

# The Proms Listening Service

Radio 3's Tom Service proposes onward sonic explorations inspired by the music of tonight's Prom



AGATA ZUBEL

## Fireworks

Musical fireworks have been lighting up concert halls for the past couple of hundred years. Among the earliest are the piccolo-dazzles of lightning that flash throughout the storm of

**Beethoven's** 'Pastoral' Symphony (No. 6), even if that's a natural firework rather than a man-made combustible confection.

**Debussy's** 'Feux d'artifice' manages to turn the hammers and strings of the piano into an explosively luminescent instrument.

There are, though, a couple of orchestral fireworks before Agata Zubel's from either end of the 20th century. I'm talking about

**Stravinsky's** *Feu d'artifice* from 1908 and the late **Oliver Knussen's** *Flourish with Fireworks*, written around the material of Stravinsky's piece 80 years later. Both are vivid, incendiary creations. They also last longer than Catherine wheels and rockets, and can be repeated as many times as you desire ...

CHOPIN

## Piano Concerto No. 2

... written before his First Piano Concerto, which makes not much sense at all! Confusion attends the numbering of many composers' works, usually when they were published in a sequence that doesn't match the order in which they were composed. **Beethoven's** first two piano concertos present the same situation as Chopin's: the B flat major Concerto, known as No. 2, was composed before the C major, so the First should be the Second and the other way round. (There was another attempt at a piano concerto even earlier, which complicates matters further!) The numberings of Mendelssohn's and Schumann's symphonies are similarly confused and confusing.

**Mendelssohn's** 'Scottish' Symphony, the Third, is actually the last of his five symphonies – and sounds like it, as the most radically ambitious of any of his orchestral works. **Schumann's** symphonies are even more muddled: his Fourth Symphony was actually composed in the same year as his First, it's just that he revised and published it after the others. (Again, there's a much earlier, unfinished and un-numbered 'Zwickau' Symphony.) But my favourite bit of numerical topsy-turviness in music concerns Bruckner's symphonies. The wonderful symphony known as 'Die

Nullte' (No. 0) was actually composed after what's now called his First Symphony, which means that every Bruckner symphony afterwards ought to be numbered up to 10 rather than nine. And there's more: a fully fledged symphony in F minor pre-dates all of these pieces, making the Brucknerian canon 11-strong. What's that piece called? No. 00, the 'Doppelnullte', of course.

TCHAIKOVSKY

## Symphony No. 5

Some other pieces with different species of motto themes that stalk their structure, Tchaikovsky-style. **Saint-Saëns's** 'Organ' Symphony has one of the best mottoes of any late-Romantic symphony, a melody that flowers so magnificently in the finale and that should be known as the 'Babe' theme after its use in the climactic scene of that unforgettable porcine film. **Wagner's** *The Ring* is a palimpsest of leitmotifs – different dramatic 'mottoes' for characters and emotional situations. **Sibelius's** tone-poem *Tapiola* goes even further, being based entirely on the melody you hear right at the start: a monothematic seed from which this terrifying musical forestscape grows, eventually engulfing the orchestra.