

The week in classical: Proms 1 & 7; L'arlesiana; Il segreto di Susanna/ Iolanta; Die Zauberflöte – review

[The Observer](#)

Classical music

Royal Albert Hall; Opera Holland Park, London; Glyndebourne, East Sussex

The 125th BBC Proms get off to a flying start, Opera Holland Park is on a roll, and the Queen of the Night gets a new day job



[Stephen Pritchard](#)

Sat 27 Jul 2019 11.59 BST



'One small step': Karina Canellakis conducts the First Night of the Proms; and the BBC Philharmonic's new chief conductor Omer Meir Wellber at Prom 7: 'a statement of intent'. Photograph: Chris Christodoulou/BBC

We have lift-off. Another season of the [Proms](#), the largest and least elitist music festival in the world (more than 1,000 £6 tickets available every day) is well under way, having scorched off the launchpad with a moon-walk anniversary theme in a heady week when the operatic stage gave us triumph, tragedy – and real disappointment.

[...]

[Omer Meir Wellber](#) becomes chief conductor of the BBC Philharmonic this month, an appointment that, judging by his Proms debut ([Prom 7](#)), has already put a rocket under the orchestra. His reading of Schumann's single-movement Symphony No 4 felt like a statement of intent. The energetic 37-year-old was in total command, leaping in the air like a tennis player to emphasise an entry, crouching down to demand a pianissimo, reaching out to almost touch the music at the end of his fingertips. And his programming is interesting. He paired Mozart's Piano Concerto No 15 in B flat major, played with expressive delicacy by [Yeol Eum Son](#), with his fellow Israeli Paul Ben-Haim's Symphony No 1 in the first half, and Schoenberg's Five Orchestral Pieces with the Schumann in the second.

[...]

The Prommers roared their approval at the close of Ben-Haim's symphony, written in 1940 but here getting its first Proms outing. A refugee from Nazi Germany, Ben-Haim settled in the nascent Israel, achieving an east-west synthesis in style, and while claiming his first symphony was not programmatic, acknowledged that "the terrible rampage of underworld forces" against the Jewish people had a powerful impact on the piece. It's all too evident in the terrifying force of the outer movements, the music moving relentlessly to massive, ear-splitting climaxes, thrillingly played by the newly inspired Philharmonic.

[...]

Star ratings (out of five)

Proms 1 & 7 ★★★★★

L'arlesiana ★★★★★

Il segreto di Susanna/Iolanta ★★★★★

Die Zauberflöte ★★★

The Guardian
27. Juli 2019

Prom 14: BBC Phil/Wellber review – creative approach makes for a magnificent Creation

4 out of 5 stars

Royal Albert Hall, London

Conducted from the keyboard, Omer Meir Wellber's Haydn might have been idiosyncratic, but at its best this Proms performance was magical



[Tim Ashley](#)

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Palpable enthusiasm ... Omer Meir Wellber conducts the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra in Haydn's Creation at the Royal Albert Hall, London. Photograph: Chris Christodoulou/BBC

For his second Prom with the [BBC Philharmonic](#), the orchestra's new chief conductor [Omer Meir Wellber](#) turned to [Haydn](#) for a performance of his oratorio [The Creation](#). Wellber is passionate about the composer's work, and is concerned that "apart from period ensembles, hardly anyone plays much Haydn these days". "I'm going," he adds, "to be conducting a lot of Haydn with the BBC Philharmonic."

His enthusiasm was palpable throughout, though his approach had its idiosyncrasies. He directed the performance energetically from the keyboard, using a harpsichord for Part I and a fortepiano, stronger in sound, for Parts 2 and 3. He took liberties with the score. The big recitative for Adam and Eve was spoken rather than sung, as was Uriel's cryptic pronouncement on the "happy pair" in their prelapsarian state. The latter was delivered in English, as was the final chorus, at the end of a performance that was otherwise given in German – a reminder, perhaps, that the oratorio was originally planned to an English text.

Wellber clearly regards Haydn as malleable and far from sacrosanct.

Against that must be set the excitement he generated in a work that celebrates the glory of God not only in the act of creation but in the wonder of the natural world. Though the balance took time to settle, the playing was splendid. Orchestral textures and instrumental solos teemed with life as it comes into being, burgeons and grows. The woodwind sounded exquisite and genuinely magical at the start of Part 3 as they ushered us into Eden.

