

Prom 21: Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Rattle, Royal Albert Hall

Reviewed by: Edward Seckerson

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A night of love; an hour or two of quiet revelations.

As Simon Rattle and his period band – the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment – nursed the sensuous, no erotic, harmonies of the love scene from Berlioz’ *Romeo and Juliet* the realisation dawned once more that without this extraordinary composition and others like it Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* might have remained forever chaste. Two pairs of star-crossed lovers and between them a seismic shift in the evolution of music. Talk about the earth moving.

Rattle’s ability to command our attention and to create atmosphere from that attention was a major feature of the evening. When did we last hear a Prom open in rapt and all-enveloping stillness – a cushion of whispering strings barely moving air, erratic heartbeats caught in the pizzicati of string basses, nine of them ranged across the rear of the orchestra and for now attending only to the music’s excitable pulse. How effectively Berlioz navigates his love scene between tenderness and unfettered ardour and **how perceptively Rattle realised not just its warm embraces but also its amazing dying cadences** suggestive as they are of those sinking moments where this Romeo and his Juliet feel the cold reality of the approaching dawn.

Tristan and Isolde’s night of love is rather more brutally cut short in act two of Wagner’s opera and **here again Rattle’s gripping concert performance sought to prioritise harmonic tension and the music’s other-worldly theatricality.** Those brassy period horns sounded at once earthy and cosmic in their dramatic offstage volleys and as *Isolde* (the marvellously imperious and ringingly secure Violeta Urmana) and *Brangäne* (the transcendent Sarah Connolly) anxiously acknowledged the timely departure of King Mark’s hunting party a moment of fear descended in barely audible *sul ponticello* strings and oscillating clarinets as if nature too sensed the fear and folly of the lovers’ illicit tryst. Urmana’s thrilling invocation to the “goddess of love” to bring on the night brought on a feverish eruption from the OAE – and how profoundly that would contrast with the terrible emptiness in the pit of the bass clarinet’s lower register as Franz-Josef Selig’s King Mark movingly chronicled his betrayal.

Unfortunate, then, to once again have to draw attention to the deficiencies of Ben Heppner’s *Tristan*. The problems that have long beset this fine singer are now so pronounced that the precious timbre and musicality are scant compensation for the distressing insecurities in support and production. Still, **Rattle prevailed with a translucent and exalted performance.**