



## 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 *Amérique* 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 *Amérique* 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.

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**Prom 44**  
**LSO/Rattle**  
**Royal Albert Hall**  
☆☆☆☆☆  
★★★★☆

There aren't many pieces that can make the Albert Hall feel small, but Varèse's *Amérique* is one of them. It's not simply the huge orchestra; it's the depth and scale of the head-spinning, modernist urban soundscape, which teeters on the edge of cacophony and feeds off the energy and rhythms of a city that never sleeps. Stories suggest themselves for the deluge of sounds: the wail of a police siren, the squeak of a subway train on metal rails, the clank of a bolt through a steel girder. This is music in which the world is constantly remade.

Thanks to its vast cast, *Amérique* isn't performed that often, even less so in this original version of 1921, and even more rarely with the scintillating flair of the London Symphony Orchestra and Sir Simon Rattle. If there could have been more of a razor-sharp glint to the playing, there were compensations, particularly the battery of percussion, from whistles to wind machines, which drew the eye and ear. As well as two timpanists, the programme listed 12 percussionists, but Varèse asks for 13 and I counted at least three more on stage.

Koechlin's *Les bandar-log* paved the way, a true rarity, although I suspect that's because it's not as compelling as the Varèse. A Rudyard Kipling-inspired "monkey scherzo", it opens in a jungle heat haze before dancing off into parodies of styles from 12-tone serialism to neo-classicism. As with *Amérique*, the ghosts of Stravinsky and Debussy haunt the score, underlined by sensitive wind solos.

The spick-and-span English choral writing of Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* couldn't have been more of a contrast. With Gerald Finley his dignified soloist, Rattle took the cantata at a cracking pace and he was impressively matched by the London Symphony Chorus, Orfeo Català and Orfeo Català youth choir as the music hurtled to a blazing conclusion.

**Rebecca Franks**

# Reaching heights of dizzying excitement with Simon Rattle

Prom 44

## LSO/Rattle

Royal Albert Hall, London SW7

★★★★★

By Ivan Hewett

Working in the depths of the classical music ocean are leviathans that are normally too impractical or expensive for orchestras to take on. One of the great virtues of the Proms is that because of the Albert Hall's huge, galleried space and the institution's financial clout, it can - sometimes - bring these beasts to the surface.

We saw one of them on Tuesday night, at the London Symphony Orchestra's Prom. Edgard Varèse's *Amérique* was the centrepiece of an evening of ear-drenching orchestral colour and rhythmic excitement, of the kind Simon Rattle, the orchestra's music director, does so well. He opted to perform the original, madly extravagant version of Varèse's great musical dream of America, complete with offstage brass septet, crow-call and boat-whistle. It was worth it, as these exotics humanised the awe-inspiring cityscape and prompted a ripple of laughter, which the composer wouldn't have minded (the humorous side of Varèse is often overlooked).

But what really lifted the performance was the exquisite attention to detail of both players and conductor, and the subtle way they balanced those sinister ticking factory scapes and craggy brass chorales. This revealed the grandeur and pathos of the piece far better than mere ear-splitting force could have done -

though there was no shortage of that in the build-up to the apocalyptic ending.

Before that we were treated to

another, only slightly less extravagant rarity: the vision of the anarchic monkeys in Kipling's *Jungle Book*, as pictured in *Les bandar-log*, by the French composer Charles Koechlin, from 1940. The piece is also a satire on the modern world's never-ending pursuit of the fashionable, particularly among composers. Rattle and the orchestra relished the angular parodies of "12-note music" and neoclassicism so much they actually became enjoyable, but it was the jungle-at-twilight mystery of the ending that clinched the impression of a true, neglected masterpiece.

The final piece, Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*, is hardly a

rarity. But it's certainly rare to see it performed by three choirs, as it was here, with the orchestra's own chorus joined by the famed Orfeó Català choir and youth choir from Barcelona. The result was a choral sound of magnificent depth and power. Together with the weighty, dignified recitation of the story from baritone Gerald Finley, the electrifying playing from the orchestra, and Rattle's superb sense of timing, it made for a performance of dizzying excitement. Rarely has *Belshazzar's* humbling by the Almighty seemed so satisfying.

