

# More than Camaraderie

*Ever since the Proms began 125 years ago, the aim has been to bring great classical music to the widest possible audience. In many ways, Proms audiences have contributed not only to the series' unique atmosphere but also to its very nature*

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Everyone knows the BBC Proms is unlike any other classical concert series, even those with adventurous programming and brilliant musicians. Part of the difference lies in the Proms' spectacular principal venue – that grand, circular, Royal Albert Hall of Victorian red and gold. Echoing through time with the sound of organ recitals, prize fights, political rallies and rock stars, the place oozes tradition and character. Another distinction is the Proms' eight-week summer intensity, offering easy access to a stimulating orchestral concert every night. Inexpensive standing tickets for promming in Arena or Gallery are much sought after through convivial queuing, adding to the informal atmosphere and camaraderie. Eagerness to return is palpable. Romances have blossomed. Yet camaraderie alone can hardly explain the rewarding musical experiences people cherish at the Proms. What's the connection between friendly feeling on the night and deeper intellectual pleasure so many audience members take away? Proms audiences over time, and each individual's listening investment, hold some answers.

## CONTEXT

Those Proms fundamentals – the large curved auditorium with promming area and the bewildering array of concerts packed into a few weeks – do attract a more varied audience than any other similarly ambitious classical series. They were meant to. Both features defined the Queen's Hall Promenade Concerts started by Robert Newman in 1895, and proved their worth for decades before the Royal Albert Hall entered the story in 1941.

Although a large open space allowing promenaders to move around might be thought to hinder 'serious' listening, Newman knew what he was doing. Few Londoners had heard of the cavernous new hall north of Oxford Circus. He had to subvert expectations just to get people in the building, attracting every sort of ticket-buyer – real connoisseurs and total novices, the well behaved, the inattentive, students, the elderly, office workers, bus drivers, singletons, couples, bankers, solicitors, clerks, clerics, teachers, tourists, the person on the street escaping the rain. Summer was ideal because London's main concert season had finished: with the traditional subscribing audience away from town, Newman could start afresh, testing a wider market.

To train this mixed audience in careful listening – never in one particular taste – Newman hired the similarly unknown Henry J. Wood. Wood's job was to use the promenade season to build up Newman's embryonic Queen's Hall Orchestra; each nightly performance would contribute to the ensemble-rehearsing process. Keen and curious audiences absorbed a vast range of

music, not all of it great by any means. The 26-year-old conductor, still a learner himself, functioned like a hard-working team captain rather than a prodigious musical star.

Gradually the experiment worked. Observing an orchestra in action was an exciting, visceral experience for most people around 1900. Listeners came to trust Wood, and players (eventually) to love him. The added delight promenaders felt when standing close to players and soloists, urging them on, was sensed by the musicians, forming a mutual bond of support and respect, one that remains electric today.

With perseverance, sometimes against the odds, Newman, Wood and their sponsors created a body of open-eared musical adventurers eager for new works and core repertory alike. As listeners, they served like a focus group, helping to decide which of Wood's 'novelties' went into deeper rehearsal for further performance at other Queen's Hall concerts. Listeners in the Royal Albert Hall these days — up to nearly 6,000 a night, plus many more by BBC radio, television and iPlayer — continue to refresh and extend that tradition. No wonder the broad diversity in its audiences, radiating both sociability and seriousness around music, is another defining Proms ingredient.

#### CULTIVATING CASUALNESS

Newman didn't invent promenading, but he took considerable pains to invigorate it. The luxurious Queen's Hall, opened in 1893 in upper Regent Street next to All Soul's Church, had a central, horseshoe-shaped floor area, below ground, that was wider than the Arena of the Albert Hall (opened in 1871). Its standing area was slightly larger too (although total capacity at South Kensington was roughly twice that of Queen's Hall). The point is that, at Queen's Hall, promenaders might far outnumber the seated audience. It was for their comfort, and to aid crowd control, that Newman placed a fountain in the middle, enhancing it with flowers, greenery and ice to lower the room's warm temperature. Advertising 'the coolest hall in London', he soon hit on the idea of goldfish for the pond, generating publicity. Decades later, the Albert Hall pond hosted occasional rubber ducks, though by 2010 they had paddled their last. In 2016 a new air-conditioning system finally gave relief.

