

## artsfirst night

### Proms 1 and 2

Berlin/Barenboim

★★★★★

BBCSO/Gardner

★★★★☆

Royal Albert Hall

Is this going to be a Proms season of political encores? At the first night on Friday Igor Levit followed a gorgeously gentle performance of Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto with Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* in Liszt's transcription. You didn't need a degree in cryptography to decipher that gesture. Levit is well known for his anti-Brexit rants and the *Ode to Joy* is the European Union's anthem.

More intriguing was the cheeky encore that ended Saturday's Prom from Daniel Barenboim and his magnificent Berlin Staatskapelle orchestra. It was *Land of Hope and Glory*. What on earth did they mean by that? A sardonic salute to Britain as we cast ourselves adrift? Or a genuine gesture of affection?

One thing's certain. In any *Pomp and Circumstance* penalty shootout, the Germans would win hands down. I've never heard Elgar's great march played with such fierce virtuosity.

Yet it didn't eclipse what came earlier in the concert: a nuanced, perfectly balanced and thrillingly paced performance of Elgar's First Symphony. To hear a non-British orchestra playing Elgar at all is still rare. To experience this complex and many-layered masterpiece delivered with such beauty of tone, passion and tenderness made the heart leap.

Earlier, the Berliners had provided the most delicate of accompaniments to Lisa Batiashvili in Sibelius's Violin Concerto. They needed to be delicate. Batiashvili floated like a phantom through the piece, dazzling with precise articulation and subtle ideas, but not projecting enough tone. It probably sounded superb on radio.

In Friday's opening Prom the Beethoven concerto was sandwiched between two contemporary pieces: a five-minute sizzler called *St John's Dance* from the young London-born composer Tom Coult, which was frenetic and compelling, and the choral epic *Harmonium*, written in 1981 by John Adams. The latter, American minimalism on a maximal scale, proved a thrilling curtain-raiser to the new season, with excellent singing from massed BBC choirs and the BBC Symphony Orchestra in fine form under Edward Gardner.

**Richard Morrison**