

MUSIC

Classical review: BBC Proms, Royal Albert Hall

The Philharmonia's Prom was vividly compelling, despite a stylistic surprise

Paul Driver



Setting the tone: Georgian violinist Lisa Batiashvili
STEFAN HOEDERATH

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The first act of Wagner's *Die Walküre* can hardly fail as a concert item, vividly theatrical though it is. A gripping, fabulously original symphonic arc, just over an hour long, with an overwhelming climax near the end, and a foreshortened prelude and coda of equal orchestral dazzlement, it formed the second half of the Philharmonia Orchestra's Prom under Esa-Pekka Salonen. The soloists were superb: the bass Franz-Josef Selig a fearsome Hunding, Anja Kampe soaringly intense as Sieglinde, and Robert Dean Smith a Siegmund of meticulous eloquence.

The programme prefaced it with the searing adagio from Mahler's *Symphony No 10*, and before that was the still novel-seeming atonal abstraction of Webern's *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, Op 10 — a marvel of compression at six minutes' duration, and conjuring up a totally other expressive world.

In fact, Salonen, rather vandalistically, had lessened the uniqueness of Webern's idiom by running its last bar into the Mahler's opening melody. It is true that the latter has a disembodied, modernist quality, and that some real if remote stylistic overlap between

the composers is worth noting, but anyone not already familiar with the works must have been confused, while the architecture of the Webern was obscured.

Startlingly, the same thing happened when the Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Rome, gave a Prom with its music director, Antonio Pappano. The opening item, Haydn's *The Representation of Chaos* from *The Creation*, segued into Leonard Bernstein's *Symphony No 1* (1942), a work preoccupied not with creation but destruction, as its subtitle of "Jeremiah" indicates and its setting of the prophet's lamentations over the fate of Jerusalem makes clear.

The biblical link was significant, perhaps, but the musical one seemed arbitrary. The performances, though, were highly compelling. The orchestra revealed a rare fineness of ensemble, beautifully balanced dynamics, with a palpable impetus from every corner of the platform. Elizabeth DeShong was the mezzo-soprano soloist, and the problematic work came over with a convincingness I hadn't felt before.

The second half was the First Symphony of Mahler, the composer with whom Bernstein the conductor most strongly identified. But the juxtaposition on both occasions left Bernstein the composer somewhat floundering. His essay has a not unimpressive energy, a charge of American rhythm, but Mahler's is one of the most original first symphonies ever. One thinks of Beethoven and Berlioz, Brahms or Elgar; and from the initial pianissimo octaves (that extraordinary tuning into the cosmos) to the hard-achieved, triumphant blaze of the close, one feels in the grip of a master, certainly in this account. The playing was as vigorous as it was polished — though I relished a slight slip in the absurdly high-lying double-bass solo inaugurating the ironic funeral march: Mahler apparently meant the passage to seem unplayable.

The BBC Philharmonic's last of four Proms, and a concert marking Juanjo Mena's last appearance as their conductor, included a work premiered under Bernstein's direction in 1962: Copland's *Connotations*, a stern 19-minute movement written for the New York

Philharmonic's opening of the Lincoln Center concert hall. It must have been a challenge to a polite-society audience, veering as it does sharply from the accessible "cowboy" side of the composer's output towards a recension of Schoenberg's 12-tone technique. Yet it distils an American essence just the same, its craggy dissonances conveying an acerbic yet joyous self-reliance.

Illustrious soloists, both Georgian, appeared on consecutive nights with two other visiting orchestras, each young, youthful and remarkably adept. The Estonian Festival Orchestra was founded seven years ago by Paavo Järvi, who conducted them in a concert signalling the centenary of Estonian independence. Khatia Buniatishvili was a captivatingly fleet-fingered soloist in Grieg's Piano Concerto, and before it came the Estonian Arvo Pärt's plainchant-inspired, big-boned Symphony No 3 (1971); the composer was present to take the applause.

The next evening, Daniel Barenboim conducted his brilliant West-Eastern Divan Orchestra in Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto, with Lisa Batiashvili. Effortlessly she projected her rich line into (if against) the hall, and the canzonetta seemed all the more

powerful for being muted. And David Robert Coleman’s monodrama Looking for Palestine (2018), in which the speaking and stratospherically singing soprano was Elsa Dreisig, made an intriguing, politically alert but musically fantasticated novelty.

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