

From ballads to Rule, Britannia!

Sunday's Prom will replay the Last Night from 1910. Jessica Duchen looks at how the institution has changed

Thursday, 2 September 2010

Cross the Proms' two most popular fixtures – the Last Night of the Proms and the Doctor Who Prom – and you might just end up with the event that's taking over the Royal Albert Hall on Sunday afternoon. It's a recreation of the programme you would have heard had you attended the Last Night of the Proms 100 years ago, in 1910.

It's also a rare opportunity to glance at the musical roots of the Last Night itself, an occasion that annually provides a healthy dose of controversy, being pilloried for jingoism with its bawling of "Land of Hope and Glory", "Jerusalem" and "Rule, Britannia!".

It may come as a surprise to learn that those associations, and most of the music, have built up in relatively recent years. The sole stalwart of 21st-century Last Nights that was included in 1910 is Sir Henry Wood's *Fantasia on British Sea Songs*, penned in 1905 so still relatively new then. Its final section is "Rule, Britannia!" – strictly in context. The programme includes an Elgar Pomp and Circumstance March, but it's not No 1 (which contains the melody that became "Land of Hope and Glory") but No 4. And you might be startled to hear that Wagner's *Kaisermarsch* was a popular inclusion on such a night, just four years before the First World War.

Today we see flag-waving and explosions of patriotism as redolent of a time gone by, but, as the conductor Paul Daniel, who will be on the podium for the performance, points out, much of that supposed time had already vanished by 1910. "Queen Victoria had gone; Edward VII had died in May that year; the British Empire was in decline," he says.

"It's almost possible to look at Elgar's career as a touchstone for the national mood. In 1909-10 he'd turned away from the enormous confidence he had in 1908. It was a mark of the times; you can hear an undercurrent of anxiety in his compositions by then, especially the Second Symphony, which was premiered in 1911. People were unsettled by it: here was the country's most popular composer giving them music they couldn't understand."

The zeitgeist was receding from the blazing confidence of the late 19th century towards the shadowy insecurity that led up to 1914 and the outbreak of the First World War. Then, as now, the Last Night of the Proms offered a chance for a little escapism. But the differences between the Last Night then and the Last Night now don't only reflect changes in music.

The first thing you might notice about the programme is its length: a good three hours. Before music was universally on tap via the media and recordings, people had a much greater hunger for the live concert experience. Then there's the variety. Chamber music is heard alongside works on a symphonic scale, and the second half includes a light ballad by the now almost-forgotten Dorothy Forster.

Roger Wright, director of the Proms, says that popular ballads often used to drift out of music halls into the Last Night of the Proms: "Dorothy Forster's 'Mifanwy' is a popular parlour song, and this was typical of the way 'lollipops' would be dropped into the second half after more heavyweight fare before the interval. A fabulous variety existed in concert programmes in those days," says Wright. "I think we're in danger of losing that variety in our more formulaic concerts nowadays, which is why I've been trying to break the formulas, to change the format and involve interesting juxtapositions of works. It can make you listen to music in a different way."

New music featured in Sir Henry's Last Nights, as it did amply throughout the season. Sunday's programme pays tribute to Wood's passion for the best of the new by including a world premiere for today: Dark Pastoral by David Matthews, which is based on the surviving fragment of a lost cello concerto by Vaughan Williams. It will be performed by the cellist Steven Isserlis. The piece takes the place of a work by Max Reger that appeared in the 1910 line-up; perhaps no composer in the programme has fallen quite so far out of fashion as that contrapuntal German (though I think he will soon be ripe for "rediscovery").

What about the audience? Should we take our teddy bears and football rattles? According to Wright, knowledge of 1910 Last Night audience behaviour is relatively limited. "We know that they promenaded about a bit; and we know that they smoked," he says. "Those things were part of the concert-going of the time. But we don't know exactly how they might have dressed for the occasion, or whether the atmosphere would have been quite as carnival-like as it has become."

This year's musical time-travellers have a feast in store, and all without charge: it is this year's Free Prom, making the afternoon a combination of not just two but three favourite events. As with all Proms, there's no dress code; crinolines and flags are optional. But, please, no smoking.

Last Night of the 1910 Proms, Royal Albert Hall, London SW7 (0845 401 5040) 5 September, 2.30pm