

The Very Last Night of the Proms . . .

—as far as we're concerned and as they appear on television.

How many years is it now since we first heard an announcement of a future Radio 4 programme accompanied by pop music and thought at first that the pop had been mixed in by mistake? Human beings are so constituted that we can give full attention to only one thing at a time. Children are being brought up on the contrary principle that they are unable to attend to anything unless something else is also happening, so the schools programmes on television are enhanced by a beat and you can see on the bus a teenager reading Rieu's translation of the *Odyssey* while listening to "music". The lecture is succeeded by the presentation where some may think the overhead projector is primary, some the human voice. It is true that bullet-points on screen can reinforce the spoken message, but only to the extent that the thought is simplified.

Music is after all sound. To music, the faculty of sight is at best unnecessary and at worst a distraction. Television is not a good medium for music, as against cricket or billiards, both of which can be seen much better on screen than in actuality. Television could not convey well the atmosphere of the concert hall, even if it were allowed to, which it is not. No director is satisfied with trying to reproduce the experience of being there. Directors of anything from a rock concert to a symphony concert by way of *Songs of Praise* can't help themselves: they *must* pan one singer in close-up then another, distracting us from the sound. (How can *Songs of Praise* be in any sense religious if the main point is to look at people's faces?) The organist used to be the only recitalist likely to be able to get on with the music out of sight of the audience. No longer so: he/she is visible by CCTV on a huge screen, and if with unpolished shoes there will be gossip.

The Promenade Concerts originated as an attempt to bring music to ordinary people, who needn't pay much for standing room. When the BBC got involved the musical standards improved, and there was no need any longer to be present. Many people owe much of their musical education to the Proms, and perhaps still do by way of the Radio 3 broadcasts and preceding discussions. But on television the proms can no longer be broadcast without, as well as the view of the trumpeter's puffed-out cheeks and the conductor's (cultivated?) facial expression, *presentation* and endless discussion, both preferably by celebrities. For anybody not there in the flesh for the concert commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Vaughan Williams^[1] or not listening on Radio 3, and who heard what BBC2 made of it a few days later, it was much harder just to listen to the music.

Interspersed with the music there had to be discussions with the conductor, the performers and—of course—CELEBRITIES. Classical music and celebrity status may not often mix, but Jane Asher does it, being qualified by cookery books and novels and long since, an affair with a Beatle, as well as participation in the summer of 2008 in a competition for celebrities to conduct a symphony orchestra. On the web she may be seen in this last, waving her arms expressively and still looking pretty. Jane Asher came from a seriously musical family (her mother being professor of oboe at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama) and is old enough to have served on the panel of *Juke Box Jury*. About the *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* she had nothing to say, and said it at some length. It is hard, she observed, to comment on a piece one has never heard before (though after all that puts the listener into the position of a first-night critic). What to do, as personality and celebrity, when called on to criticise a work one doesn't know and about which one has nothing to say? One gushes. Lovely, etc. etc. One wonders what Jane Asher got paid for this display of ignorance and insensitivity.

Will this treatment do anything for classical music? In the radio trailers, the pop-beat subserves the information about the programme, or is supposed to. With the TV proms it is the other way round. There, prom music subserves celebrity-babble. Why not give music a chance?

1 Radio 3, 26 August 2008 preceded by discussion, BBC 2 without the rarely performed ballet *Job*, 30 August

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