



# THE PROMS LISTENING SERVICE

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

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## ELLA AND DIZZY

What they both did, of course, was miraculously to popularise some of the greatest virtuosities of instrumental technique, compositional brilliance and vocal subtlety and flexibility ever known, combined with a genius for collaboration and an ability to use the media of the 20th century to the advantage of their art. Ella and Dizzy represent an ideal fusion of an uncompromising approach to the quality of their music with the biggest possible popular appeal. But that's the world of jazz: that kind of massive, cross-cultural success seems hardly possible for all but the greatest of classical musicians.

That might be true today but it wasn't always that way, because composers of earlier eras prefigured Ella and Dizzy's achievement of combining artistic success and popular acclaim. Let's start with **Franz Liszt**. It wasn't just that he was the single most influential pianist who ever lived – creating new, astonishing visions of the prestidigitally possible in everything he wrote (the *Transcendental Études*, the B minor Piano Sonata, his transcription of Beethoven's symphonies, fantasies on popular operatic themes and much else). Through his concerts, Liszt became one of the most familiar and talked-about figures of the early 19th century, the original godfather of musical fame. Mind you, that was partly helped by his extracurricular reputation: in his younger years, Liszt's colourful private life was the stuff of a gossip magazine's wildest dreams. In the concert halls, his reputation drew crowds of thousands of swooning male and female admirers, whom he was able to bring to orgasmic climaxes of musical and sensory pleasure through his playing. All of

the attributes of glamour, of showmanship, of the expert manipulation of crowds that we would think of as the proper sphere of today's pop stars were Liszt's to command, and all of that was in a symbiotic relationship with the overwhelming power of his virtuosity as a composer and pianist.

The same was true for another musician who rose to enormous 19th-century fame – or, really, infamy. Relatively late in his life (he only started touring outside of his native Italy in his mid-forties), **Nicolò Paganini** brought his violin-playing and his compositions to the rest of a disbelieving Europe, who were so attracted yet appalled by the virtuosity they were witnessing that Paganini's talent was thought to have come from the Devil. What else could explain the dark wizardry of his talents to inspire and seduce an audience in his solo Caprices or his violin concertos? But, where Paganini and Liszt had led, it seems that similar titans of performing and composing brilliance in classical music weren't due to follow in the 20th century. It was the real virtuosos of jazz – like Ella, like Dizzy – and then pop and rock who took on the mantle of becoming the musical icons of a whole culture.

And then, in America, **Leonard Bernstein** came along. If any single figure of the 20th century matched the greats of the jazz and pop worlds as a composer, performer and media presence from the middle of the last century, it was Bernstein. There was his music, of course, from *West Side Story* to his symphonies – the 'Jeremiah', 'Age of Anxiety' and 'Kaddish' – each of which, in different ways, was composed to communicate with the whole of a community and not just its classical audiences; and there was his genius as a performer, conductor and

communicator. Bernstein's centenary falls next year, when the world will be celebrating one of the most important lives in classical music in popularising and energising his art-form – just as Ella and Dizzy did for theirs.



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