Newman also lined the front of his platform with flowers, and the back of auditorium and stage with palms: garden scenery lifted spirits and relaxed the mood. Ices, flowers and cigars were sold at the interval, and drinks could be bought at the bar. Such amenities welcomed 'customers' to a place akin to a high-class music hall, including the freedom to smoke in most areas, so long as matches weren't struck during the music (signs and programmes carried rules). Clearly, Newman and Wood wanted people to enjoy themselves, to absorb the music, make new discoveries and pass along the pleasure to friends. Any group able to gather a guinea, for example, could share a transferable season ticket, bringing the cost of each concert down to just over fourpence, an extraordinary bargain. Actual promenading was unlikely, so jammed was the floor space. By the early 1900s, many would-be audience members had to be turned away at the doors.

Not only had Wood become famous, but programmes grew more challenging and orchestral playing more cohesive. Last Nights were never raucous, more like glorified Popular Nights. In 1941, the first Albert Hall season, Wood gave his first Last Night speech, a very short one. The following year he warmed to his task: 'I must thank you and tell you what a wonderful audience you are. How you listen! Your attention is so encouraging and exhilarating'. It was three years after his death, in 1947, that balloting for the First and Last Nights started: 10,000 people applied for 6,800 seats. By 1951 an all-night queue for the First Night was standard. In the 1960s, under William Glock's enlightened planning and Malcolm Sargent's charisma, die-hard Prommers camped out for a week to get the best standing places.

Audience camaraderie struck an entirely different note during wartime: the Proms offered a solace that seemed essential even under the threat of Zeppelin or aircraft raids. Shrapnel incidents occurred in 1917, yet Wood kept playing; the brief 1940 season saw stoppages. Audience members remaining after an air-raid warning were treated to quizzes and entertainment long into the night. Who wouldn't be cheered by community singing, the pianist Gerald Moore taking song requests and orchestral players taking-off music celebrities? At every stage, Proms organisers knew the value in cultivating casualness. Even apart from providing emotional comfort, a relaxed environment helped to keep the Proms audience mixed, continually invigorated and open to new musical experience.

### TRAINING LISTENERS

A large audience of new concert-goers had to be trained in communal listening, much as an orchestra required practice in ensemble playing. Newman and Wood understood this and sought a path between unbridled enthusiasm and buttoned-up silence. Too much indiscriminate applause, endless shouts of 'Core!' stretching an event beyond its advertised length, conversing, coughing and other music-disrupting noises could intrude.

Worried about licensing regulations, Newman appealed in the programmes for fewer encore requests, in order to finish on time. Wood alighted on Haydn symphonies as ideal for an audience challenge, asking concert-goers to suppress applause between movements so they could follow a work's sustained drama. Far from being killjoys or in any sense elitist, both men wished to enhance the listening experience for the majority, elevating music's ability to cast a spell. Spontaneous intermediate applause for a truly pleasing performance, notably in a concerto, was always welcome.

Audience training paid dividends under Edgar Speyer's sponsorship, 1902-14. Issuing a prospectus for the very first time to entice higher-paying seat-holders, his team made the Proms a leading test-bed for new music in London, as well as the place to make one's debut. Concentrated listening became the norm, followed by a burst of warm applause at each work's end. Notable exceptions stand out: irrepressible exuberance at the double encore for Elgar's 'Pomp and Circumstance' March No. 1 (1901); frank bewilderment, with

laughing and audible hissing, at Schoenberg's *Five Orchestral Pieces* (1912); and more recently, conspicuous objection, by loud departures and booing, in Peter Maxwell Davies's *Worldes Blis* (1969).

At other times, singular interjections made an impact: the heckler who shouted at Wood for 'mutilating' Handel and Wagner (1934), an over-eager fan clapping prematurely near the end of Stravinsky's *Les noces* (early 1970s). 'I could have thrown all four pianos at him!', said the conductor Pierre Boulez. Strong political responses registered too. No better example exists than the appearance by the USSR State Symphony Orchestra on 21 August 1968, the day after the Soviet Union invaded Prague. Although tension was heightened by audience shouts of 'Go home!', 'Russians out!', Mstislav Rostropovich played a Czech masterpiece, Dvořák's Cello Concerto, committedly, bravely, through his own tears. The notion that every Prom is a collaboration between audience and performers took on layered meaning.

### LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

A rise in overt audience participation, some of it silly, is often attributed to Malcolm Sargent, playing to television in the early 1950s. It was he who invented the Last Night as we know it, its second half a knees-up of patriotic songs, party hats and flag-waving ('increasing hysteria', as one BBC boss said).

But the original enthusiast for audience engagement was Henry Wood himself: 'And away we go, getting faster and faster, with that great audience stamping and clapping and enjoying themselves enormously, and the orchestra winning by a neck. For me, that riot of noise and happiness is the way they have of saying "thank you" at the Proms.' Wood's *Fantasia on British Sea-Songs* (1905) started the ball rolling. *Sea-Songs* didn't appear on a Last Night until 1908 or become regular until the 1920s, but it promoted group singing through *Rule, Britannia!*. Later accretions – bobbing heads, honking horns, mock crying, humming – enhanced the fun, even if things occasionally got out of hand. When authorities tried to curb or replace *Sea-Songs*, rebellion ensued. More recent imaginative expansion brought four-nation singing at Proms in the Park from 2003.

Affection for Wood rocketed in 1938, his jubilee season. To curtail foot-thudding ovations, he improvised a visual gag: return first with overcoat, next with scarf, finally with hat and gloves. Soon afterwards, postwar Prommers invented responses to ordinary platform actions. Edgar Mays, BBC Symphony Orchestra assistant, would be applauded as he raised the piano lid or brought in batons or music for the rostrum. Sargent encouraged the routine, which survives today with a Prommers' chant. Before a piano concerto, the instrument is wheeled into position and a stage assistant lifts the lid. The Arena cries 'Heave!', the Gallery replies 'Ho!'. The Leader then plays an 'A' on the piano for his colleagues to tune to, evoking rapturous applause.

Witticisms in the form of telegram-like chants by the Prommers were enjoyed from the 1960s. These have gradually dwindled in number, but one Prommers' announcement can be heard today at every Royal Albert Hall Prom:

the appeal for contributions to a collection for musical charities and the tally so far raised. The earliest collection followed Sargent's death in 1967. In 2019, Proms audiences gave a record-breaking £121,842.95. Prommers also ceremonially place a chaplet round Henry Wood's bust on the Last Night.

Perhaps the most remarkable individual Prommer's contribution occurred in August 1974, when Patrick McCarthy, a young baritone barely out of music college, jumped up to replace Thomas Allen, who fainted partway through Orff's *Carmina burana*, conducted by André Previn. The feat surprised no one more than McCarthy's mother, listening at home by radio. He had saved the performance. The audience went wild.

Whatever we now think of referendums, post-Brexit, public voting entered the Proms in 2001-7, when *Radio Times* readers and BBC website users were polled for their choice of arias and overtures for the Nations' Favourite Prom. In 2011 the Budapest Festival Orchestra, conducted by Iván Fischer, offered on-the-spot programming at an Audience Choice concert, the pieces selected by tickets drawn from a tuba's bell, then put to a vote. Robert Newman never did such a thing, but he and Wood certainly trusted their engaged audience members in even larger artistic judgments. And why not? The collective sum of their listening experience, and the social diversity in their ranks, combined to make a considerable public resource. They still do.

The latest wind of change, Covid-19, may seem to threaten everything. Is it even possible to hold Proms 2020 without a live audience in the hall? Things will certainly be different this year, but cultural leaders say 'yes'. They see yet another opportunity for Proms advance allied to audience engagement. Far from cancelling the series, BBC organisers have conceived a sustainable mix of archived and live performances, old and new, planned yet spontaneous, that will utilise the Corporation's world-leading broadcast and digital capabilities. As ever, audience interactivity remains crucial: orchestras, soloists and singers will participate virtually, as they must, and listeners can too. Tuning in, watching, commenting, sharing memories on air of favourite Proms moments will all help to keep music-making and its values alive for everyone, including new listeners who may never have set foot in the Royal Albert Hall. Such self-renewing, public-facing collaborations represent sanity in our confused world. Still more, they show hope in the larger Proms project, supporting the art we all hold in awe, music itself. There is everything to play for.

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