festival in the world' is supposedly to be devoted to good music and not given over to trash since that is what *Dr Who* is. This year we had *Horrible Histories* (Prom 20) which was funny but demeaning to music and musicians.

Prom 21 had that idiot Charles Hazlewood introducing it on Radio 3. Well, it sounded like him. This is the nerd who said that your trousers must flap in Richard Strauss's *Festival Prelude* Op 61, that Rachmaninoff's *Fourth Piano Concerto* was merely jamming; that you could only understand and appreciate Bach if you understood rock 'n' roll and that Handel was a great composer because he had balls.

In introducing the Walton *Violin Concerto*, he said that it was clearly influenced by Elgar and was second to the Elgar. Here we go again! Let us worship at the shrine of Elgar!

Walton's concerto is vastly superior and miles ahead of the Elgar and shows no influence of the older narcissistic composer. Elgar could not write an allegro. Walton could. The Walton has memorable themes and his concerto is technically stunning. Elgar's concerto is a self-indulgent drag. Will someone please shut Hazlewood's mouth? Can those employed by the BBC who introduce the works keep their opinions to themselves? No normal person should care what others think. Let us make up our own minds.

Do these announcers and guests get paid for talking rubbish?

And later in the season, we had a great violin concerto by Shostakovich.

One conductor who impressed was Andris Nelsons, who really enjoyed himself and it showed. This was an encouragement both to the orchestra and audience alike. Richard Strauss's *Don Juan* was very fine and Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky* was the highlight of the season so far. Midori, playing the Walton, was hindered by poor sound which was another sound engineer's fault.

Charles Hazlewood conducted the BBC Concert Orchestra in a programme named after a BBC programme *The Human Planet*. The composer of the music to this series is not well-known but this concert had singers and instrumentalists from various parts of the world singing songs from their part of the world thus endorsing the BBC's interest in world music. But this was not classical music or music of any greatness.

Will we have an Eastenders concert next year?

This Prom's season was disappointing in many other ways. There is the continuous ignoring of British composers such as Denis ApIvor, Richard Arnell, David Dorward, Peter Racine Fricker,

Iain Hamilton, Edmund Rubbra, Humphrey Searle and William Wordsworth to name but a few. I have in writing from conductors and orchestras that they would like to perform works by these composers and at the Proms!

And where was Vaughan Williams?

Bring back William Glock! Or someone like him!

But, on the positive side, we were spared the awful diarrhoea-producing Cello Concerto by Elgar and his dreadful symphonies. I am quoting Holst and Malcolm Arnold. We had a lot of music by the serial pederast Benjamin Britten including his Piano Concerto of which someone rightly said that the best part of this work was written by Prokofiev. And, as John Veale wrote, it has a lot of Constant Lambert in it!

Now we must be fair to the BBC. They cannot include every composer and, however their complete programme turns out to be, they will not please everybody. Some composers will have to be left out. One remembers the composer Robert Simpson complaining that in the Ponsonby years at Radio3 some composers were black listed. The BBC refuted this and so Bob Simpson said that the BBC had a white list. Others made the statement, with some evidence, that the BBC promoted composers who were gay and/or Roman Catholic.

That is all well and good but the BBC saturate us with Mahler and Elgar (15 pieces in one year and it was not an anniversary year). The BBC are, in effect, telling us what is worth hearing in their continuing policy of dumbing down.

We had five symphonies by Mahler numbers 1, 2, 5,6 and 9 and Das Klagende Lied. This is not an objection to Mahler's music but this constitutes probably over nine hours of music and yet there was not one note of Haydn. If we had nine hours of any composer this would be unfair.

If, in one season, we had nine hours of Stockhausen there would be a hue and cry.

I am not a fan of Gustavo Dudamel or his Simon Bolivar Orchestra. But when I heard that they were to appear, I knew that there would be a television broadcast.

Their Prom debut in 2007 was said to be electrifying and the greatest Prom ever. They performed Shostakovich's Symphony no 10 and then donned colourful jackets and played some music by Ginestera, Moncayo and Marquez in which they stood up, sat down, shouted and twirled their instruments as if they were majorettes. They promenaded around the platform and waved their instruments in the air. Many thought this to be great fun while others thought it was wild, undisciplined and not faithful to the music.

Geoffrey Norris in the Telegraph on 10 August 2007 expressed his real concern for this conductor and his orchestra.