The soloists were strong. Baritone [Christoph Pohl](#) finely contrasted Raphael's lofty detachment with Adam's human warmth. Soprano [Sarah-Jane Brandon](#) took a while to get into her stride but sounded lovely both in Nun Beut Die Flur and her duets with Pohl. Tenor [Benjamin Hulett](#) delivered his arias with ease, elegance and fervour. The performance's chief glory, however, was the BBC [Proms Youth Choir](#), whose singing blended enthusiasm and commitment with superb dynamic control and polyphonic clarity. An evening of occasional eccentricities, perhaps, though the best of it was magnificent.

- Available on [BBC Sounds](#). [The Proms continue until 14 September](#).

The Guardian
30. Juli 2019

THE TIMES

THURSDAY AUGUST 1 2019 · MIDDAY UPDATE

Lightly frosted with an even layer of vibrato, Mozart's Piano Concerto in B flat major K450 twinkled remotely in the Royal Albert Hall. Size may not be everything, but there is a sweet spot, acoustically, where the reduction of forces works to the benefit of all in this building, pulling one's ears into focus. The pianist Yeol Eum Son, the Israeli conductor Omer Meir Wellber and approximately half of Wellber's orchestra, the BBC Philharmonic, didn't quite hit that spot.

This was death by consonance: politely pin-tucked music that, contrary to the composer's boast to his father, made no one in this performance sweat. The rebel grin that saves Mozart's lesser concertos from tweeness is withheld until the third movement's belated twist of chromatic kink. Son's execution of the solo part was sparkling, but in a programme otherwise devoted to Romanticism and the reaction to Romanticism, it was hard to understand why the concerto was there at all, unless to mollify the Schoenberg-phobic.

The swipe and swirl of colour in the opening of Paul Ben-Haim's Symphony No 1 was a tonic. Here was the real voice of the BBC Philharmonic: clear, strong and characterful at full size. Composed between 1939 and 1940, this late Romantic work is testament, lament, protest and warning. Born Paul Frankenburger, Ben-Haim fled Munich in 1933 for Tel Aviv. Sour tangles of brass, predatory side-drum, earthy figures for cello, bass and contrabassoon take us into a soundworld not unlike that of William Walton. This is masculine music, with new material usually introduced by lower voices. The woodwind timbres are those trailed by Stravinsky 30 years earlier, a garish conflagration of bitter dances framing a gauzily feminine idyll for flute and oboe.

Wellber, in his first concert as chief conductor of this orchestra, grew in confidence through the concert. Performed in their original version, Schoenberg's Five Orchestral Pieces were exquisitely shaped and balanced. The sense of unease and longing, the ifs and buts and ellipses, the mauve and silver palette of high strings, harp and celesta, and the impression of a slow implosion of vast structures across the course of the work were beautifully argued.

From this starting point the revised version of Schumann's Symphony No 4 was a breeze. Here was the sharpness and clarity of style that was absent in the Mozart, finely graded dynamics, scrupulously applied vibrato and tumbling, exhilarating accelerandi.

Anna Picard

4/5 stars

The Times
24. Juli 2019

An explosive BBC Proms debut: first review

- By norman lebrecht, on [July 24, 2019](#)

Any doubts about the surprise appointment of a little-known Israeli, Omer Meir Wellber, as music director of the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra were blown apart last night at a BBC Prom of uncommon intensity.

Aside from a warm-up Mozart piano concerto in which the Korean soloist Yeol Eum Son barely touched the sides, every piece in a complex programme clocked in with a rising degree of energy and excitement.

The first symphony by the patriarchal Israeli composer Paul Ben Haim, written in 1940, had hora rhythms along with echoes of Hollywood and Mahler. Dated at times, the symphony was rethought by Wellber in its wartime context, trembling with anxieties and distant hope. A [huge orchestra](#) and near-capacity hall were gripped by the novelty.

After the interval, Schoenberg's Five Orchestral Pieces were played for sheer beauty, each unlinked aphorism a picture at its own exhibition. This atonal work had its world premiere at the Proms in 1912. A century later, it sits beneath BBC orchestral fingers like bedrock heritage.

