

# Classical

## A lot less pomp, a bit more circumstance

We all like to moan about the Last Night of the Proms: its clichés and its jingoism. We asked the experts to play artistic director and tell us how – or if – they would change it

### Gerard McBurney composer, writer, broadcaster

It would take a buffoon to interfere much with the Last Night of the Proms, but there are a few elements I would like to see thrown into the mixture. One would be a moment of intense stillness. The lights would be lowered to a single spot; all we would see and hear would be a lone counter-tenor and a lutenist doing one song by Dowland. That would be real British music and a real British tradition to believe in. Also, how about a regular spot for that dreaded item, the new orchestral piece? But with rules:

- 1) Every year, the new piece has the same place in the programme;
- 2) The new piece must never last longer than 4 minutes, 33 seconds. If the composer goes over, the orchestra should just stop playing;
- 3) The piece must be VERY LOUD and VERY FAST (most modern composers are chicken about writing real fast music: they just bounce up and down on the spot instead);
- 4) The promoters should mark it out of 10 at the end (the who shouts loudest wins).

Also... Elgar. How about reviving those outrageous patriotic pieces from the first world war, written for speaker and orchestra: Carillon, Une Voix dans le Désert and Le Drapeau Belge? They are so beautiful and such fun, and no one ever does them.

### Marshall Marcus head of music, South Bank Centre

This year's programme offers us 112 minutes of music with an imaginative Russian flavour, but what we tend to focus on is that sea of undulating union flags and the last ritualistic quarter-hour of Land of Hope and Glory and Auld Lang Syne. Do we really need the same end to this "story" every year? The star turn is always the audience – so I'd be in favour of commissioning a series of "lands of Hope and Glory", involving the audience and written by composers from notable and far-off musical centres – say, Venezuela, Soweto, Iran. It's all a matter of vision. Think of those millions tuning in: is it them looking in at us, or us looking out at them?

### Gerald Barry, composer

I think it should stay exactly the way it is. Last Nights, like first sorrows, are essential.

### Michael Berkeley composer and broadcaster

Clearly it needs to be celebratory, yet must have artistic integrity so as not to diminish all that has preceded it. I would bring together diverse musical languages with Leonard Bernstein's Prelude Fugue and Riffs, a fabulous driven piece of classically informed jazz. Let's follow that with Charles Ives'



The Unanswered Question, with the solo trumpet (Wynron Marsalis) up in the balcony, using that vast space to great effect. Next, to draw together the strands of jazz and classical modernity, the G major Piano Concerto by Ravel. In the second half, in come the choruses and organ for Janacek's Glagolitic Mass. And, to end in true party mode, Wynron and Branford Marsalis and assorted jazzers would return for a Duke Ellington set. If we must have some of the traditional singing, let's use those wonderful improvisers to spice it up with syncopation and some wah-wah mutes – a refreshed Hompipe and Land of Dope and Glory!

### Douglas Boyd music director of the Manchester Camerata

I would celebrate the stunning British talent that we have and include a world premiere of an orchestral work by a major British composer – perhaps Sally Beamish, who celebrates her 50th birthday this year. I would also ask

holding the EU presidency in September would be invited to programme the Last Night, complete with anthem, jingoism and anachronism from its own nation state. The concert would be broadcast worldwide, with subtitles for hapless viewers and subtitles for those unfortunately in the hall. Roll on, the Slovak Last Night!

### Anna Meredith, composer

There's something fantastic but naughty about the Last Night of the Proms. A bit like spending the last day of Lent in a bath full of piña colada. Let's roll with the recklessness. I say! I don't think the Last Night is the time for sneaking in tithbits of "proper" British music – this audience is braying for camp with all the trappings, so, for one night, why not go a bit Sing-Along-a-Sound-of-Music? I'd want the audience (Edwardian dress compulsory) to split into four groups for some stirring part-singing – sopranos in the stalls; Basses in the balcony?

Staging would include the recreation of a battle or two, with a life-size replica of HMS Victory bursting through the walls. Of course there'd be copious amounts of dry ice, lasers, cannons, fireworks and foam, to accompany the culmination of my Prom Idol competition (vote for your favourite MP/footballer/newscaster to sing Rule Britannia with the words taped to the inside of their shield). And for a grand finale? How about thousands of union flag balloons in the shape of Henry Wood's head falling in a patriotic rainstorm on the jubilant throng below?

### Phillip Hensher, writer

It's just an embarrassing disaster. The Last Night doesn't represent the rest of the festival, and yet most people assume there's flag-waving every night of the season. Get rid of it, and the awful mixed-bag programme. I'd finish the Proms off with something lengthy and noisy, such as the Berlioz Damnation of Faust or the Schoenberg Gurrelieder, played by a really smart visiting orchestra with an international reputation.

### Catherine Bott singer and broadcaster

Henry Purcell should be celebrated; he's our Orpheus Britannicus. And there's so much to choose from – mighty chaconnes, sparkling dances, Pinest Isle (a sumptuous alternative to Rule Britannia for a grand soloist)... So many promoters have jumped on the Last Night patriotic feelgood bandwagon that there's now a Last Night of the Inset stately home here! Proms every summer weekend. Time for the real Proms to get ahead, give Henry Wood's beloved sea songs a rest and assemble an anthology of tunes that define this country now. One nautical request: a homgrown tenor to sing Tom Bowling. It's always beautifully played, but the promoters' mock-sobbing into prop blankets is too air guitar. I want them to hear those heartbreaking words and cry for real.

### Mark Simpson BBC Young Musician 2006

I'd want the programme to encapsulate the essence of the Proms: providing world-class international music, fantastic new commissions from a range of globally renowned composers, community participation, world music and, above all, British music. Walton's Portsmouth Point is a great opener, or perhaps Malcolm Arnold's Scottish dances – something to get the audience warmed up. James MacMillan has written a fantastic feast of British music in his Britannia for large orchestra. It has that Last Night essence about it, what with the car horns and Scottish fiddle solos. Taking into account recent events in Israel and Lebanon, I'd like to see Daniel Barenboim's West-Eastern Divar Orchestra play the last movement of Britten's War Requiem to finish.

### John Woollich composer and associate artistic director of the Aldeburgh festival

I wouldn't touch this job with a barge-pole. Whatever phenomenon the Last Night of the Proms is, it isn't a musical one, so fiddling around with the programming is missing that point. Anyone trying to do something of musical interest is going to enrage an awful lot of people. Which isn't to say that previous controllers of the Proms haven't expended a great deal of thought and ingenuity on trying to ginger things up: William Glock and Robert Ponsony, Nick Kenyon and, gloriously, John Drummond have all tried to prod some life into the event. To survive you'd need a very thick skin or to stick to tradition. But then the traditionalists can't agree which tradition they want upheld: even if you went back to what Henry Wood himself did, you would provoke 10,000 letters of complaint from those who prefer their traditions to be of a more recent vintage.

### Anthony Sargent general director, the Sage, Gateshead

The Proms are more than just eight weeks of exhilaratingly fresh, high-level music-making: they affirm the outstanding quality of today's British musicians and the inspiring sense of adventure of our audiences. My Last Night would emphasise those things, including a solo spot for the Young Musician of the Year, and other world musics alongside western classical music – the scorching jazz Jamaica All-Stars perhaps. Then I would enfranchise the only 7,000 of the 100m worldwide audience currently missing out on the effervescent television link-ups with the Proms-in-the-Parks by adding TV screens in the Albert Hall, so the core live audience becomes part of the nation's annual musical party.

The Last Night of the Proms is tomorrow at the Royal Albert Hall and broadcast live on the BBC2 and 1 and Radio 3.

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