I accept that Dudamel is an enthusiastic musician and has really done well with young musicians in Venezuela and made that country cultural. But where I have problems is that he and his orchestra do not adhere to the score and are often quite wild. Often his orchestras sounds like a big band with off-beat percussion and one expects Gene Kelly or Frank Sinatra to appear at any moment. In this, Dudamel cheapens music and one longs to hear music played as written without any trendy misdemeanours.

Apparently, Simon Rattle has commended this orchestra and its conductor, but he often performs his own versions of music departing from the score.

A half hour or so into Dudamel's performance of Mahler's Symphony no 2, the orchestra tuned up and received applause but this may have been because the soloists came on to the platform.

The choir sat through about 80 minutes before they entered with their singing, still seated.

The soprano had to wait a little longer for her entry. Eventually, the choir stood up for the last few minutes and I have to say that the National Youth Choir of Great Britain were excellent.

Mahler's symphonies are good in parts but inconsistent as a whole. He writes very fine 'serious' stuff and then has lighter movements something like the inconsequential Landler of Schubert, music that belongs elsewhere.

The orchestra were often superb and very exciting but the music is episodic. It has been said that the last five minutes of the work is its redeeming feature.

To watch him conduct is very off putting. He appears wild and undisciplined. People will say that he is enthusiastic and enjoying himself and that I am a grumpy old man.

But am I wrong to expect the music to be played as the composer wrote it?

Stephen Crowe's review of this work was absolutely right. It was not a great performance. Dudamel's Mahler was not moving. There were numerous gaffes, wrong notes, sloppy entries particularly from the brass; the introduction of the soprano and mezzo at the end of the first movement amid applause broke up the momentum and decapitated the symphony. The character of the piece was spoiled by being too bold and too pompous.

All I can say is that if this was the first time I heard this Symphony, I would never want to hear it again. Listen to it in the hands of great conductors like Kubelik and Maazel and you will readily see how awful Dudamel's performance was!

Andris Nelsons is enthusiastic and enjoys himself but he plays what is written and does not take liberties.

Prom 24 was really Elgar night. It started with an unaccompanied Part song There is sweet music to words by Tennyson which the announcer relished telling us it was difficult because it was in two keys. Elgar was not the first to be polytonal. Then followed the Elgar Violin Concerto inspired by Windflower, a married woman that Elgar had the 'hots' for. I wonder if he ever inspected her to ensure she was wearing navy blue knickers to satisfy his fetish!

It was said to be an enigmatic and emotional work. It had its pompous beginning but it was not an allegro although so marked. Elgar could not write allegros. It has one of those feeble rising melodic fragments like someone wanting to be sick. I am sorry I brought that up. There were the ghastly sforzando outbursts and the work was nothing but ghastly self-indulgent wallow. The slow movement or, I should say the next slow movement, has a chunk of the famous Max Bruch Violin Concerto in it, and meanders endlessly not knowing where to go or when to stop. The finale has a few allegro ideas but the last 15 minutes is really awful. The music is so negative and depressing. It is inconsistent. There is another hint at Bruch and the pompous opening idea of the first movement returns. The announcer told us that when Fritz Kreisler gave the first performance he looked nervous.

Where do the BBC get these lies from? Kreisler was apprehensive because he disliked the work intensely and wanted it severely cut. At 47 minutes long, it is 46 and an half minutes too long! I have to say that Tasmin Little's playing was excellent.

When it was first mooted that this concerto was going to feature in the Proms I said, "I bet it will be

televised!'. Of course, I was proved right. The BBC are both Elgar worshippers and his High Priests!

There are so many problems with Elgar. The first movement of this concerto is marked allegro, crotchet equals 100 with about 365 bars in 4 time. That tempo is not allegro and we have many largamente. If the movement was an allegro it would last about eleven minutes and twelve seconds instead of eighteen minutes plus. The usual starting point for allegro is crotchet equals 120 to 130. The slow movement is marked Andante, crotchet equals 52 but that is not an andante but a largo whose tempos range from crotchet equals 50 to 60.

After this first half we had some music with quality entertainment from Percy Grainger and Richard Strauss's Till Eulenspiegel.

This raises a problem for the BBC as to its programmes. There would be many who would love the Grainger and Richard Strauss items but would not want the Elgar.

For the following afternoon, sanity was restored with a repeat of Prom 22 with Gianandrea Noseda and the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra and the Mravinsky choir and soloists giving us some real music culminating in Rachmaninov's Choral Symphony The Bells, clearly his masterpiece.

