



Behind the scenes at the Proms

Floods, nerves and piano tuning—Henrietta Bredin goes backstage at the world's biggest music festival, an epic feat of logistical planning

FLEETS of music stands, umpteen water bottles for thirsty singers, coaches for travelling performers, cushions for cellists with back-ache or fans for the hundreds of people who stand, sit or lie on the floor of the Albert Hall arena and gallery during the great summer festival of BBC Promenade Concerts—the statistics of this 57-day musical extravaganza are near infinite. The Proms began in 1895 and the BBC has been an integral part of the season since 1927, when it stepped in to save the concert series from going bust.



The Proms by numbers

- 84** concerts
- 57** days of music
- 3,000** performers
- 60,000**-plus Prommers
- 9** cities
- 11** venues
- 36** orchestras
- 17** choirs/choruses



Left: An evening like no other: the unashamedly exuberant Last Night of the Proms. Above: Radio 3 presenter Petroc Trelawny ready for anything, from delays to triumphs

It's an enormous enterprise, with live performances not only in London's Royal Albert Hall, Battersea Arts Centre and Cadogan Hall, but also, this year, in Birmingham, Glasgow, Liverpool, Cardiff, Bristol, Truro, Gateshead and Belfast. The logistics are complex and extremely challenging, although you wouldn't think that when speaking to Helen Heslop, the Proms and live-events manager, who exudes an impressively reassuring air of calm, good humour and enthusiasm. 'I've been working on the Proms since 1996 and it's grown and grown, so I've developed and learnt

alongside. Thankfully, that means I've dealt with many different glitches along the way, so, although I get a good rush of adrenaline, I don't get impossibly nervous any more.'

The director, David Pickard (Miss Heslop's third, after Nicholas Kenyon and Roger Wright) has, by his own admission, spent 'more years delivering Proms than running them'. In his previous job at Glyndebourne, he took his first opera to the Proms, *Don Giovanni*, back in 1994. An opera comes to the Albert Hall every summer and, this year, it's *The Wreckers* by Ethel Smyth, an appropriate choice as she was a contemporary of Henry Wood, the founding conductor of the Proms.

'I love the moment when an orchestra walks out on stage and is completely blown away'

'The efficiency and grasp of detail displayed by Helen and her team are the main reason I can take risks and make ambitious plans,' says Mr Pickard. 'I knew I'd be working with a flexible and highly skilled group of people with a brilliant can-do attitude. Everything is a bit of a negotiation, there's a fair bit of to-ing and fro-ing, discussion of what's possible—or seemingly impossible, but worth a try—and I do push Helen to the absolute limit.'

For every orchestra that is familiar with the Albert Hall, there's another playing there for the first time. 'I love that,' reveals Miss Heslop, 'the moment when they walk out on

stage and experience that vast space and are completely blown away. Of course, it's very different once the audience come in and David and I both have an introduction that we give, an explanation of what to expect.

'The Prommers have their own set of traditions and make sure we tell performers about that, for example, the way they give a round of applause to whoever plays an A on the piano so that the orchestra can tune to it. And, if a piano concerto is being performed, when the lid of the piano is lifted it prompts a cry of "Heave!" from the Prommers in the arena, to which those in the gallery respond "Ho!"'

'It's the greatest pleasure I derive from my job,' reveals Mr Pickard, 'witnessing the response from an orchestra that's never played at the Proms before. I know that, when the Australian World Orchestra comes this year, however clearly I describe it beforehand, the players will never have experienced an atmosphere quite like it. What they're not used to is the astounding quiet: the audience is all around, very close, but completely silent and still. What we missed most during the pandemic was that hushed feedback, that two-way connection. When an orchestra's on tour, this is always a stand-out for them. The players feed off the audience response and play even better.'

The return of international orchestras is keenly anticipated. 'There's a lot to think about,' observes Miss Heslop. 'Parking, for instance, trucks of different sizes needing parking spaces, loading and unloading, making sure that lifts are ready to take things up to stage level. The door 11 lift, the only really big one, does have a tendency to break down and getting a grand piano up a ramp is tough.'

'We need to make sure there are enough places for people to change, too. When →



From pianists such as Yuja Wang to the grand pianos themselves, space is found for all

there's an orchestra and a choir and solo singers, there aren't enough rooms in the hall and we have to use buildings nearby, such as Holy Trinity Church. Then we need to factor in enough time for people, when they're off site, to come in—it's like a military operation.'