Schumann's fourth symphony seemed at first too heavy to end a long concert on a hot summer's night.

But Welber delivered an ice-cream sundae, rippled through with rich colours, rushing to the bottom of the glass. I have not heard the Manchester-based BBC Phil blast forth like this in years, or Schumann played with such hunger. Wellber has something of the Kirill Petrenko in his calisthenic movements and searing concentration. There is a cracking new era about to begin in the Manchester concert halls.



Prom 7: Omer Meir Wellber moves through the gears with BBC Philharmonic

Von [Mark Thomas](#), 24 Juli 2019

The Proms are like mini-discoveries. Obviously there's the music. Then there are the artists. But then there are also the occasions they mark. Last year's Proms saw Juanjo Mena bid a fond farewell to the BBC Philharmonic after seven years at the helm, and a year later the Proms welcomed [Omer Meir Wellber](#), making his Proms debut, to his first official engagement as Mena's successor (no longer as Chief Conductor 'designate'). But he didn't hang about setting his stall out with this intriguing and rather generous programme: take a couple of Classical and Romantic staples, throw in a revolutionary work from the early 20th century and a wartime piece from Wellber's homeland and you've got quite a mix.



Yeol Eum Son and the BBC Philharmonic
© BBC | Chris Christodoulou

But there was no whizz-bang of the popular overture to announce his official arrival, but the rather more subtle woodwind opening of Mozart's *Piano Concerto no. 15 in B flat major*, which always sounds to me like you are coming in half way through a conversation. The whizz-bangs came later. South Korean pianist [Yeol Eum Son](#), who has previously collaborated with Wellber, has gained a reputation as a fine interpreter of Mozart, and on this performance it was easy to see why. Son mixed serenity with calm assertion, with a delicate but confident touch and an almost dream-like quality, particularly in the *Andante*, while also creating breathing space amongst all of Mozart's technical intricacies. The wonderful playing of the orchestra gave stability but was not as crisp as it might be. Nevertheless, Wellber took great care over phrasing and brought out a noble warmth in the strings with woodwinds floating lyrically throughout.

The music of German-born Israeli composer Paul Ben-Haim has never been heard before at the Proms, yet his *Symphony no. 1* is considered to be one of the most important works in Israeli classical music. A post-Romantic style tempered with middle-Eastern folk idioms characterised Ben-Haim's music, but there was also an overriding sense of struggle and defiance in this particular work, mirroring the outbreak of war, most notably in the martial overtones of the restless first movement. Wellber gave this real meaning, drawing out rampant brass, persuasive percussion and wailing woodwinds, with the strings aggressive and mournful. He yielded intense emotions and a distant melancholy in the glorious second movement, with wonderfully melting flute, violin and oboe solos after the huge central climax, and the busy tarantella rhythms of the third movement, mixed with the *hora* (a Hebrew folk dance), had Wellber in fiery and tempestuous mood with the sharp, acerbic rhythms stirring up the orchestra into a frantic frenzy. Full marks to Wellber for bringing this rather absorbing work to our full attention.



Omer Meir Wellber and the BBC Philharmonic
© BBC | Chris Christodoulou

After the interval, Wellber took us to the year 1909, a melting pot of musical change. Schoenberg's new musical language of total chromaticism and atonality opened up a whole new world of expressionism, but the real game-changer was his *Five Pieces for Orchestra*. Wellber's approach to this piece was straightforward. Schoenberg always said that there were no themes to try to bring to the fore and that performers should concentrate on playing the dynamics exactly as written. So Wellber simply allowed the music to do its thing. He coaxed each nuance and gesture with care, letting the delicate colours contrast with explosive, violent outbursts exactly as intended, and allowed extreme changes of dynamics and timbres to prevail. Each section of the orchestra played an equal part, and the BBC Philharmonic excelled, with Wellber embracing the unsettling nature of this still remarkable piece very ably indeed.

Schumann's *Symphony no. 4 in D minor* gave the opportunity to end in more buoyant mood. While not an exceptional performance, there was much to enjoy. Wellber brought vibrancy to the first movement, though slightly laboured at times, but with nice contrasts, beautiful woodwind lines and singing strings (the brass were a little over-balanced early on). The lament of the *Romanze* was gorgeous, and Wellber gave himself *carte blanche* in the Finale to be super-generous with tempi, bringing the whole shooting match to a joyous close with the conductor dancing almost continuously for the last five minutes.