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CHRIS CHRISTODOULOU

Exquisite attention to detail: Rattle conducting the London Symphony Orchestra



# The Guardian



## Prom 44: LSO/Rattle review – virtuosic Varèse and quick-witted Koechlin

**Royal Albert Hall, London** An all-20th-century programme showcased the wit and brilliance of Simon Rattle and the London Symphony Orchestra, although Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* lacked bite

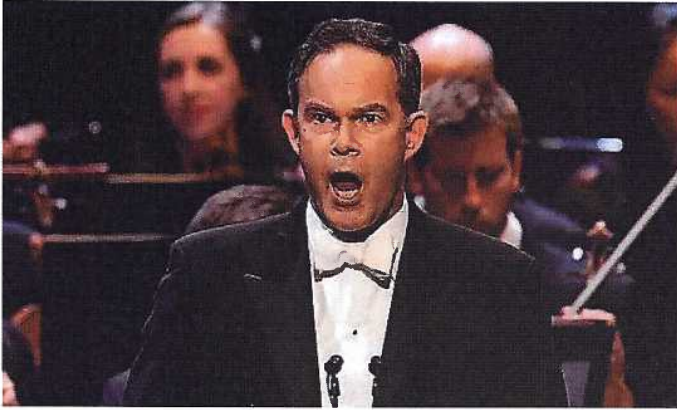
**Andrew Clements**

Wed 21 Aug 2019 13.52 BST

**B**y the time of his death in 1950, Charles Koechlin's work list ran to more than 200 opus numbers, but only two orchestral pieces by this elusive and teasingly uncategorisable French composer, who studied with Massenet and Fauré, and whose pupils included Poulenc and Cole Porter, have been performed at the Proms. One of those is his "monkey scherzo", *Les Bandar-Log*, the final instalment of a cycle of orchestral works inspired by episodes in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. It was also the piece that opened Simon Rattle's concert with the London Symphony Orchestra.

Named after the troupe of monkeys in Kipling's story, *Les Bandar-Log* is a musical satire on the fads and fashions of 20th-century music, combining elements of wispy impressionism with dour, strait-laced neoclassicism, atonality and 12-tone writing. What binds it together is Koechlin's brilliance as an orchestrator, and his ability to clothe every strand of this constantly changing musical narrative in glowing instrumental colours. At its best, Koechlin's music is

unlike any other of its time. It is also the kind of multilayered, quick-witted music in which Rattle and his orchestra excel.



Impeccable ... Gerald Finley at the Royal Albert Hall. Photograph: Chris Christodoulou/BBC

They followed it with another rarely heard score demanding similar instrumental virtuosity - Edgard Varèse's *Amériques* in all its original 1921 glory, which calls for an orchestra of 150 players, including 13 percussionists, almost 50 wind players and an extra off-stage brass group. In a more focused acoustic than the Albert Hall, it could have been sonically overwhelming. But the cavernous space took the edge off its elemental power, in which the European modernism of Debussy and Stravinsky confronts the hard-edged brutalism of the new world that Varèse had encountered for the first time.

After these two extraordinary pieces, Walton's Proms staple *Belshazzar's Feast* seemed almost like an afterthought, even with the combined voices of the London Symphony Chorus, and the senior and youth choirs of Orféo Català from Barcelona. In fact, a smaller choir might have given the performance more bite and presence. Gerald Finley was the impeccable solo baritone, and Rattle ensured that every element was in the right place at precisely the right time. Still, even he could not prevent the whole thing seeming just a bit meretricious.

. Available on BBC Sounds and on BBC Four on 23 August. The Proms continue until 14 September.

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## ***Belshazzar's Feast Crowns Simon Rattle's Splendidly Innovative Prom Programme***

21/08/2019



 United Kingdom **BBC PROM 44 – Koechlin, Varèse and Walton:** Gerald Finley (baritone), London Symphony Chorus, Orfeo Català, Orfeo Català Youth Choir, London Symphony Orchestra / Sir Simon Rattle (conductor), Royal Albert Hall, London, 20.8.2019. (AS)



Gerald Finley (c) BBC/Chris Christodoulou

**Koechlin** – *Les bandar-log* Op.176  
**Varèse** – *Amérique* (original version)  
**Walton** – *Belshazzar's Feast*

In his regular page-long feature in each Prom programme, which bears the title 'The Proms Listening Service' (*sic*), Tom Service on this occasion suggested that Sir Henry Wood's most "treasurable" legacy is the new music that's commissioned and played each year. This year it is 15 new works, and there are several other pieces that are almost new to the scene. If the quality of these "novelties" (to use Sir Henry's term) was such as to justify their promotion then all would be well, but so often patient Proms audiences have to put up with works that either desperately strive to say something new, without success, or are cast in an idiom that palely reflects infinitely better compositions written maybe a century ago. The result, coupled with the programming emphasis on the same old 30 or so composers that we hear all the time, means that so many fine composers, particularly those of the mid-twentieth century, are routinely neglected.

