

The Proms Listening Service

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



MOZART

Clarinet Concerto

There's a lot of hot air talked about key centres and their expressive meanings for composers in earlier centuries. That's even if you take the view that there is an absolute sonic quality of 'C major' or 'E flat major' – when, in fact, such pitch centres are, even now, entirely relative, so that one orchestra's C is more like another's B natural or C sharp, especially if you're going from Baroque to standard modern pitch or vice versa. The point is that pitch is relative and it always has been – and it was, much more so, in the 18th century, when every city, every orchestra and even every organ would have had a relatively higher or lower definition of what constituted an A, an F or a D. This, then, also prompts the question of what the point of so-called perfect pitch would have been in earlier centuries. What feels like a magical gift today, enabling some musicians immediately to identify which note is being played, might have been a useless and even annoying skill in the 18th century, when the idea of A was so much less fixed than it is now. A sense of 'relative pitch', being able to analyse the distance between notes, was (and is) much more useful. Perhaps more mysterious is that the specific ways in which instruments resonate when they're played in different keys has often fired composer's imaginations. There's a complex cultural and technological history at work here, to do with tuning systems and with the emotional and symbolic significance of key centres that has been built up by composers and musicians from the 1600s onwards, which we haven't quite time for here ... Nevertheless, A major meant something very special to **Mozart**. Or, at least, in works in A major he often wrote music of a lyrical sensuality that aches and sears just as much as it sings and soars, as in the Clarinet Concerto. Three earlier works inhabit a similarly powerful and ambiguous sound-world: the serene Symphony No. 29, K201, composed in 1774 on the threshold of Mozart's artistic maturity; the String Quartet, K464, the fifth of a set of six he dedicated to Joseph Haydn when they were published in 1785; and the sublime A major Piano Concerto, K488 (1786) – a tripartite conspectus of Mozart's ecstatic A major melancholy.

MAHLER

Symphony No. 5

'Love and counterpoint': that's Sir Simon Rattle's never-bettered three-word distillation of where this symphony ends up. The dizzying skirls and swoops of counterpoint in the finale of this symphony are overwhelmingly, dangerously joyous in their power; but composers have often used the ferocious intensity of such contrapuntal techniques to summon much darker emotional worlds. In the Rondo-Burleske movement of his Ninth Symphony, Mahler himself distorts and twists the counterpoint until it screams. **Berlioz** consigns the hero (himself!) of his *Symphonie fantastique* to hellish oblivion through the machinations of a diabolical fugue towards the end of the closing Witches' Sabbath movement. And **Brahms**'s Fourth Symphony withdraws symphonic hope – not just from the piece itself but, in Brahms's pessimistic view, arguably from the entire 19th century – through the medium of hard-wrought counterpoint and polyphony in its finale, a relentlessly austere passacaglia.