

# That's Entertainment

By Robert Paterson

## Impresario to the Stars

By coincidence, when I was asked to write these words about my experiences at the Royal Albert Hall, I had just read, in a recent Compendium, that many years ago when Yehudi Menuhin was driving to the airport his youngest son said to him, as they passed the august establishment "Daddy, we are passing your home!". That really is very much how I feel about the Royal Albert Hall. This year marks fifteen years of putting on concerts there - concerts as diverse as Andy Williams and Viennese and Tchaikovsky nights, Paul Simon and Nana Mouskouri, Shirley Bassey and Mahalia Jackson. During three generations of untiring and ever- helpful Royal Albert Hall managers, Chris Hopper, the late lamented Frank Mundy and Tony Charlton, I have been constantly astounded at the unbelievable effort that everybody makes towards ensuring that each evening is the resounding success that it usually is. The Honorary Stewards, for example: so little is written about them and yet behind each face at every door in the stalls, the orchestra and the balcony, there is always a character - a person who maybe has a V.C. to his credit in World War II, maybe spends' all his daytime, working for some charity with unstinting dedication. Every time I have stopped and talked to one, I have found one such as this. A truly remarkable and praiseworthy gathering of people, faceless to the public, but absolutely fundamental to the basic nightly cause of fostering the public's interest and enjoyment of the evening. And then one thinks of the facilities that a promoter gets offered.

Those crazy nights when a Robert Paterson rushes into the Hall with telephone calls from New York, Los Angeles and Sydney pursuing him. How helpful the manager has always been to let one take those calls in his office. A discreet tap on the door of grand tier 40 and one is ushered away into the privacy of an office within which one can talk to one's heart's content. How few halls throughout the world in which I have presented shows provide that kind of courtesy and gentillesse.

But enough of what the Hall means to one promoter. It represents to the world quite another thing. It represents everything that is good and best about British entertainment, whether it be sport or music, Remembrance Day or the Burma Star Reunion, Brass Band competitions or Boy Scouts Reunions. It represents the epitome of Britain, which is why I would like to mention some of those marvellous nights that I will never forget and some of the fantasies I planned that never happened, but which naturally I planned only for the Royal Albert Hall.

There are so many of those "great moments" and since it is such a subjective matter, it inevitably turns out to be extremely invidious to list just a few. However, with trepidation I will do so, as since I was a student either sitting on the floor at the back of the arena during the Promenade concerts (where I learnt all my basic symphonic and concerto literature)' or today when I am fortunate enough to be ushered to a slightly more salubrious seat. I nevertheless in the last 25 years, have witnessed some of the greatest musical experiences of my life right there in front of six thousand people. In the early sixties I remember so well the fiftieth anniversary performance of Stravinsky's "Sacre de Printemps" with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Pierre Monteux. That happened to be the very first moment in my life when I actually saw Igor Stravinsky in the flesh. I remember rushing down from the very top of the choir seats to behind the loggia from which Stravinsky walked out, down through the stalls and along to embrace Monteux at the edge of the stage. It was one of the most moving moments of my life and I particularly remembered it with affection, because it was to be but a year later that I signed a management contract with Maestro Stravinsky, and eventually brought him to London for his last concert here in September 1965. During those early student days there are many other happy souvenirs. It was probably in 1959, sitting again in the choir, that Henryk Szeryng made his debut performance in a

Promenade concert conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent. I remember well that it was Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto and I am sure I was the first on my feet to applaud this extraordinary Polish émigré on his first appearance in this country. A year or two after there was an unforgettable evening with the Stern-Rose-Istomin Trio, which ended in a sublime performance of the Beethoven Triple Concerto, but perhaps more significantly there was also a performance of the Beethoven Violin Concerto with Stern that reduced both him and Sargent to tears. The list could go on and on. May I plead indulgence and mention a few more? The night, for example, that Julius Katchen played the Brahms B Flat Concerto with Sir John Barbirolli and, after the very last chord of the fourth movement was struck, and Julius stood up to take his applause, the back leg of the piano sheared off at its base and the whole instrument collapsed in front of him, J.B. and the orchestra! I'll never forget the critics. "Katchen batters piano into submission" in *The Telegraph*! It was all power for cause in those days. (I was lapping up Sir William Glock's menu at the Promenade concerts, listening to David Oistrakh's magnificent performance, hearing the astounding debut of Sviatoslav Richter's with the Dvorak Concerto instantly followed up the next day by the two Liszt Concerti and as an encore the "Totentanz". What performances! After all in those days all we had to go by about arguably the World's greatest pianist, was an extraordinary performance of the Schumann Piano Concerto, which had been released some two years before. Then there was Lenny Bernstein's moving Memorial Concert to Igor Stravinsky and, in particular, his performance of "The Symphony of Psalms". Shortly after that the Royal Albert Hall celebrated its centenary culminating with an unforgettable performance of "Belshazzar's Feast" with Sir William Walton, a frail figure, walking on to the podium and conducting with such authority and grandeur. A moment during which one was proud to be British and indeed to be celebrating with the Royal Albert Hall. A year later Rostropovich gave his first Promenade concert. It was "Don Quixote", - an absolutely ravishing performance from the world's greatest cellist, who certainly appeared to be as equally moved as the audience.

