

Inside Out **Old Promming traditions die hard**



(c) Chris Christodoulou

Centre-parted hair and a plastic bag containing a Havergal Brian score - tenor Christopher Gillett fondly remembers his student days as a Prommer at the Royal Albert Hall, but finds that 30 years on, little has changed.



I suppose most people reading this will have been to a BBC Prom at the Royal Albert Hall. I used to prom a lot when I was a student. I lived within walking distance and, bored off my nadgers during the holidays, I would wander over to the hall and hear just about anything that appealed, usually from the Gallery as there was no way I was going to spend hours queuing for the more popular Arena. As a wannabe singer, I would often wonder what it would be like to sing in that vast hall, with its huge audience and dodgy acoustics. Nerve-racking, I imagined. Back then, prommers wore student clothing of the era - safari jackets and bell-bottoms - and we had longish, lank hair, centre-parted and festooned with dandruff. We carried all our stuff - copies of *Gramophone* and miniature scores of Havergal Brian symphonies - in plastic carrier bags.

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Apart from a single appearance in the Glyndebourne Chorus I then gave the Proms a wide berth for many years. In 1995 I took my American wife-to-be, Lucy, to hear her first Prom and we decided to try for the Arena. I'd given Lucy the full hype on the Proms, lauding their music-for-all idealism and telling her to expect a jolly, youthful crowd. If only that had turned out to be true. Almost 20 years since my last visit, there again were the same safari jackets, albeit over bulkier girths, and the centre partings had expanded into follicular deserts, dusted with even more dandruff. Even the plastic bags looked the same. Sadly, the season ticket holders were rude and bossy, imagining themselves to have some authority over those of us who had come for the solitary evening. And the famous prommer jokes hadn't changed one bit. What once seemed fresh and witty now struck me as tired and strained.

A couple of years later I finally sang in my first Prom as a soloist (and yes, it was as terrifying as I had imagined), and I've done so several times since. It's a strange thing: as you age yourself, policemen really do get much younger but prommers seem to get much, much older. Where are all the fresh youngsters whose photos the BBC likes to vaunt as the typical prommer? Oh, they're several rows back, their behaviour closely scrutinised, not by the hall's own stewards but by the fearsome people occupying their daily spots by the front rail, who imagine themselves to be the guardians of proper concert behaviour.

Now, I'm no great fan of any movement that attempts to make concert-going more appealing to the young at the expense of the middle-aged and elderly. Why should the young have everything their own way? But I really think the Proms needs a shake-up, to break the stranglehold the ageing, die-hard prommers now have on this extraordinary festival.

My solution is quite simple: get rid of the season tickets entirely and lower the price of day tickets by 20 per cent. That would open the Arena to everyone and anyone, and it would end the practice of hogging the front rail. Though, I'll admit, if the Proms did lose its hardcore season ticket holders, I'm not sure how many people would actually turn up for some of the grittier late-night Proms that have been my bread-and-butter as a performer over the years.

Something needs to be done, and if my radical suggestion were to be taken up I fully expect to have a plastic bag full of Havergal Brian and dandruff chucked at me when I'm singing at next year's Proms.

[christophergillett.co.uk \(http://www.christophergillett.co.uk/index.htm\)](http://www.christophergillett.co.uk/index.htm)

[saddoabroad.blogspot.com \(http://saddoabroad.blogspot.com/\)](http://saddoabroad.blogspot.com/)

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