These thoughts were reinforced by the splendidly innovative programme that had no doubt been devised by Sir Simon himself. Charles Koechlin's *Les bandar-log*, completed in 1940, may not be a great masterpiece, but it has many merits, and how fresh and 'new' it sounded, compared with the derivative quality of much of today's new music.

Koechlin was continually fascinated by Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, and wrote a cycle of works based on episodes contained in it. The last of these, *Les bandar-log*, depicts the chattering and cavorting of a troupe of monkeys at one level, but also satirises contemporary composers who act like monkeys in seizing upon newfangled methods of composition. Therefore, we hear examples, for instance, of 12-note serialism (though Koechlin was in fact seriously interested in Schoenberg's works), and neo-classical fugues. The work is extravagantly scored, and Koechlin's kaleidoscopic use of orchestral colour is masterly.

Edgard Varèse wrote *Amérique* over a period of several years after his arrival in New York from France at the end of 1915. It reflects his reactions to the tumultuous activity of the city, and particularly the sounds that he heard in his riverside apartment. Thus, this work, scored for an even vaster body than that for the Koechlin, contains parts for a



siren, whistles and exotic percussion instruments. Though the influence of Stravinsky and Schoenberg is apparent, it is an astonishingly original and forward-looking work for its time, teeming with potent invention of all kinds, and its 25-minute length is not a moment too long.

In both these no doubt difficult works the playing of the LSO had extraordinary energy, finesse and obvious total confidence under Rattle's inspirational leadership.

*Belshazzar's Feast* has been a justifiably familiar work to Prom audiences over the years. Its last performance in 2017, with Kirill Karabits leading forces including the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, was disappointing, since the conductor pressed too hard and the whole thing rather boiled over and became somewhat garbled. Sir Simon is an old hand in Walton's music, and his was a finely balanced execution, with the score's many fast and exciting sections certainly played for all they were worth, but its quieter, somewhat menacing elements vividly brought to life too. Often the solo part is given to a heavy baritone voice, and as a consequence the tricky solo passages usually lack security and definition. Gerald Finley's somewhat lighter, but still strong and resonant voice was perfect for the occasion and his skilful, accurate and dramatic delivery left nothing to be desired. The combined choruses sang as a perfect unit, whose tonal quality, impressive volume capacity and precision of execution were astonishing. Of course, the LSO's virtuosity could be taken for granted, and the whole added up to a magnificent and memorable performance of this great masterwork.

*Alan Sanders*

Posted by Alan Sanders | Filed Under [BBC Promenade Concerts 2019](#), [Concert Reviews](#), [Festival 2019](#), [Newsletter](#), [This Week's Review](#), [UK Concerts](#)

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# Prom 44: Finley, LSO & Chorus, Orfeo Català, Rattle review - lurid inter-war triptych

Less could sometimes have been more in blockbusters by Varèse and Walton

by David Nice | Wednesday, 21 August 2019

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Monkey business with the monstrous: Simon Rattle conducting the LSO

All images BBC/Chris Christodoulou

So the Proms ignored the Berlioz anniversary challenge to perform his Requiem and serve up four brass bands at the points of the Albert Hall compass. Yet at least last night in works of the 1920s and 1930s we got one offstage in the crazed baggy-monster original version of Varèse's *Amérique* and two in blazing antiphons on the platform, fanfaring both luxury and the celebrants of its overthrow in Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*. With **Simon Rattle** in command of vast forces, it was mostly loud and brilliant, but it could have been even more focused in its ferocity.

With two London orchestras showing off in coruscating repertoire three days apart at the Proms – the London Philharmonic under Jurovski on Saturday, the London Symphony Orchestra now in Rattle's charge last night – some comparisons were inevitable. Jurovski, highlighting Russian spectaculars from the previous two decades, kept it all sharp and shining throughout. Rattle, admittedly handling much more elaborate and modernistic material, with Stravinsky as the missing link between the two concerts, didn't always seem in total command of rhythm and propulsive movement.

