

Prom 2: Daniel Barenboim; Prom 4: Daniel Barenboim and the Staatskapelle Berlin ★★★★★

When Daniel Barenboim visits the Proms, you can be sure the temperature will rise on every front – musical, emotional and political. He always brings some bigger ambition, some symbolic joining of music to the world.

On this occasion, when he conducted two concerts with the Berlin Staatskapelle orchestra, the theme underlying the music-making was nothing less than the value of a pan-European culture. ‘We have to fight this terrible tendency to fanaticism and isolationism’, he said, in a speech from the podium after the second concert. ‘Education is the key, through music’.

This speech came after two concerts of absolutely stellar music-making, which made Barenboim’s point eloquently. Here we had a German orchestra, playing what are perhaps the greatest symphonies composed by an Englishman - the 1st and 2nd symphonies by Elgar - composed on the eve of a titanic and tragic war between the two nations. They played the music as if to the manner born. I’ve rarely heard the surging energy of the first movement of the 2nd Symphony flung out with such magnificent energy, and the sound throughout was refulgent, glowing and crystal-clear.

Sustaining the long melodic line in Germanic romantic music has always been one of Barenboim’s strengths. These performances were a reminder of how important that line is in Elgar’s music too, above all in the magnificent slow movement of the 1st Symphony, which in Barenboim’s hands took on a truly Wagnerian amplitude.

But Elgar's two symphonies weren't the only glory of the two concerts. There was also a magnificently lithe and lyrical performance of Sibelius's Violin Concerto from Lisa Batiashvili, which caught the heroic stature of the music without any sense of strain. And there was the latest orchestral work from Sir Harrison Birtwistle, entitled Deep Time.

The work was inspired by the vast slowness of geological time, and the way this slowness is occasionally riven by sudden catastrophes and slippages. The piece itself revealed a more human scale, with a melancholy cor anglais solo arousing memories of Birtwistle's earlier processions, and moments of pulsating energy in marimbas and plucked cellos. It was grandly impressive, in an inscrutable sort of way.

So a deeply serious pair of concerts, but there's a mischievous streak in Barenboim too. He played Elgar's Pomp and Circumstance March no 1 as encore, twice. So as well as dominating the Proms's first weekend, he stole the Last Night's thunder as well.

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