When you hear first class music like this, why do we bother with the awful stuff of the night before?

A French evening with the BBC Scottish SO under Donald Runnicles with Lynn Harrell performing the Cello Concert Tout un monde lointain by Henri Dutilleux was a highlight of the season. Harrell rightly said that this was the greatest cello concerto since Dvorak's B minor. In other words, he said that these two concertos were the only two great cello concertos. He explained how very well it was written for the instrument and then proved it in a profoundly moving performance. However, Lynn Harrell did say that he had to and was expected to play other cello concertos. He played as an encore the bourees from Bach's Suite no 3... masterly! Runnicles is a good conductor and not a show off like Rattle or Dudamel.

The problem of television guests reared its ugly head. Gillian Moore said that the Dutilleux was good but had its weaknesses and she had a good moan. Julian Johnson was pressed to comment on Ravel's Bolero and he admitted that he did not like it. At its premiere, some woman shouted out 'Rubbish' and Ravel agreed. It is an awful piece, repetitious and it gets on your nerves. Daphnis and Chloe is a super ballet score but I felt the choir were a little distant at times.

Another stupid remark was made that Debussy and Ravel were great friends. Where do the BBC get such false information? Debussy hated Ravel. He also hated Cesar Franck.

Prom 27 introduced us to the Concerto for orchestra no 5 by Robin Holloway apparently inspired by colours. It was not outstanding and the following work, the glorious Four Last Songs of Richard Strauss was given a disappointing performance.

The first half of Prom 30 was an absolute disgrace. The National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain was conducted by Jurowski and included the Concerto for turntables and orchestra by Prokofiev's grandson Gabriel. The turntables were 'played' by some DJ and it was utter trash having no coherence or worth. We cannot understand why the BBC are trying to marry such junk with real music and have to ask how low can the BBC get. We had funny noises, grunts and groans This 'music', if that is what it was, was both indisputably appalling and illogical and has succeeded in bringing the Proms into serious disrepute.

And it did not get any better for then we had Britten's Piano Concerto. Although it was brilliantly played by Benjamin Grosvenor, it really is an awful work. It was neither original nor is it worthy. It

was incoherent, episodic and illogical. It was not durable since many expressed their resolve that they never wanted to hear it again and that one hearing of it was one too many.

It was full of obvious plagiarisms and, as it has been often said, the best parts were written by Prokofiev. It was all splash and no wash in the first movement. The ghastly second movement was a type of waltz and a cheap one at that reminiscent of the melodic nullity of Debussy and the third movement, an Impromptu was even worse. The opening to the finale, a march is shockingly bad music. The rest of the movement was incoherent, episodic stuff. It was all over the place and disjointed.

The late night Prom was of Nigel Kennedy playing Bach. No, thank you.

Kennedy is one of those musicians who is so odd and strange that all his performances are always both unexpected and at variance with the score. One will never forget the time coming on to the stage to play (was it the Beethoven or the Brahms concerto?). He had a long dark thick overcoat on and was dressed as Dracula and already sweating profusely under the lights.

I want to hear Bach played both properly and well and, to this end, I have recordings by Ruggiero Ricci and Hilary Hahn.

Kennedy has a persona which is described as abrasive. His speech and diction is appalling. In 1991, John Drummond of the BBC called him a Liberace for the Nineties and that his clothing was ludicrous and he had a grotesque self-invented accent. Kennedy has admitted smoking cannabis to improve his playing. He seems to be anti-Semitic condemning the actions of Israelis. I repeat seems to be. I am not saying he is. He wrote a cadenza in the style of Jimi Hendrix for the Beethoven Violin Concerto! He has said that playing jazz is preferable to serious music!

Monday the 8th August had an excellent Prom, number 33. Why aren't all Proms like this?

The Royal Stockholm PO played under Sakari Oramo. They began with Sibelius's greatest work, a symphony that is as perfect as any symphony could be, the Symphony no 6 in D minor. One reviewer said that it is the work of greatest coherence.

The we encountered the 23 year old pianist Alice Sara Ott known to some of us for while now, and she played the Grieg concerto. It was certainly not a spotless performance and sometimes wayward (her tempi were strange at times and her fast speed occasioned the wrong notes), but it had a vitality and freshness and the applause she received was greater and far more than Dudamel's Mahler or any other concert so far. She played Liszt's La Campanella as an encore with its irritating top notes like breaking glass. She has style and personality but needs to make her playing more mature. However, she is already a star at 23! And yes, she does play in bare feet!

