

Posted on Thu, Aug. 24, 2006  
St. Paul Pioneer Press

## **Young people at a symphony concert!**

BY PAMELA HILL NETTLETON

Aug. 24 London, The Proms

Think of it as a red plush-lined pit, a sort of luxury State Fair hippodrome, and start to get a partial sense of the famous London Proms. The Royal Albert Hall is stately: tiers of red velvet curtains and gilt-swagged boxes, with a gorgeous pipe organ backing the stage, and the customary European audience seats behind as well as in front of the orchestra.

But during Proms, in front of the stage, in a concrete-floored oval pit, are no seats and a crowd of classical music groupies. These Promers are the symphonic equivalent of Trekkies. All ages (young people at a symphony concert!), in T-shirts and jeans (at a symphony concert!) standing, sitting, and lying (lying down at a symphony concert!) on the floor, looking genuinely happy and excited about hearing Barber and Mahler. There are more than 70 concerts in the 8-week Proms season, and a ticket to all of them costs about 160 pounds — a bargain. Michael Mabe, who lives in Oxford and works as head of a trade association in London, has been standing in the pit of the Proms since 1988, and before that attended the concerts seated up in the stalls like the rest of us.

He and those like him get a laminated season ticket and then rush around to as many of the concerts as they can, always standing in front of the stage, always dressed as though they're out for a night of bowling, and always honoring the great Proms traditions.

There's the hissing "Shhhhhh!" to be done as the concertmaster walks onstage. The wild applause to raise once she hits the "A" key on the piano to tune the orchestra. And should there be a piano concerto, as there was tonight, when the stagehand raises the lid of the piano, half the crowd yells "HEAVE!" and the other answers "HO!" Kinda like a Vikings game, only with a lot of dead German composers.

Another Proms tradition is to hail a first-time orchestra with an original cheer. Mabe says they were thinking of one for the Minnesota Orchestra, but it was too long. It went something like this: "Welcome to the orchestra formerly known as Minneapolis from the Promenade formerly known as Sir Henry Wood's." Wood started the whole business back in 1895.

Another season ticket holder, London native Steven Wilsher, says he knows Minnesota as the home of Mystery Science Theater. I tell him I once stood on the spaceship set between Crow and Mike, and I have his full attention. He wanted to cheer the Minnesota with "Orchestra sign! Orchestra sign!" like MST has "Movie sign!" in every show. I told you. Trekkies of the symphony world.

The rest of the red velvet hall is stuffed with excited audience members, as well — many of them very young, an unusual age to see back in Orchestra Hall. I ask four handsome, well-suited, British-looking lads why they are so interested in classical music at their age and they tell me they are college students from Notre Dame studying music culture. Well, I thought they looked British.

The orchestra opens with Samuel Barber's First Essay for Orchestra (he wrote three), and is playing to a focused, non-squirming (considering many of them are standing), quiet audience, who respond to the piece

with warm applause. Then the brass leave the stage, the piano gets the old heave-ho, and Welsh pianist Llyr Williams enters to play Beethoven's Concerto No. 3.

Some standing person yells out something in Welsh (I think) that has everyone else in the pit shrugging and wiggling their eyebrows. During the Beethoven, people sprawl on the floor, lay on rolled up coats, sit very still on chairs with their heads bowed. There is no coughing. They are with Williams and with the Beethoven and during the contemplative second movement, it is not exaggerating to say that the atmosphere is a prayerful one. Big cheers. A few standing ovators, unusual for London. Two curtain calls. Then, the interval, which is interrupted by a bunch of Promers shouting out in unison the results of their fund-raising for musical charities (groups like our Greater Twin Cities Youth Symphonies in Minnesota): they've raised 37,000 pounds this year. Then the Mahler. It is, in a word, extraordinary.

Marvelous last night at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, tonight in London it is somehow more. The fourth movement, the Adagietto for strings and harp, is light and dark, grief and peace, both torn from and healing the heart. The audience is amazingly still.

Men on the floor of the Royal Albert are crying as they listen, their eyes closed. Sometimes watching strangers' faces during this movement feels almost too intimate, like a violation. After the final movement, a gentleman sitting behind me leans over to tell me that is the best Mahler he has ever heard. His wife says she felt something electric in the air. The cheers go on and on. Rhythmic clapping and foot stomping. A curtain call. More rhythmic clapping.

Another curtain call. Then an encore: a traditional Finnish tune arranged by Osmo called the Sakkijarven Polka.

Backstage, board members are jubilant, visiting musicians greet each other and shake Osmo's hand.

Concertmaster Jorja Fleezanis and her husband, music writer Michael Steinberg, head to dinner with a circle of people that just keeps growing. By the end of the night, it includes BBC announcer and writer Petroc Trelawney; cellist and recording artist Steven Isserlis and his wife, Pauline; ex-Guardian literary editor Bill Webb; Bach specialist and Canadian pianist Angela Hewitt, my bass-playing husband, and me, among others. I make good use of the considerable cultural acumen at my end of the table by asking the British luminaries to please define my growing list of baffling UK slang. "Pudding-basin hair" is what we call "helmet head." "Blue-eyed boy" is what we call "golden boy." "Flogging" is "selling," "rozzers" are cops, "dossed" is "crashed," and "chuffed" means puffed up and proud. Which the Minnesota Orchestra and Osmo Vanska ought to be tonight.

*Pamela Hill Nettleton is traveling with the Minnesota Orchestra on its European music festival tour and reporting on its travels, travails and performances. Her husband is acting associate principal bass and has been with the orchestra for 30 seasons.*