

The Proms Listening Service

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



LISZT, BRAHMS, SARASATE

Hungarian Dances and Rhapsodies

These pieces are the sounds of ersatz Magyariana that became more real, more Hungarian, than the real thing, as U2 almost sang. It's often the case that signifiers we imagine to be definitively representative of a place or culture have a history that's more about displacement or synthetic musical manufacture. 'Auld Lang Syne' is a Scottish melody with words by Robert Burns, right? Well, apart from its use at New Year and at the Last Night of the Proms as British symbol of friendship and collegiality, if you're Japanese you know the melody as a Japanese song, 'Hotaru no Hikari', which was introduced to the country as a pentatonic carrier of music-educational possibility in the wake of the opening up of the country after the Meiji Dynasty's reforms of 1868. In Japan it's a tune that's also used to bring in the New Year, but with completely different lyrics. How about *matryoshki*, the Russian dolls that were exported as the very embodiment of Russian arts and crafts in the late 19th century, along with the cultural exports of dance and music and opera by Sergey Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes? In fact, the Russian doll was an idea taken from Japanese dolls from the island of Honshu in 1890. But, when the Russian versions were presented at the Paris Exposition Universelle, they became instantly identified with Russianness and a whole industry of these ersatz artefacts was born overnight. The same goes for music, too. At the turn of the 20th century Japan's Madame Sadayakko, who was touring Europe, changed her act to make it conform to Westerners' ideas of what Japanese geishas should look and sound like.

Giacomo Puccini saw her and remade the part of Madame Butterfly in her (manufactured) image. These musical and cultural cases prove that the boundary between the 'authentic' and the 'synthetic' hardly matters: what makes something 'authentic' is the way that symbols, ideas and sounds are assimilated, received, produced and consumed by performers, audiences and cultures as a whole. Brahms's *Hungarian Dances* really are Hungarian, in other words ...

BRAHMS

Symphony No. 1

Brahms, typically tortured, faced that 'difficult second album' syndrome before he'd even written his First Symphony. Mind you, he was competing in his mind with his unbeatable personal pantheon of musical greats, from Bach to Beethoven, Mozart to Schumann, so it's no surprise he felt under pressure. The world waited for **Sibelius's** Eighth Symphony for 30 years; it was probably composed and consumed by the flames of the fireplace of his home, Ainola, in the 1940s in one of the greatest tragedies of self-criticism in musical history. I suspect that the final movement of **Bruckner's** Ninth Symphony remained unfinished at the death of its creator in 1896 because it posed a superhuman challenge that lay outside the realms of musical possibility; which is a set of similar issues to those that faced Beethoven towards the end of his life. Ludwig wanted to write a 10th Symphony, in order – to use his indelible words – 'to create a new gravitational force'. A new force of gravity in music ... for all of the avant-gardes that have come and gone since Beethoven's death, that new gravitational force still waits to be revealed.