At lunchtime on this same day at Cadogan Hall, we had Chamber Prom 4 with the outstanding pianist Khatia Buniatishvilli. Her Liszt Piano Sonata was simply brilliant but all over the place. Her enthusiasm and technical genius creates problems of tempi and control. Mastery must not be at the expense of accuracy. It was her performance of Prokofiev's Sonata no 7 that was nothing short of sensational. The applause was electrifying and well deserved. I can think of many famous pianists would be praised to the heights who would not be able to play this masterpiece and, even if they could, they would not compete with Khatia. Absolutely phenomenal.

If you want to buy a CD of the Liszt Sonata then Peter Katin is best followed by Nino Gvetadze and Yuja Wang.

Performances of this superlative quality are rare and they show that pianists we have loved and admired as famous names for so long may not be as good as people think!

Still suffering from the trauma of the Elgar Violin Concerto the afternoon of 11 August repeated the Prom in which a real violin concerto was played. This concerto was the Brahms in an endearing performance by Christian Tetzlaff. What an incredible tone. I could not continue with the concert of the Mahler song cycle as that would be both an anti-climax and a disappointment, although we did have a Bach encore from this superb violinist

Why have second best when you can the best?

We had a concert by the Spaghetti Western Orchestra or should I say Quintet! Obviously, I did not bother! It used cereal packets and asthma inhalers!

Nor did I bother with Steve Reich and his Clapping Music etc.

Prom 34 showed us what a far better composer Frank Bridge was than his overrated pupil Benjamin Britten. We had Bridge's Enter Spring and Ben Johnson was the tenor soloist in Blow out ye bugles. This was followed by Centaureomachy, a concerto for clarinet, flugelhorn and orchestra by Simon Holt who is the composer in residence with the National Orchestra of Wales. It was predominantly slow and sometimes static but the fourth of the five movements depicting the battle was inspiring.

I do not know what happened to Prom 35 of Liszt, Gliere and Rachmaninov's Symphony no 2. On Radio 3 iplayer we did not have the first half! However, it was broadcast as a repeat and we could enjoy Irish born soprano Ailish Tynan in Gliere's Concerto for colouratura and orchestra — a splendid piece and what a top F at the end! There is no work like this!

IT WAS THE PERFORMANCE OF THE SEASON, WITHOUT A DOUBT.

I could not restrain my bravos, applause and tears of real joy.

Then the announcer, Louise Fryer, told us that Rachmaninov's First Symphony was a failure at the premiere because the conductor Glazunov was drunk. Is that really true or is it that the orchestra had little time to rehearse it?

Prom 40 was a Comedy Prom for Saturday 13 August with an array of nobodys, by which I mean people we do not know, Tim Minchin, Sue Perkins, Kit and the Window, Beardyman, the Boy with tape on his face, Doc Brown and the Mungrels. Who? Who are these people? The pianist Danny Driver, soprano Susan Bullock and conductor Andrew Litton took part but who are these other people? To make fun of good music is totally unacceptable and shows the low levels to which the BBC have sunk. It also included adult humour... bad language, in other words.

Earlier that week we had Brahms Violin Concerto arranged by the pianist Dejan Laziv as Brahms's Piano Concerto no 3---oh dear, it is not his Piano Concerto no 3 and the announcer said that after the interval we are wondering what the conductor Vassily Sinaisky is going to make of Elgar's Enigma Variations, as if we cared. We were more interested in what socks the conductor was wearing!

We had an evening of film music with the BBC concert Orchestra under Keith Lockhart introduced by the infuriating Charles Hazlewood. Will someone please shoot him? Chloe Hanslip played both the violin and her facial muscles in a piece by Ennio Morricone and a brilliant reciter, not named in the Radio Times, added to Walton's Suite Henry V. I believe it was one Rory Kinnear.

Some of the music was simply awful and yet this is supposed to be a festival of the best in classical music.

On Sunday August 14, we had Britten night. Mark Wigglesworth stood in for Jiri Belohavek who was unwell. The Cantata Misericordium Op 69 is another sterile work by Britten and this was followed

by the Sinfonia da Requiem of 1940 which had been commissioned by the Japanese to commemorate the 2600th anniversary of the founding of the Japanese Empire. Britten, who was the most loathsome man I have ever met, insulted the Japanese with the titles of the three movements which refer to the Roman Catholic liturgy, the Mass for the Dead. Years later, he was to compose his War Requiem which is not a requiem at all and ends with a nauseating homosexual love duet.

