



THE PROMS LISTENING SERVICE

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

A battle of the bands. In one sense, the whole of the Proms season is one long battle of the orchestras. Who wins? You decide! Will it be any of the BBC ensembles – as it obviously should be? Or will the Berlin Staatskapelle best the Concertgebouw? Will the Vienna Phil oust the Chamber Orchestra of Europe in your affections? It's only in your hearts and minds as Prommers that the results will ever really be known ...

That's not entirely as flippant as it seems, because the format of a concert, like this afternoon's, with the most productive of face-offs and musical collaborations between two virtuosic big bands, is a swing-era echo of the kind of real-time musical competition that used to be part and parcel of the lives of the greatest composers. You couldn't amount to much as a composer-performer unless you could take on and beat your rivals in a not-so-gentle game of public musical one-upmanship. That's why composers such as Handel and Scarlatti met to duel across the keyboards, with rounds on the harpsichord and the organ. The result? Handel won the organ competition, Scarlatti the harpsichord. It's the reason Mozart took on and triumphed over Muzio Clementi on the fortepiano, and why Beethoven was a one-man pianistic champion, taking on all comers in Vienna and besting them all.

The question is, what did these keyboard championships sound like? At their core was the ability of the composers to improvise against one another on themes that were made up on the spot (that's what Bach did with the theme of the *Musical Offering*, which Frederick the Great gave to him as the ultimate contrapuntal challenge – Bach immediately improvised a fully fledged fugue on the tune), or to turn tunes into different

dramatic or character states (the kind of thing the young Mozarts, Wolfgang and Nannerl, did to impress the courts of Europe as children). And it's exactly this in-the-moment virtuosity, the actual sounds that Handel or Scarlatti or Mozart or Beethoven made as players, that is lost to the historical record. The notation they did leave in their works, the pieces they wrote down, is like the tip of a musical iceberg, because the vast majority of the music they made and improvised in their lifetimes is lost for ever beneath the waves of time.

Or is it? There are clues in the works they left to us as to what these composers might have been like as performers. **Scarlatti's** 555 keyboard sonatas are full of the kind of ornamentation that must be a written-down relic of his personal performance practice; **Handel's** organ concertos are a window on to his thinking about the instrument on which he was an objectively verified king of virtuosos.

As for **Mozart**, we can hear echoes of his improvisational style in some of his solo piano pieces, above all the Fantasias in D minor, K397, and C minor, K475, which look on the page and sound in performance like written-down improvisations. They are in an ever-changing, ceaselessly dynamic form, as if the music is making itself up as it goes along – or, rather, it's as if Mozart was particularly happy with something he had come up with at the instrument and decided to put it on down on the page as quickly as he could remember it and write it down.

Beethoven's piano sonatas, especially the earlier ones, are often cast in such experimental shapes and use such idiomatic ideas that you feel they must have been improvised in the white heat of the moment and then codified in notation: like the Sonata

'Quasi una fantasia', Op. 27 No. 2, otherwise known as the 'Moonlight', or the opening of the D minor Sonata, Op. 31 No. 2, in which the pianist quietly lays their hands on the keyboard in a slow spread chord – exactly the kind of thing you might do at the start of an improvisation – before a faster tune is tried out, the quiet chord returns and the faster tune is developed and then rejected in favour of another melody. It's music that's lived in the moment, in which you feel you're in contact not just with Beethoven the composer but with Beethoven the pianist. The iceberg of musical time may have melted, leaving only the notes these composers left on the page, but there are clues amid the icy rubble of musical notation to their battling brilliance as improvisers too!



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