

## 2002 Last Night of the Proms

Written for The Guardian

For some time I've been convinced - and The Guardian's own flag-waving preview of the Proms confirmed me in the belief - that 90% of the public thinks that the Last Night's antics take place in the Albert Hall every night of the Proms. Pointing out that it's only half of one concert out of more than seventy carries little weight. And that the new music tradition of the Proms is usually maintained in the first half of the Last Night is probably unknown to 99% of the population, especially those who've tried to blank out the horror of Birtwistle's *Panic* in 1995.

So the news that there will be seven premieres as part of this year's Last Night sounds like nothing less than the collapse of civilisation as we know it. How could such a subversive event come about? Will the flag bearers rush screaming from the hall?

There's no need for further panic. What the Last Night audience is being offered, though brand new, isn't too frightening : it has its roots firmly in the past. Seven composers have been asked to collaborate on a set of variations on a theme from Purcell's 1692 'Ode on St Cecilia's Day'. And when the project was devised, it was not specifically intended to be part of the Proms, let alone the Last Night.

Last December Helen Wallace, editor of BBC Music Magazine, asked me if I would like to be involved in a scheme to celebrate the magazine's 10th anniversary, in November of this year. Having commissioned many articles from composers in the past, Helen felt that this was an appropriate opportunity to ask them to write some music instead, to be featured on the magazine's cover CD. She was aware that this might be rather short notice to assemble a team, so it was important to get them on board as quickly as possible, and a priority was to decide on a suitable theme to offer them.

My role would be to coordinate the project once it was under way, but clearly the logistical decisions would have to be Helen's. We looked at several possibilities for a theme, and agreed that it needed to be neither too well-known, nor too straightforward. Her suggestion of Purcell's aria, 'Thou tun'st this world' seemed ideal : tuneful, but slightly quirky - as Helen wrote, 'with characteristically eccentric twists and turns - corners I hoped would prove provocative.' The work, taking its title from Nicholas Brady's *Ode*, would be called 'Bright Cecilia'.

The selection of composers was more difficult, and something I didn't feel I should be too closely involved with. I could tell Helen who I thought might be available, who might write what sort of variation, but the ultimate choice was hers. We agreed, though, that there should be a mix of British and non-British composers, and somewhere between seven and ten of them.

Helen succeeding in charming nine composers into accepting, although one of them quickly dropped out, finding the theme difficult to work with. The remaining eight were, from the USA, Lukas Foss and Michael Torke; from Denmark, Poul Ruders; from Finland, Magnus Lindberg; and from the UK, Judith Weir, David Sawer, Anthony Payne and myself.

Collaborative variations have a long history - perhaps the most famous are the 50 commissioned from his contemporaries (including the young Schubert and the very young Liszt) by Anton Diabelli in 1819, although they wouldn't be so famous if Beethoven hadn't refused to join in, and written instead his own set of 33. Recent examples from this country, where the composers concerned have been more cooperative, include the Variations on Sellenger's Round, commissioned by Britten for the 1953 Aldeburgh Festival; the 1966 Severn Bridge Variations, commissioned by the BBC; and another Aldeburgh set from 1987, based on *Sumer is icumen in*, all recently released on CD by NMC and the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

Judith Weir's experience with the 1987 variations led her to suggest that she, and she thought the others, would welcome some guidance as to what kind of piece they should write. So I devised a provisional running order, with working titles to denote the character of each variation. The other thing the composers needed to know was the deadline : completion by late July to allow time for the performing material to be ready for recording in September.

It was now early February, and the emphasis was on the recording, with a first performance not yet scheduled. But a conversation with Nicholas Kenyon revealed that he knew all about the project, and - even at this late stage - was thinking of putting it into the Proms. He quickly made up his mind, and since the Variations wouldn't be ready before September, the best available slot just happened to be the Last Night.

I was asked to write an introduction to the Variations for the Proms Guide, but since not a note had yet been written, I couldn't say much about what they would be like. And two things happened to disrupt the plan : Lukas Foss found that he couldn't come up with anything he thought suitable, and regretfully withdrew; and on a happier note, Poul Ruders hit the deadline running, with months to spare; although instead of the dramatic variation I'd suggested he'd written a dreamy reminiscence. The Purcell theme was one that he'd known and loved as a child.

It was time to follow Poul's example, and write my own. I'd put myself down to 'realize' Purcell's theme (which in the original is just a tune and bass line) and write Variation 1, and I decided that what was needed was not so much a variation as an elaboration - a reworking of the theme to bring it gradually into the present. That way, I thought, the contrast between the theme and its variations would not seem so abrupt.

I finished by early May, and the others began to come in - all of them, to my relief, following the suggested guidelines. First Judith, and Michael Torke, then Anthony Payne and David Sawer (both of whom had already been hard at work on Prom commissions); and finally Magnus Lindberg, who'd also been completing a Clarinet Concerto whose first performance is on the same day as the Last Night. To some extent we tried to make it like a game of Consequences, so that as far as possible each composer would know how the previous one had finished : but as everyone was working at roughly the same time, this couldn't be a hard and fast rule.

At the time of writing, the last bits of orchestral material are being prepared, the CD recording is a week off, and the first performance a fortnight away. The order of the variations might still change. We don't know how many composers will be able to come to brave the wrath of the audience. I'll be attending my first ever Last Night, and may be furtively clutching a red flag.