



So, what do you know about the Proms? That it's something uniquely British, something to do with music, and has a 'last night'? Correct on all counts. Did you also know that it is self-billed as the largest classical music festival on earth? Or that it has its roots in the 19th century, and that you can buy a ticket to one of 70 or so performances for the princely sum of just £6?

The Proms is a lot of things to a lot of people. It is truly a British institution – heck, they even round off the event with a rousing rendition of the national anthem – and it is an amazing opportunity for almost anyone who is interested to enjoy the best in classical music, from the crowd-pleasers to the experimental.

It has also stayed true to its roots, which at its inception during the Victorian era saw its founder, impresario Robert Newman, seeking to improve the common man through the education of classical music. As he saw it, he would “train the public by easy stages. Popular at first, gradually raising the standard until I have created a public for classical and modern music.” We may these days bill this in very different terms, but the essence is there; it's classical music for everyone, prompting Czech conductor, Jiří Bělohlávek, to describe the Proms as “the world's largest and most democratic musical festival”.

Its name belies its ethos; the word Proms is short for promenade concerts, which were outdoor concerts played in London's pleasure gardens. Instead of having formal seating, the audience comprised those people who happened to be visiting the gardens, where they would stroll around lis-



tening to the orchestra play. Today, a ‘prommer’ or ‘promenader’ is the name often given to those attending the Proms, particularly the people who stand in the areas inside the hall rather than paying the higher price for a seat.

Impressively, the Proms has never skipped a year since its founding. Although Newman may have been declared bankrupt in 1902, a series of backers have supported it over the years, and through wartime when its original home, the Queen's Hall in Langham Place, was destroyed during bombing. Most famously and recently, the BBC has become its flag bearer. The broadcaster has turned the event into an eight-week season of concerts, most of which are held in the Royal Albert Hall. Alongside this, on the famous last evening, ‘The Last Night of the Proms’, it organises Proms in the Park events across the UK, as well as using the season for educational means, with a particular focus on schools.

The ‘Last Night’ of the Proms is what many people associate with the event. Typically, it's a big, brash, noisy celebration, which culminates in a lot of flag waving and boisterous singing. It is regarded as an ostentatious, patriotic event, but has also come to be viewed as a night of protest, with members of the crowd raising banners on subjects as diverse as the rights of miners or the LGBT

community to the plight of refugees.

So, forego that souped-up smoothie or tasty little something from your favourite café, and use the money instead to become a prommer for the day. If you like it, there will be another 69+ concerts for you to try out.



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