“ Koechlin put younger Frenchman Varèse to shame for having something to say throughout, even if his simians ape different styles ”

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Admittedly *Amériques* Mark One seems to lumber from one thrash to another, Charles Koechlin's *Les bandar-log*, his anthropomorphic 1939 scherzo taking Kipling's monkey troupe in *The Jungle Book* as its subject, put younger Frenchman Varèse to shame for having something to say throughout, even if his simians ape different styles between steamy-jungle bookends (wonderfully evocative from a team which knows *The Rite of Spring* and its heady Part Two prelude inside out). Varèse surely goes wrong in upturning the advice of Lewis Carroll's Duchess to "take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves"; the sounds, from naughty crow call, siren and wind machines to raucous brass fanfares, are fascinating but repetitious. A more whiplash approach might have been difficult given such gargantuan forces in such a venue, but it's possible, and it wasn't always felt last night.

If there was any fault about this immaculately together *Belshazzar's Feast*, it lay in the two-edged sword of vast vocal forces (the London Symphony Chorus, Orfeo Català senior and youth choirs from Barcelona, pictured above with Rattle and the LSO). The blazing chords of judgment brought supreme shock and awe, but when Walton wants angular, jazz-inspired drive, a choir half this size might have served the purpose better. The same ambivalence pertains to the venue: spacious for the broadest climaxes, taking away the edge of the syncopations and the roller-coaster rides around the great march.



No quibbles, though, about Gerald Finley's operatic narration (the bass-baritone pictured above), reaching its stylistic high water-mark in the punchline about Babylon's merchandise – "slaves, and the souls of men" – though still appropriately creepy, with perfect orchestral colouring, for the writing on the wall (the choral "slain" was spine-tingling, as it must be). The main thing is that we left in stunned admiration at the extremes to which Walton took the oratorio form. There may be deeper masterpieces in the choral/orchestral repertoire, but none more visceral.

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## Prom 44: Rattle and the LSO full-throated in Walton, Koechlin and Varèse

Por [Chris Garlick](#), 21 agosto 2019

Only [Sir Simon Rattle](#) could fill the Royal Albert Hall with a concert programme in which the first half consisted of two obscure and not exactly *easy listening* works from the mid-20th century. Of course, with Walton's crowd-pleasing *Belshazzar's Feast* beckoning after the interval was the main pull for the Proms audience, but they would apparently have to endure works by Charles Koechlin and Edgard Varèse to reach that alluring prize.



Sir Simon Rattle

© BBC | Chris Christodoulou

Koechlin's symphonic poem *Les Bandar-log* from 1940 is this prolific composer's most well-known orchestral work, which isn't saying much with only one previous Proms performance back in 1993. His individual eccentricity has been hard to sell, despite much recent advocacy in recordings by Heinz Holliger. The mystify range of styles he adopts can embrace the late Romanticism of César Franck, through Debussy, jazz and with a touch of the Second Viennese School thrown in for good measure. *Les Bandar-log* certainly reflects all these predilections and more and fastens them to the imagery of the troublesome troop of monkeys from Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*, for which he had been writing a series of tone poems since 1899, this being the last of the set.

Rattle and a sparkling [London Symphony Orchestra](#) certainly made a case for this strange work. Extremes of pitch, dynamics and tempi are juxtaposed, creating a bewildering tonal picture of a forest with dangers in dark corners and the random burst of primate high jinks. The clarity of the orchestral balance and the control of the pace impressed here, as well as the progression to the final outburst of rather aggressive colour that caps the work.

After this assault on the senses one might have longed for something more soothing, like a Mozart concerto, but instead we were launched into Round 2 in even more boisterous form. Unlike Koechlin, who laboured away without really having an impact on the course of musical history, Varèse was to become one of the darlings of the post war *avant-garde*. However, it was mainly his later work which dealt with musical brutality and electronic music that were focused on by Boulez and his cohort, rather than *Amériques* which was his early foray into post-*Rite of Spring* excess.





The LSO, London Symphony Chorus, Orféo Català and Orféo Català Youth Choir

© BBC | Chris Christodoulou



Finished in 1921 it is usually the later more practically orchestrated version from 1927 that is heard in concert, but Rattle opted for the massively scored original version, its first performance at the Proms. And what a juggernaut of a piece it is. It's evocation of the blazing glory of New York in the early years of the century is presented with the echoes of the *Rite of Spring* and Schoenberg's *Five Orchestral Pieces* firmly to fore. However, the overall effect is uniquely gritty and tinged with an ironic humour that doesn't feature anywhere else in the composer's output.

