

FIRST NIGHT

Prom 42 review: Estonian Festival Orchestra/ Järvi at the Royal Albert Hall

The Estonian Festival Orchestra's Proms debut delights with committed Grieg and Arvo Pärt, but Sibelius is underpowered

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Paavo Järvi's seven-year-old Estonian Festival Orchestra
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★★★★☆☆

In the year marking the centenary of Estonia's first independence from Russia, I was pleased to discover one of the country's national monuments — Arvo Pärt — sitting across the aisle at the Royal Albert Hall. Conservatively dressed, with neat black shoes, the composer was there for the performance of his Symphony No 3 from 1971, a strange and compelling transitional piece from the period when he abandoned the serial straitjacket and discovered the magic of thinner textures, plainchant, stepwise motion and the “tintinnabuli” style.

This was an excellent choice of home produce for the Proms debut of Paavo Järvi's seven-year-old Estonian Festival Orchestra. They gave it a committed performance with each element in its patchwork mosaic, from circling strings through brass bursts to the tinkling of a little bell, scrupulously sculpted, polished and placed. On the platform at the end, Pärt received a hero's welcome with rapturous applause.

Everything changed for Grieg's Piano Concerto. After ascetic gestures and a welter of notes came laconic expression and emotional exuberance. Much of this was stirred by the irrepressible Georgian pianist Khatia Buniatishvili, who is a great one for the mad rush and fortissimo bang. Luckily, she proved equally good in filigree subtleties that were whisperingly delivered. This skill was, unfortunately, squandered in her indulgently slow encore of Debussy's *Clair de lune*.

The evening's big mystery was the frequently underpowered delivery of the Fifth Symphony of Sibelius, a composer who is supposedly in the bloodstream of all Nordic orchestras. Where was the sense of momentum and organic growth, and the drama of those stabbing last chords? Mislaid at Heathrow, apparently. Järvi's orchestra at least regained personality for the lightweight encores, especially in the sleek hesitations of Lepo Sumera's music for the Estonian animation film *The Spring Fly*. I hope Pärt enjoyed it.

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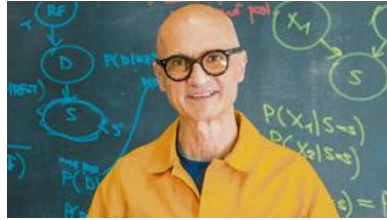
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