Another great performance was given by the violinist, Lisa Batiashvili, in Shostakovich's Violin Concerto no 1. What a performance, truly amazing in the hands of a remarkable and wonderful violinist.

When you hear this concerto, which is superlative and absolutely brilliant, how can anyone classify the Elgar Concerto on the same level? There is no comparison.

This concert also had the benefit of a very fine conductor in Esa-Pekka Salonen.

Prom 45 had the premiere of Thomas Larchner's Concerto for violin, cello and orchestra played by the husband and wife team of Victoria Mullova and Matthew Barley. It also had a concertino group made up of prepared piano, played by the composer, an electric zither, an accordion and percussion. The BBC Scottish SO under Ivan Volkov copied well with this extraordinary piece set in two movements. It had its own sound world but two movements of predominantly slow music calls for mental stamina for the listener.

I could not fathom what the composer was aiming at and it is such a pity that Mullova has taken her talent into less worthy music.

After the interval Volkov conducted a fine performance of Bruckner's Symphony no 5 in B flat which reminded us of how greater a composer Bruckner is than Mahler.

The next Prom I followed was of the Chamber Orchestra of Europe conducted by Bernard Haitink, a conductor I have never taken to but I must admit I was impressed. His conducting was so clear and without histrionics. I am not convinced that Brahms' Third Symphony works with a small ensemble although this is how Brahms heard it. The performance was gentle and delicate, perhaps a little too much so and in the Piano Concerto no 1 this was also the case. But what a fine soloist we had in Emmanuel Ax singing along with this gigantic work and listening to the orchestra, having a joke with the leader. Haitink said that Manny was a fine musician and an old friend and one saw why. Benjamin Grosvenor watch this pianist and learn.

The concert was spoiled by that idiot Charles Hazlewood who had to bring up Elgar again. His guest Roberty Saxton, himself a composer, talked sense. And what was impressive is that Haitink said something that I have been saying for years and had abuse as a consequence. Haitink said that there is too much talk about interpretation and what matters is the music not the interpreter. He was obviously cross that Hazlewood had brought up this subject.

When will the BBC learn?

The next Prom had the same forces with Brahms's Piano Concerto no 2 and the Symphony no 4 which was given a good performance. The scherzo was faster than usual and the set of variations well realised. Manny Ax was his usual reliable self. The first horn in this orchestra had a beautiful tone.

And joy!! We did not have Charles Hazlewood!

But we did have Katie Durham. Two fellow professionals complained that in the interval Katie Durham was running amok in Vienna speaking to us as if we were complete ignoramuses. What is the point of this? Part of BBC using dumbing down methods? We are not idiots!

Prom 13 of 24 July was screened on 21 August and was the Verdi Requiem with excellent soloists Marina Poplavskaya, Mariana Pentcheva, Joseph Calleja and Ferruccio Furlanetto, chorus and the BBC SO under Semyon Bychkov. I have not heard such a good performance since Julia Varady sang the soprano part at a Prom years ago.

I always squirm at this work not because of the work itself but because the film of the life of Christ The Greatest Story Ever Told which has music by Alfred Newman. It is not. It is Verdi's Requiem.

When one hears a masterpiece like this one does not want to hear poor works like The Dream of Gerontius.

Prom 51 had Thoma Dausgaard deputising for Belohavek. The Masteringers overture had a curious ending and Liszt's Funeral Ode La Notte was poignant. This was followed by the world premiere of Kevin Volans' Piano Concerto no 3 written for and played by that very fine pianist Barry Douglas OBE.

Volans was born in South Africa in 1940 and has lived in Ireland since the 1980s he is said to belong to the post-minimalist school. As to making a concerto challenging he said, "You can't have a Ferrari and drive it at five miles per hour!". He is an advocate of Liszt the first experimental composer and the father of modern music and in his Third Concerto there is a quote from a lyrical part of Liszt's Second Concerto. There is also an orchestral piano.

The Concerto lasts about 20 minutes and starts in a rugged, strong and masculine style but then it becomes repetitive and somewhat static. It is interesting but unlikely to be durable. In fact, it seems rather pointless. It does improve and the last five minutes or so is admirable.

