

Prom 1
Symphony of a Thousand
Albert Hall

★★★★☆

RICHARD MORRISON

Stung, perhaps, by criticism that recent First Nights of the Proms have been itchy-bitsy assortments of lightweights, the BBC has started the 2010 season with a triple-strength wallop: a whole weekend of monster raving epics. Heaven knows what condition the Prommers were in after listening to Wagner's *Meistersinger* on Saturday and Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra* yesterday. My ears are still ringing from Mahler's Eighth Symphony, the work that opened the festival on Friday.

It is nicknamed the Symphony of a Thousand. Here we merely had the BBC Symphony Chorus, Crouch End Festival Chorus, Sydney Philharmonia Choirs, boy choristers of St Paul's, Westminster Abbey and Westminster Cathedral (all gaudily arrayed in cassocks), and a massively enlarged BBC Symphony Orchestra — plus offstage brass blasting from any nook or cranny not crammed with audience. If they fell a few short numerically, they didn't stint in the decibel department. The opening chord must have been heard in Southend, never mind South Ken. And that was just a taster. Like a Hollywood disaster film, this is a symphony that begins with an earthquake and works up to a climax.

Its text — a creaky harnessing of God and Goethe — is best ignored. Someone once said you should try everything in life except Morris dancing and incest. I would add metaphysical German poetry to that

list. "The Eternal-Feminine draws us heavenward"? Chance would be a fine thing. The music, however, is a different matter. Mahler may have written for gigantic forces, but there's a stunning clarity about his gradual transformation of two or three essential themes through 90 minutes of pulsating counterpoint and hushed ethereality to a blazing apotheosis.

Not everything worked perfectly here. Jiri Belohlávek let the momentum falter dangerously in quieter moments of the first movement; nerves sometimes got the better of the trumpets; and not all the eight soloists made as great an impression as the magnificent Stephanie Blythe, an American mezzo with a voice the size of the Albert Hall.

But Belohlávek paced the huge second movement — really the opera that Mahler never wrote — admirably from its hushed beginning, through those mystical choirs of Blessed Boys, Penitent Women and More Perfect Angels, to the moment when, just before the glorious final chorale, every singer on the platform unites in that ear-splitting rising-sixth phrase. Delivered like this, the moment seems like the Apollo Moon landing, VE-Day and the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel all rolled into one: a thrilling affirmation of humanity's better achievements.

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This ran in late editions on Saturday



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