

Brilliantly blazing show is highlight of the season

Prom 46

Gurrelieder: London
 Symphony Orchestra/
 Simon Rattle

Royal Albert Hall, London

★★★★★

By John Allison

Often described as “Schoenberg’s *Tristan und Isolde*,” *Gurrelieder* may be concise compared with Wagner’s seminal opera yet it requires gargantuan forces several times the size. Performances are understandably rare, but few venues are better suited to accommodating them than the Royal Albert Hall, making this Prom a spectacular highlight of the season and an obvious draw. A packed hall greeted Simon Rattle, an augmented London Symphony Orchestra (LSO) and three large choruses – how heart-warming to see 6,000-plus people gathered for an evening of Schoenberg.

Rattle, who officially becomes the LSO’s music director next month, was in complete control, at least once past an orchestral prelude that needed to settle; its glistening textures and autumnal warmth may not have floated ideally at the opening, but it soon achieved the right sort of rapture. The orchestra’s sound was built on the foundation of a large double-bass section, which sighed sonorously as the prelude wound down towards the first vocal number.

Schoenberg based his massively lush song-cycle-meets-symphonic-cantata on poems by Jens Peter Jacobsen, the Danish romantic writer, telling of a medieval romantic tragedy involving King Waldemar and his

lover Tove. For much of the long Part 1 they address each other in alternating love songs, linked together by orchestral bridges that seldom sound as magnificently urgent as they did here under Rattle. He also conducted with rare feeling for the work’s pantheistic power, underlining Schoenberg’s heartfelt embrace of the poetry’s nature imagery, a spirituality in contrast to Waldemar’s cursing of God in the dramatically concise Part 2 that follows Tove’s death.

The greatest vocal burden falls on the tenor singing Waldemar, and Simon O’Neill was very moving, caressing the lines with all his usual artistic sincerity. He may not command all the heroic tenor heft ideally needed to ride the biggest orchestral outpourings, but he sang with a Wagnerian’s verbal intelligence and was unstinting in his powerful delivery. Eva-Maria Westbroek was a radiantly glowing Tove, and Karen Cargill gripping in the Wood-Dove’s sorrowful monologue.

Schoenberg was under Wagner’s spell when he began *Gurrelieder* in 1900, but his style had developed radically by the time that he finished it 11 years later. In addition to Mahlerian influences, Part 3 contains his first use of Sprechstimme, a technique that hovers between singing and speaking, potently delivered by Thomas Quasthoff’s Speaker.

The London Symphony Chorus, CBSO Chorus and Barcelona’s Orfeó Català, all under the direction of

Simon Halsey, capped the performance splendidly. The male singers were rollickingly incisive as Waldemar’s Men and everyone blazed brilliantly in the final hymn to the sun.

Hear this Prom again on the BBC iPlayer. All Proms are broadcast live on BBC Radio 3



CHRIS CHRISTODOULOU

Spectacular:
Simon Rattle
conducts
Eva-Maria
Westbroek with
the London
Symphony
Orchestra in
Schoenberg's
Gurrelieder