THE PROMS LISTENING SERVICE
Radio 3’s Tom Service proposes onward sonic explorations inspired by the music of tonight’s Prom

TOM COULT
St John’s Dance
We start with a dance of delirium. St John’s Dance is an infectious upbeat to the Proms season. Literally: Tom Coult turns the ergot-poisoned pageant of the Middle Ages – in which people fell victim to dancing mania that shook their bodies, inducing visions that brought them to the brink of death – into a vivid and terrifying explosion for orchestra. And he’s far from the first composer to conjure a dance of death from his orchestra: Ravel’s La valse is a waltz to the apocalyptic end of time in the 1920s, as Ravel makes the pleasure of Vienna’s favourite imperial dance curdle into a waltzing war machine. Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring stages another dance to oblivion, creating a music whose savage yet mechanistic power sacrifices the Chosen One to the ancient gods. And Thomas Adès’s Totentanz, first heard at the Proms in 2013, makes a whole society, from its Pope to its peasants, dance to the Grim Reaper’s tune. And here’s the strange thing: these pieces are some of the most thrilling sounds an orchestra can make, dances of death that take us to terrifying places but which we can’t seem to resist as Prommers. This music of existential extremes exorcises our collective desire to experience oblivion from the safety of the Royal Albert Hall: music as transport of deathly delights.

BEETHOVEN
Piano Concerto No. 3
You can hear Beethoven’s C minor Concerto as a response to Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 24, K491, in the same key. But where Mozart’s piece starts with a theme of snaking, tortured chromaticism, Beethoven’s rewrites that idea as a self-contained thematic cell, whose possibilities he will mine for the rest of the movement. It’s a stark difference between the two composers: Mozart the exploratory melodist, Beethoven the self-conscious musical architect.

Kind of … that theory holds up for the first movement but Beethoven’s slow movement finds something that even Mozart couldn’t, a song of such aching slowness and visionary lyricism that the piano is transformed from a hybrid percussion instrument – which is what it really is! – into something that’s capable of soaring, singing and searing our imaginations. It’s a new kind of piano-writing that later generations of composers would take to extremes in their own piano concertos: the continuous melody of the slow movement in Brahms’s First or the sonic magic carpets that Rachmaninov creates in the middle movements of his four piano concertos – all of which you can hear at this year’s Proms!

JOHN ADAMS
Harmonium
The final movement of Harmonium is one of the greatest, most thrilling crescendos in music: an ominous, quiet, percussive pulsation that becomes a cosmic whoop of joy for the chorus and the orchestra, setting Emily Dickinson’s ecstatic ‘Wild Nights’. It’s Adams’s version of something that much earlier orchestral composers knew they could use to thrill their audiences. The ‘Mannheim Rocket’ was a kind of crescendo that the orchestra in Mannheim pioneered, and you can hear Mozart’s scintillating versions of the idea in the magnificently timed upswellings in the first movement of his Sinfonia concertante, which you can hear in Prom 26, and in the first movement of his Symphony No. 34. As the orchestra got ever larger in the 19th and 20th centuries, composers could make their crescendos ever more colourful and even more exciting. Listen to the Sunrise from Ravel’s Daphnis and Chloe to hear how orchestral music can be even more powerful than the real thing in its luminous, glowing irradiation of sound, light and sumptuous orchestral texture. And to hear a crescendo as dramatic creation myth, there’s the opening of Wagner’s Ring Cycle, a crescendo on a single chord, E flat major, which begins in abyssal, quiet darkness and swells to overwhelming, flooding tumult as the Rhine starts to sing its mythic song.

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