



THE PROMS LISTENING SERVICE

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

A Last Night of immortal musical traditions, above all in the second half of tonight's season-capping celebrations. Except that the amazing thing about the traditions of the Last Night of the Proms is that there's nothing traditional about them. Well, there is, but not for the reasons you might think! This traditional sequence of music, at least at the end of the concert, is a made-up 'tradition', a pageant of musical communality that was manufactured, invented and effectively composed over decades by successive masters of Proms ceremonies. But it was only with Malcolm Sargent in the post-war years that the sequence that is known and loved today was really put together. And, like all traditions worthy of the name, what's significant about these musical rituals is how open they are to change and how they seem not to be the product of the institution that calls itself the BBC Proms but, rather, how they seem to belong to us, the audience.

The New Year's Day Concert from Vienna is another concocted annual jamboree, because it's an idea that has little to do with Johann Strauss II – apart, of course, from the legacy of his and his family's music! In fact, the annual concert's design and shape was a product of Nazi-occupied Austrian cultural politics in 1939. The fact that this concert goes on from year to year, gilded by ever larger audiences from ever more nations around the world, along with the darkest possible political memories of how and why this concert first started – shows how it's possible for a musical ritual to belong to a much wider community than those for whom it was originally intended. Today it's not so much the Vienna Philharmonic who 'own' the New Year's Day concerts but the millions and millions who make the concert part of their own rituals of bringing in the

new year, just as the Last Night of the Proms consecrates the end of our summers and celebrates another unforgettable season of music-making.

Something similar is true of massed musical celebrations in other cultures and contexts: the performances of the finale of **Beethoven's Ninth Symphony** by entire stadiums of choirs in Japan, every voice singing the 'Ode to Joy', or the communal expression of identity through music that's spontaneously made by crowds at sporting events: the way Liverpool football fans sing '**You'll Never Walk Alone**' as a collective performance of sporting and emotional solidarity at every match, or perhaps the greatest sporting vocal performance of them all, when Welsh rugby fans turn '**Bread of Heaven**' into a heaven-storming anthem.

But the Proms' Last Night rituals have shown their value through the way they have been open to change, whether it's going live around the nations thanks to the developments of technology to physically connect with audiences and singers from Belfast to Swansea, or the way the programme has been altered completely so that the Last Night can still speak meaningfully to the world: in 2001, days after 9/11, as well as Barber's *Adagio*, Leonard Slatkin conducted the finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at the end of the concert instead of the usual patriotic line-up.

How can the Last Night continue to speak to today's audiences? Simultaneously by staying the same and by changing: that's the paradoxical beauty of an invented tradition. Whatever happens to that sequence of participative songs and surreal sea shanties at the end of this concert in future years, they will go on resonating for as long as they sound as if they are made by us in the

audience. Are these the songs we will still want to sing in a decade's time, in 20 years, in 50 years? It won't really be the programme-makers who will decide, it will be us, the people. And that's what the Last Night symbolises about the Proms as a whole: this concert and all of the concerts this summer, are made because we are here, and have been here all season. The Proms has never really been Henry Wood's or the BBC's – they are ours. That's their power – or rather, that's our power. Enjoy the celebration this evening: you deserve it!



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