



Old and new technology meet in a thoroughly modern festival

Pwyll ap Siôn journeys to Plymouth for a truly innovative contemporary music festival

Plymouth

A shaft of light falls upon the façade of a building. It activates a panel of sensors which trigger a series of sounds inside. Thus opens the *Sunlight Symphony*, the work of composer Alexis Kirke and technologist Tim Hodgson. It is a bold and original opening to the 2010 Continuum Peninsula Arts Contemporary Music Festival in Plymouth, now entering its sixth year.

The *Sunlight Symphony* is by no means the only innovative work featured here. Within the space of a weekend, one can observe robots evolving a repertoire of melodies by singing to each other, sculptors and tin cans fitted with receptors that produce a whole range of sounds when touched, or a collage of noises sourced from observatories, air traffic control signals and natural radio frequencies. The performances and installations may question and challenge our preconceived notion of music in different ways but are rarely done with avant-garde posturing in mind. Instead there is a quiet conviction and confidence in the inherent value of musical experimentation and innovation.

After such radical innovation, sitting down at the Plymouth Guildhall to a concert given by the Ten Tors Orchestra under Simon Ible with Dame Evelyn Glennie was akin to entering some

kind of historical time warp. But Glennie also engages with sound in an immediate and physical way, and her highly nuanced and concentrated performance of James Barrett's new fantasy for solo percussion and string orchestra, *Toilers of the Elements*, was vivid and compelling.

While it was no surprise to see the Guildhall sold out for Glennie's appearance, staging most of the Festival's more outré events free of charge in the Roland Levinsky Building at Plymouth University ensured healthy audience attendance. Such openness and inclusivity also extended to participatory events, the most notable being the enthusiastically rendered "Conduction" improvisation for orchestra, which consisted largely of BA students in theatre, dance and music at Plymouth.

I was reminded in Kirke's *Sunrise Symphony* of Haydn's analogous attempt 250 years previously. Haydn managed to turn the potentially debilitating prospect of working on the cultural margins in Eisenstadt to positive ends. The Peninsula Festival, also lying on the geographical margins of the UK, holds no fears about being bold and original too, and if it continues to challenge, surprise and impress as it has done this year, it may well help nurture a new Haydn for the 21st century. ©

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Our Contributors



SIR RICHARD EYRE, one of the UK's foremost directors, joins *Gramophone* as our new monthly columnist. In addition to having run the National Theatre, his directing extends to film (*Iris*) and opera. He is also a noted author.



Photographer **SAM BARKER's** year has ranged from shooting tribes in a Columbian rain forest to Jenson Button at the McLaren research centre and "sticking Nicola Benedetti up a ladder with an expensive violin in a red dress".



TIM BLANNING, who reviews a musical history tome this issue, is Professor of Modern European History at Cambridge University and author of *The Triumph of Music* and *The Romantic Revolution*.

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EDITORIAL

GRAMOPHONE

Founded in 1923 by Sir Compton Mackenzie and Christopher Stone as 'an organ of candid opinion for the numerous possessors of gramophones'

New Proms season, new guest editor



As someone accustomed to facing audiences from concert platforms, taking this particular stage comes as a new experience and a great honour. I'm delighted to have been asked, for two reasons. *Gramophone* has been in my life for years, one of the first music magazines that I came to know and love, and it is truly fascinating for me to be involved with it from the inside of the process. And the Proms is similarly an institution that has been, and continues to be, very important to me.

This year is particularly exciting for me as I make the leap from admiring observer to make my very first appearance at the Proms, performing Vaughan Williams's *The Lark Ascending*. I couldn't have chosen a more wonderful year, it seems, to be making my debut. There are so many incredible musicians and events, many of them unique and fascinating – even to the extent of having two Last Nights!

'I learnt a lot from my conversation with Pappano. There is surely no wiser conductor working today.'

When James Inverne asked me to take the editor's chair for this issue, he also invited me to interview an artist from this year's Proms line-up whom I especially admire. I chose Antonio Pappano – and not only because we share an Anglo-Italian heritage. There is surely no wiser conductor working today. I learnt a great deal from our conversation and realised how many things there are to gain from that kind of in-depth encounter with a great musician. It's something I plan to do again.

I've commissioned an interview with Andrew Litton, who will be giving surely one of this year's most original Proms – a concert of Bach, transcribed by other composers. Andrew's thoughts are fascinating, as I'm sure the concert itself will be (I definitely plan to attend!).

In my interview with Pappano we talk a lot about the state of Italian classical music and I feel proud that the Italian influence is, as ever, so great in this year's Proms. We chart the ways one can understand Venice's eventful history through its music. My other home, Scotland, is represented, too, as we catch up with the returning Donald Runnicles, and there's much, much more. However you hear the Proms, in the hall or on air, it should be a special season!



Nicola Benedetti

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