Prom 14: Haydn's *Creation*, fresh as a fragrant bouquet

Von [Stephen Pritchard](#), 30 Juli 2019

Who better to sing of the birth of the planet and its infancy than a choir of young, fresh voices who themselves only came into the world relatively recently? Haydn's gloriously tuneful *Creation* sprang to new life at the Royal Albert Hall last night in the vocal cords of the 200 singers of the BBC Proms Youth Choir in a heartwarming affirmation of the abundance of new choral talent in this country. Sitting in the audience was our planet guardian-in-chief Sir David Attenborough, and while he might have challenged some of the science, he seemed entirely enchanted by this hymn of praise to the natural world.



The BBC Proms Youth Choir © BBC | Chris Christodoulou

Meticulous direction, first from the harpsichord and then the fortepiano, came from [Omer Meir Wellber](#), the BBC Philharmonic's new live-wire chief conductor, who takes up the post this month. He made his Proms debut last week, conducting a newly-energised BBC Phil in [a storming performance](#) of Schumann's Fourth Symphony. Last night he pulled another rabbit out of the hat, this time transforming the orchestra into an authentic 18th-century band.

Gone were the broad sweeping gestures of their Romantic 19th-century sound from last week and in came tangy, vibrato-less strings and crisper, harder-edged woodwind, all beautifully decorated by Meir Wellber at the keyboard. He moved from the harpsichord to the fortepiano in the second half in an innovation that drew directly on the text. We had reached the fifth day of the earth's creation, so why not reflect this by demonstrating the growth and development of musical technology in Haydn's time, too?

It was just one of the many imaginative features of this performance, which towards the close featured the soloists speaking their recitatives and breaking from the German into English, to bring us into the here-and-now of modern London. And that great moment at the start of the piece, when the chorus sings mysteriously of God's spirit moving on the face of the waters before the explosion of sound on the words "Let there be Light" was intensified by having these highly disciplined young singers perform from memory, hurling their voices out into the dark void of the RAH.



Omer Meir Wellber conducts *The Creation*
© BBC | Chris Christodoulou

The whole piece is a feast of word-painting, as each new wonder appears on the earth. Christoph Pol, as the archangel Raphael, sang thunderously of the creation of the seas before sinuously navigating us along the limpid waters of babbling brooks and serpentine rivers, and soprano Sarah-Jane Brandon, as archangel Gabriel, sang fragrantly of flowers, fruits and herbs as "With verdure clad the fields appear". But our bucolic reverie was interrupted by a cannon-shot of an entry by the chorus, urging us to "Awake, the harp, the lyre awake! In shout and joy your voices raise!"

Tenor soloist Benjamin Hulett, as archangel Uriel, was suitably radiant for Haydn's glorious sunrise and the creation of the moon and stars, a celestial introduction to the favourite chorus "The Heavens are Telling", which was taken at an unusually stately pace and not always entirely in tune, with the tenors attempting valiantly to reach that crucial top A.



Sarah-Jane Brandon © BBC | Chris Christodoulou

Lovely chuntering bassoons imitated cooing turtle doves, a dazzling flautist nightingale serenaded us and pizzicato double basses searched the seabed for leviathans before the "tawny lion" and "flexible tiger" sprang from the orchestra and prowled metaphorically around the Hall, accompanied by a single, slithering, lowly worm.

The final part of the piece is taken up entirely with the story of Adam and Eve (sung winningly by Pohl and Brandon), turning it from a Biblical story to a *Magic Flute*-like extended love duet, with choral interjections, some of them beautifully realised, particularly the pianissimo entries.

The BBC Proms Youth Choir was made up of singers from its own Academy, the Royal Northern College of Music Chorus, University of Birmingham Voices and the University of Manchester Chamber Choir. All praise goes to Simon Halsey, overall choral director, and his colleagues Grace Rossiter, Joe Judge and Lynne Dawson. And a special mention for language coach Norbert Meyn; chorus diction was exemplary throughout.

Bachtrack
30. Juli 2019