I have never been a fan of David or Colin Matthews largely because their projects did not interest me. However, I was taken with Colin Matthew's No Man's Land for tenor, baritone and orchestra with a splendid text by Christopher Reid. It was a portrait of the reaction to the First World War and had songs akin to Music Hall songs and a slightly out of tune piano. At times the music was poignant and the words quite exquisite. At 28 minutes, this was a little too long since the work started and proceeded for a while in an exemplary way. Ian Bostridge and Roderick Williams were the excellent soloists and the BBC SO was conducted by Stephen Layton. One did think that the homosexual love duet which ends Britten's War Requiem was not far away, but Matthews' music was superior to the Britten.

Valery Gergiev conducted Prom 52 with a disappointing Prokofiev Symphony no 1. Leonard Kavakos was the soloist in Dutilleux's Violin Concerto L'Arbe des songs and very fine he was. The work is not easy to appreciate.

Prom 55 was both offensive and a disaster. It was a semi-staged production of Handel's Rinaldo with ludicrous ideas. We were taken into the notorious girls' school of St Trinians where Armida was dressed in PVC, stiletto-wearing, whip-brandishing dominatrix. We had schoolboys on bicycles and a football match which made a complete mockery of Handel and his librettist.

Shocking, BBC! Let us have Handel operas as written without this bastardisation!

Prom 57 with the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra under the brilliant David Zinman gave us a stunning performance of Beethoven's Symphony no. 3 in E flat (Eroica). This was electrifying, powerful, faithful to the score (other conductors please note) and played with commitment and attention to detail. I have to say that the Funeral March must be the finest funeral march ever written. The tragedy and power and sheer excitement generated by the players and a first class conductor made this a tremendous musical experience and showed up the inadequate performances of other conductors and orchestras and the appalling evenings of trash!

I have never heard Zinman give a bad performance! His encore was of the final movement of Beethoven's Creatures of Prometheus which uses the same material as the finale of the Eroica!

Although there are super symphonies by Haydn, Mozart and others, this Beethoven symphony must be the first ever truly great symphony!

The next Prom, 58, I attended was of Mendelssohn's oratorio Elijah second only to Handel's Messiah. It is true that Mendelssohn is respected but not admired. He is out of fashion when less worthy composers are in fashion. The performance was on the slow side and, as a result, the trial on Mount Carmel was lacking in drama.

Prom 59 was the Hooray for Hollywood with the Maida Vale Singers and John Wilson orchestra. It was nostalgic and sometimes fun but two of the female singers were abysmal. Caroline O'Connor was an embarrassment and she shouted, bawled screeched and in THERE'S NO BUSINESS LIKE SHOW BUSINESS she could not get her low notes. Clare Teal was almost as bad. Her singing of YOU'LL NEVER KNOW was frankly horrible with unauthorised gaps between words and her Secret Love was ghastly.

Annalese Beechy was acceptable; Sarah Fox was good but the star was Charles Castronovo with his singing of the Serenade from The Student Prince.

When you see a drum kit in the orchestra you know that the music is to suffer. Much of the music was bland and in the same vein of raucous noise and predictability. The conducting was often absurd as if Wilson was playing at Lords and trying repeated square cuts.

But it was fun and enjoyed.

Prom 61 had David Robertson at the helm of the BBC SO and Chorus and the Philharmonia Chorus. I have never heard a bad performance from this conductor and his Beethoven 9 was the best I have heard with excellent soloists in Christine Brewer, Karen Cargill, Toby Spence and Ian Patterson. There was real joy and optimism in this exhilarating performance and, as with my comments on the Eroica, Beethoven must be the greatest of us all.

This concert had Yo Yo Ma premiering Graham Fitkin's Cello Concerto, a very rewarding and masterly work which puts the Elgar to shame and elevates this new work to join the superb Walton Concerto. There is so much to admire in Fitkin's work and we do need a CD recording... we really do!

Prom 62 had the Israel PO under Zubin Mehta which concert was interrupted and abandoned by protests by Palestinians. This was an absolute disgrace.

Jac Van Steen was the excellent conductor for Prom 65 which started with Elgar's noisy and often pompous Cockaigne Overture. A couple of Prommers asked, "Was Elgar on cocaine at the time he wrote this boring piece?". Well, no comment from me. David Goode was the soloist in Michael Berkeley's 20 minute Organ Concerto which was a non event. Then Marc-Andre Hamelin played Rachmaninov's Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini. No one doubts his splendid technique but this performance was eccentric with unusual tempi, note values changed as in the famous 18th variation and pauses on piano notes which are not in the score. Many commented that the playing was cold.

