

August 10, 2012

THE CATHOLIC HERALD
Sounds that
batter you
into delirium



**MUSIC
REVIEW**
Michael
White

Vaughan Williams / Walton

PROMS 2012, ROYAL ALBERT HALL

Engadin Festival

SWITZERLAND

Succumb though I did to the humanity, spectacle and charm in Danny Boyle's Olympic vision of Britain it left me wondering where I fitted in to the picture, given the near-total absence of things that for me define what living here is all about – including the related cultures of the English Church and English musical tradition. So it was a relief, the following week, to find myself in a packed Prom that celebrated English music start to finish (without any contribution from the Arctic Monkeys). And though it wasn't wholly music of the first order, it at least began with the transcendent splendour of Vaughan Williams's *Tallis Fantasia*, written to float on the vast acoustic of Gloucester Cathedral and a joy to hear in the comparable immensity of the Albert Hall.



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John Ireland's choral cantata *These Things Shall Be*, written for a coronation concert in 1937, wasn't such a great experience. It plods, and sounds too much like something Elgar might have written 30 years before. But as it's never done these days it was a useful thing to programme in this anniversary year of Ireland's death. And it fitted neatly beside Delius's *Walk to the Paradise Garden*, an orchestral interlude that has its place although, along with almost everything by Delius, it's not for me.

But very much for me is Walton's brilliant, brutal, crazily over-climactic oratorio *Belshazzar's Feast*, which isn't what you'd call a subtle score but has the power to batter you into delirium. A good performance leaves me smiling for an hour with the sheer joy of it. And though this Proms performance was a mite straight-laced – without the rhythmic swing or bouncing syncopation that would be ideal, and with a soloist, Jonathan Lemalu, who wasn't on best form – it was still good. Special thanks for this to the clear, strong choral forces and spectacularly virtuosic brass.

What's more, the fact that all these people were essentially the BBC National Orchestra and Chorus of Wales, with the Japanese conductor Tadaaki Otaka, was a happy proof that English music isn't always the preserve of English players.

Performance naturally involves emotion, but it's equally about control, otherwise the result is chaos, and I heard an interesting example of the near-chaotic last week at an otherwise wonderful chamber music festival in the Engadin Valley, Switzerland. With concerts in exquisite southern Alpine settings around towns like glitzy St Moritz and Pontresina, it's a smaller version of the festivals at Verbier and Gstaad in that it homes in on emerging members of the European chamber music elite. And for this particular concert, which took place in the salon of the venerable grand hotel Kronenhof in Pontresina, there were three such players – violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja, cellist Sol Gabetta, pianist Khatia Buniatishvili – all of them star soloists but working together here as a piano trio.



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The music they were playing – Shostakovich and Tchaikovsky – had a valedictory theme to it. By unhappy accident a friend of all three (another musician) had died the day before in tragic circumstances. And the result was playing of such scalding emotionality it was both uncomfortable (like watching a stranger cry in public) and destructive (the music ran away with itself). The response was understandable, but it made the audience feel like interlopers. Not a good experience.

More positively, I also heard in Engadin a magical recital in a remote church by perhaps the world's most celebrated harpist, Xavier de Maistre, a real virtuoso whose playing method exceeds the all-too-usual, expressive limitations of the harp and challenges my tendency to think the best place for the instrument is at the back of orchestras or in the corner of a room at wedding parties. And better still was another church recital by surely the world's leading oboist, Albrecht Mayer, whose rich, trumpet-like tone makes most English playing sound insipid.

The one problem with Engadin is that it's hard to reach: three hours by car from Zurich Airport or four from Milan. But the combination of great artists in great scenery is also hard to beat. Well worth the effort if you're anywhere in striking distance (there's a winter season too).

