

A Christmas Proms Concert

Here is London impresario Robert Newman in 1894, describing his intention in inaugurating a series of informal Promenade concerts:

I am going to run nightly concerts and train the public by easy stages. Popular at first, gradually raising the standard until I have created a public for classical and modern music.

We don't actually think that the lovely, loyal, discerning public of Lower Hutt needs to be trained, by easy stages or otherwise, in classical and modern music. We do, however, think that it has been a trying few years for many of us and we all deserve a bit of cheerful escapism.

Giuseppe Verdi's ***Nabucco*** kick-started his career as a superstar composer of Italian opera, but not everybody was a fan; one contemporary critic wrote "He must have the heart of a donkey and in my view he is a pitiful, despicable composer ... *Nabucco* is nothing but rage, invective, bloodshed and murder". Nowadays it is best known as the one with the evergreen "Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves" in it. We bring you the Overture.

Nicola Kirkup, of our awesome viola section, was sufficiently encouraged by your generous reception of last year's Christmas carol mash-medley to expand and develop it into ***Journey of the Magi***. As explained in "We Three Kings", the journey is to bring gifts for baby Jesus which correspond to his threefold purpose: gold for Christ the King, frankincense for Christ the God, and myrrh for Christ the Sacrifice. The Magi come across three related scenes, a market-place, a pastoral where angels sing to shepherds, and a funeral, before following the star onwards.

We're heading back to the opera, but now in Act II of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. Naïve young pageboy Cherubino asks older, more sophisticated ladies for advice on what love is about in ***Voi, che sapete***.

John Williams has defined what sharks, space adventure, archaeology, dinosaurs and the Holocaust sound like for entire generations, and with the music for ***Harry Potter*** he added magic to that list.

Act I of Georges Bizet's *Carmen*, and the heroine gives advice on what love is about, in a ***Habanera***. Little Cherubino would probably have been reduced to a puddle of jelly if he had received this answer to his question.

The Great Gate of Kiev is the Finale from Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. This picture was the winning entry into a competition to design a monument for Tsar Alexander II to commemorate the monarch's escape from an assassination attempt, but the gate was never built.

You don't have to have seen ***Pirates of the Caribbean*** to have a pretty good idea as to what it's about. Klaus Badelt's score is appropriately swashbuckling. A piece of eight is about 28g of 90% silver, which would today be worth about \$60. About fifty of those would get you a parrot.

The origins of both text and tune of ***O Come All Ye Faithful*** are lost to time, although one theory has it that it was a coded call to arms for faithful Jacobites (supporters of the political movement to restore the Stuart line) to return with triumphant joy to England (Bethlehem) and venerate the exiled pretender to the English throne Bonnie Prince Charlie.

We know more about ***Hark! The Herald Angels Sing***; the text is by Charles Wesley, the music is by Felix Mendelssohn and the genius who thought to put them together was one William Hayman Cummings, a noted tenor of his day. Watch out - he held strong views on singing and delivered the occasional stern tirade attacking the "pernicious vibrato".

The Proms are named after Sir Henry Wood, although he was not their actual founder. He conducted at them for nearly half a century, bringing hundreds of new works to British audiences. He put together the ***Fantasia on British Sea Songs*** in 1905 for the centenary of the Battle of Trafalgar and it has been a Proms staple ever since. Traditions include weeping during "Tom Bowling", foot stamping and clapping during "Jack's the Lad" (keep up!); solemn humming in "Home, Sweet Home", whistling "See, the Conquering Hero Comes" and singing the refrain of "Rule, Britannia".

William Blake's poem ***Jerusalem*** was written as a preface to his epic *Milton: A Poem in Two Books* and set to music by C. Hubert H. Parry in 1916 for the *Fight for Right* campaign, which sought to shore up public support for the Great War. Parry did this as a favour for a friend but had misgivings about the ultra-nationalist cause, feeling much more comfortable when the song was taken up by the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. It was orchestrated by Edward Elgar for the Leeds Festival in 1922 and this is the version usually used at the Proms. The anthem is also used by several English sports teams and has been recorded by rockers Emerson, Lake and Palmer, Simple Minds and Iron Maiden's Bruce Dickinson, among others.

The first performance of Edward Elgar's first ***Pomp and Circumstance*** march, in Liverpool in 1901, was described as a "frantic success". The second was a few days later at a promenade concert, and as recalled by Henry Wood the audience "...rose and yelled... the one and only time in the history of the Promenade concerts that an orchestral item was accorded a double encore". It has been a Proms fixture ever since.

Thank you, good evening and Merry Christmas one and all! We shall miss you and look forward to your return.

Programme notes by The Jabberer