The organist Thierry Escaich gave a very interesting organ recital including two of his improvisations but the real interest was in playing Bach, Reger and Franck.

The older Sir Colin Davis gets, the greater a conductor he has become. His performance of Beethoven's Missa Solemnis was first rate. But it was spoiled by an earlier discussion of the 'flaws' in this work. It was challenging and many famous singers will not sing it; it was impossible to sing and so on.

Next year, if the Proms include any Elgar let me preface any performance with evidence of the many and real failures in his work.

Prom 68 was the first of two concerts by the Pittsburg SO conducted by Manfred Honeck, an orchestra so vastly improved by the great Fritz Reiner. They included some excerpts from Braunfels Fantastic Appearances of a theme of Hector Berlioz about which I will say nothing. Beethoven's Piano Concerto on 4 in G is not my favourite and it was preceded by more useless discussion and the claim that the opening was difficult. It is not. At my ripe age and arthritic fingers I can still play it without any problem.

The BBC must cut out these inane interviews.

Helene Grimaud, who was described as prickly often cancelling concerts if she did not like the orchestra or conductor (more inane remarks), played the concerto well.

The next Prom, 69, included a new violin concerto by Wolfgang Rihm, the finest living German composer. It is subtitled *Gesungene Zeit* (Time Chant). It was written for a small ensemble with a large percussion section used sparingly. The violin part played by Anne-Sophie Mutter for whom it was written is scored mainly in the high stratosphere and lasted about 22 minutes. It was slow and static as is much modern music. It called for perfect intonation which is what we had.

Prom 70 opened with Frank Bridge's Symphonic Poem *Isabella*, a gruesome tale. The BBC SO under the excellent David Robertson coped well with this melodic nullity. Then we had a treat with Christian Tetzlaff playing the Violin Concerto of Harrison Birtwhistle (i.e. *Sir Harry*). One movement predominately at a leisurely pace but with rhythmic interest and some exquisite sounds, very well written for the violin. At 26 minutes it probably was a shade too long for the material but it is one of Birtwhistles' finest works. Thank you, Sir Harry!

I did not listen to the Stan Kenton tribute concert. I thought the Proms was the greatest musical festival of classical music.

The Last Night of the Proms was the usual mixture of interest and rubbish. The new Peter Maxwell Davies piece in honour of the Musicians Benevolent Fund was excruciatingly awful. The Prommers could join in the singing (did I say singing?) – it was chanting on one note... utterly boring and the words donated by Prommers were a mish mash.

Susan Bullock was wonderful in the Immolation scene from Wagner's *Gotterdamerung* but this was severely dented when she sang in the second half two songs by Richard Rodgers.

Then we had Lang Lang described as the Chinese superstar. For goodness sake, BBC refrain from such inane remarks. There were superstars throughout the Proms such as Claire Booth. Lynn Harrell. Lisa Batiashvili, Allish Tynan and Yuja Wang.

Watching Lang Lang is awful. His facial expression, his ballet – dancing hands, his irritating mannerisms and effeminacy and the Liszt Piano Concerto no 1 was not always Liszt. His technique is truly amazing and I hope Benjamin Grosvenor takes note.

Silly Katie Durham introduced this as *The Triangle Concerto*. It is not. BBC, put an end to all this nonsense.

The Percy Grainger setting of a Scottish song was lovely.

Jenny Agutter is always worth watching and was the narrator in Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* with new words by Wendy Cope. Such narration breaks up the music and why didn't the

BBC tell us that at the first rehearsals of this piece Sir Malcolm Sargent had to correct much of the score since Britten was a duffer and writing notes for instruments that were not in their range. Del Mar had to correct some corrections later on.

Lang Lang played a predictable and tedious waltz by Chopin and then we had the usual rubbish.

We were told that the conductor, Edward Gardner at 36 years of age was the youngest conductor at the Proms since Henry Wood. So what? What about the player who was wearing odd socks?

I hope the BBC will take note of all these comments and while we congratulate them on their successes we lament their failures which are clearly set out here.

I interviewed many Prommers and most of them said, "We would like a decade of Proms without any Elgar, Britten or Mahler!".

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