Rattle and the LSO were fully engaged throughout, never daunted by its technical challenges and relishing the backdrop of the 18 percussionists that bang and bashed and squealed their way through the score. The final extended climactic passage was delivered with devastating force and unanimity, clearly leaving the audience feeling both battered and elated.

A hard act to follow, but Walton was the man for the job. *Belshazzar's Feast* has been a popular work since it was first performed in 1931. It is perhaps the composer's most effective work with its canny balance of drama, jubilation and effective thematic material. And it certainly lived up to expectations here. The three choirs – the London Symphony Chorus, Orféo Català and Orféo Català Youth Choir – were splendid at every turn, whether in the gentle keening passage work or the full-throated final chorus. Gerald Finley was stylish as ever and resolute when needed. Rattle and the LSO understood the ebb and flow of the work and with even more extra brass than normal – left over from the Varèse – everything led to the well-earned final outburst of joy.





**Koechlin**

Les bandar-log

**Varèse**

Amériques [original version]

**Walton**

Belshazzar's Feast

Gerald Finley (baritone)

Orfeo Català, Orfeo Català Youth Choir &amp; London Symphony Chorus

London Symphony Orchestra

Sir Simon Rattle

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## Prom 44: LSO – Simon Rattle conducts Les bandar-log, Amériques, and Belshazzar's Feast

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Tuesday, August 20, 2019 Royal Albert Hall, London

*Written by Richard Whitehouse*

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Simon Rattle has often used his Proms appearances to schedule works of notable dimensions (hence Gurrelieder in 2017), and this concert was no exception in featuring three pieces which ideally need the Royal Albert Hall acoustic to convey their fullest impact.

The 'scherzo' among his sequence of tone poems evoking scenes from Kipling's The Jungle Book, Les bandar-log (1940) is also the only one of Charles Koechlin's orchestral works to enjoy revival in the UK. Having given it in London and Berlin (sadly never in Birmingham), Rattle accordingly has the measure of music whose recalcitrance is never at the expense of a greater profundity. The successive depictions of the monkeys (i.e. establishment lackeys) as purveyors of respectively serial, neoclassical, then fugal orthodoxies was realised with acute irony by the LSO, as too that culmination of percussion-clad anarchy, yet it was the preternatural otherness with which the forest is conveyed that left the strongest impression: the music posing questions not so much unanswered as essentially unanswerable.

If the composing life of Edgard Varèse was one of continual frustration over the fulfilling of his grander conceptions, the heady experiences of his early years in New York at least found realisation in *Amériques* (1921) – here in its outsize original version unheard for six decades after its infamous premiere with Leopold Stokowski. In truth, such a process of cumulatively developing variation often feels obscured by the sheer textural abundance Varèse judiciously streamlined on revision; additionally rewriting sections in which the presence



of Schoenberg and Stravinsky might be thought a little too overt. No matter – this remains a testament to the recklessness of the creative spirit, Rattle urging the 140-strong LSO through to a peroration whose visceral onslaught remains jaw-dropping almost a century on.

Had this piece made it to the UK then rather than forty-five years later, the impact of *Belshazzar's Feast* (1931) might have been less remarkable. Not that William Walton failed to grasp the challenge as the Leeds Festival took up a BBC commission for a cantata on the

fall of the Babylonian king, its double chorus complemented by organ and an orchestra only seeming modest in the context of this programme. Gerald Finley was on hand for an authoritative rendering of the baritone part – 'shopping list' and all – that projected effortlessly around the RAH expanses.

The masses forces of the London Symphony Chorus, along with combined youth and adult choirs of the Barcelona-based Orfeó Català, were given their collective head – Rattle being mindful to underline the potency of such inward passages as the initial lament of the Jews in exile or elegiac remembrance of an empire fallen just before the end. Nor was the apotheosis wanting for impact – antiphonally placed brass bands duly adding their weight (and decibels!) amidst the ensuing charge through a tirade of "Alleluia"s then on to that concluding orchestral QED.



Quite a concert: three opulently scored works – each heard to advantage in a venue such as befits their scale – might be thought exactly what the Proms is there to provide.

- Broadcast live on BBC Radio 3 (available on BBC iPlayer for thirty days afterwards)