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Elgar for our time

PROMS 2017

STAATSKAPELLE / BARENBOIM

Albert Hall, SW7

★★★★☆

BARRY MILLINGTON

THE first weekend of the 2017 BBC Proms culminated in a streamlined performance of Elgar's Second Symphony, beautifully executed by the Staatskapelle Berlin under Daniel Barenboim. He strips away the imperialistic trappings of the work, eliminating caesuras between phrases and de-emphasising grand gestures. The result is more organic but also more breathless and arguably loses something in terms of emotional uplift.

The concert began with the UK premiere of Harrison Birtwistle's *Deep Time*, which uses a big canvas (from filigree strings to subterranean tubas and contra-bassoons) powerfully to evoke the layering over billions of years of geological strata.

It ended with a warning from the podium (unfortunately unmiked) of the dangers of isolationism and neglect of European culture. Supposedly "non-political" – it's true the word Brexit wasn't actually uttered – Barenboim's homily was backed up by the German orchestra's two Elgarian encores: *Nimrod* and the *Pomp and Circumstance March No 1*, aka *Land of Hope and Glory* (the Promenaders thought Christmas had come early). Here pomp and swagger were eschewed in favour of spiritual nobility. It would make for an interesting Last Night. As for the symphony, this is perhaps Elgar for our time, though it's not Elgar as we know it. Am I alone in finding the virtues of Barenboim's cosmopolitan Elgar reading more convincing in theory than in practice?

■ *The BBC Proms continue until Sept 9 (bbc.co.uk/proms)*