I wondered how much practical considerations influenced artistic planning. 'The creative vision comes first,' confirms Mr Pickard, 'but it's tempered by knowing the implications of programming two works in a row that require massive forces. An orchestra can't simply turn up and play—each Prom requires a rehearsal of up to three hours in the hall to check the balance, make sure chairs are set


out in the right order, position microphones for radio and cameras if it's going to be televised.' 'Sometimes, we split rehearsals,' explains Miss Heslop. 'For example, the Ukrainian Freedom Orchestra will rehearse the day before their concert, on the same day as the Hallé Orchestra Prom. That necessitated a dance of the pianos, as we weren't sure if the same piano could be used for both concerts: we were worried the Ukrainians might have expected theirs to be at a different pitch. Luckily, they have agreed to play at A440, which is generally accepted as the standard tuning pitch.'

When the 'great beast', as the Albert Hall organ is known, is played, you can't have any-

thing else happening on stage—organists frequently have to rehearse in the middle of the night. Concerts have been delayed, but seldom cancelled. There's been a backstage fire and, once, one of the Vienna Philharmonic players accidentally knocked a sprinkler and caused a flood. Fortunately, that happened overnight, so could be mopped up in time.

Nerves can strike performers unexpectedly and inconveniently, to paralysing effect. Miss Heslop points out that 'you can't just push a performer on when that happens, they need time to calm down, to prepare themselves. The Radio 3 presenters are particularly good at filling in when there's a crisis or an unexpected hiatus'.

The tradition of the Last Night soloist wearing a flamboyant costume began in 1985, when the mezzo-soprano Sarah Walker appeared in a frock (created, incidentally, by Dame Edna Everage's designer) with an enormous Union Flag cunningly concealed in one sleeve, that she unfurled gleefully as she sang *Rule Britannia!*. Since then, Sarah Connolly has looked dashing in naval uniform as Horatio Nelson and the Peruvian tenor Juan Diego Flórez delighted everyone as an Inca warrior with a red and blue feathered headdress and dangling gold earrings the size, as *The Guardian* noted, of beer mats.

The Proms are unique and, if you think the whole operation is like a swan gliding grandly into view, remember that, beneath the water, a lot of feet are paddling extremely hard.  *The BBC Proms run from July 15–September 10 (www.bbc.co.uk/proms)*

Pick of the Proms

July 15 Verdi's *Requiem* on the first night, featuring South African soprano Masabane Cecilia Rangwanasha, winner of the 2021 Song Prize at the BBC Cardiff Singer of the World, and the British-Italian rising tenor star Freddie De Tommaso

July 19 Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, a late-night Prom, with Alice Coote as Dido—an extraordinary contrast to the preceding concert, two fourth symphonies, by Vaughan Williams and Tippett

July 30 The stupendous Hallé Orchestra, conducted by Mark Elder, playing Dukas, Respighi and Puccini's *Il tabarro*, with the Welsh-Ukrainian soprano Natalya Romaniv

August 12 Virtuoso pianist Yuja Wang (top) tackling Liszt's First Piano Concerto, flanked by Sibelius and Richard Strauss

August 21 Amjad Ali Khan, a master of the sarod, and his two sons, introducing



the distinctive and beautiful sound in a concert that starts at 11.30am and keeps unwinding until about 1pm

August 26 A new work by Thomas Adès, *Märchentänze (Fairy-Tale Dances)* is bound to be exciting. It follows Vaughan

Williams's *The Lark Ascending* played by superb Finnish violinist Pekka Kuusisto

August 29 Bach's Mass in B Minor, with the Orchestra and Choir of the Age of Enlightenment

September 2 A sensuous setting of Walt Whitman's *Lilacs* by the African-American composer George Walker, followed by Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with Chineke! Orchestra and Voices

In-house recommendations

July 28 David Pickard suggests the pairing of a new work, *The Site of an Investigation* by Jennifer Walshe (left), which will be challenging, eclectic and wild, with Brahms's *German Requiem*

August 27 Helen Heslop recommends The Earth Prom, 'a musical celebration of the BBC's Natural History Unit and a whole new way of working, bringing music, speech, natural sounds and images together