

An exhilarating take on a choral blockbuster

PROMS 2019

LSO / Rattle

Albert Hall, SW7

★★★★★

Barry Millington

LIKE so many of Simon Rattle's concerts, this high-voltage Prom was as educative as it was enjoyable. It presented William Walton's choral blockbuster *Belshazzar's Feast* in the context of contemporary developments elsewhere.

Belshazzar was delivered with equal sensitivity to its English choral roots (Vaughan Williams's spirit lurking somewhere) and its Jazz Age pizzazz.

Gerald Finley was an eloquent baritone soloist with excellent diction. The Orfeo Català and its youth choir were underpinned by the London Symphony Chorus to do battle with the huge orchestral forces (Walton was enjoined by conductor Thomas Beecham to "throw in a couple of brass bands", as he was unlikely to ever hear it again).

Charles Koechlin's *Les Bandar-log* features the monkeys of Kipling's *Jungle Book*, their antics satirising those the French composer regarded as fraudsters of neoclassicism and atonality (the fugue subject growled out by double basses is an example of his trenchant irony). But Koechlin was experimental in his own way, and Rattle beautifully elicited the sense of wonder that emerges.

Edgard Varèse's *Amériques* fuses the daring of Koechlin with the barbarity of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, projecting the young Frenchman's exhilaration at the innovative vibrancy of New York.

Irony abounds here, too. When *Amériques* was unleashed on the unsuspecting society ladies in New York, it was not what they wanted to

hear. America as progressive and open-minded? Those were the days.

● *The BBC Proms* (bbc.co.uk/proms) continue until Sep 14