How faithful he was to the morendo in the last bars!

Six years later I found myself sitting between the now much older Jeremy Menuhin and David Frost at the televised Dvorak Cello Concerto with Slava and again his powers appeared [to be] totally undiminished. I remember once discussing with him the extraordinary intellectual, mental and physical problems that he must have faced when, in the late sixties in New York, he played the entire repertoire for cello and orchestra within a period of three weeks. "Oh no" he said, "It is very simple. All I ever do is sit at my chair and to play music". How very simple indeed and yet why is it that no-one, since possibly Casals at his very greatest, has ever begun to produce such sounds as Slava? We are very fortunate that he has now taken his decision to live in the West and that we have the opportunity of hearing even more of him than in the past. In the last year or two there are a few landmarks that I would regret not mentioning. One was Riccardo Muti's Verdi "Requiem" - a performance that set the Royal Albert Hall alight and indeed possibly, and finally, paved the way for Muti to be rightly described as the successor to Giulini and even lay claim to the mantle of a latter day Toscanini. One of the annual events that has given me the most pleasure in recent years is the Schools Prom. Derek Jewell, Publishing Director of Times Newspapers, initiated the idea some three or four years ago and when you actually dissociate the evening from the popcorn and Coca-Cola, the harassed staff dealing with a virtual St. Trinians' night out, you realise the depth and wealth of talent that lies latent in this country. Some never discovered, never furthered, never given a chance. What a tragedy it is, but what pleasure the Schools Proms (this year now numbering three days) gives to all those school-children, parents and the public at large. More power to their elbow and long may they flourish.

Let me finish with a brief note of "the ones that got away" - those concerts that I would love to have presented, which circumstances regrettably prevented happening. The late Judy Garland. I remember in the mid-sixties, lived near me in The Boltons and, but for a matter of sadly insurmountable insurance problems would have

given her last London appearance at the Royal Albert Hall. I remember very well my discussions with Marlene Dietrich and Noel Coward about a joint concert and where?: quite naturally it had to be on the most famous stage in the world. In 1967 at the age of eighty-five Stravinsky asked me to mount a birthday concert in which he would conduct "A Soldier's Tale", Picasso was to design the backdrops, Orson Welles play the Devil. Maya Plisetskaya the dancer and Lawrence Harvey, bless his heart, the Soldier. Sadly Stravinsky's health worked against it and it never happened. Duke Ellington who had, some years before, appeared with the London Symphonic Orchestra in 1973, shortly after the Royal Variety Performance that November, which proved sadly to be his last ever public appearance. On the show he was to have premiered a piece, which he very touchingly dedicated to me. Instead I inherited his last composition from his estate and it still has not been performed.

I am always asked to quote "funny stories" about shows I have presented at the Royal Albert Hall. All in all now about one hundred and fifty. Despite what people think. there really are very few excitements going on backstage --- however late the curtain goes up! I am sure that people sit in the audience and think, if a concert starts late, there are all kinds of backstage rows and problems occurring. It really isn't always the case. We recently televised Barry Manilow and he, for example, insists on going on fifteen minutes late, so that everybody who arrives late as a result of traffic etc" gets a chance to see his entrance and see the entire show. On the other hand, to counteract that very understanding sentiment, you sometimes have to put up with barracking from the entire audience. It just shows that the impresario can never win! I know that once when Benny Goodman went on stage late for me at the Royal Albert Hall, it was because he had, some months before, slipped a disc and was, in fact, in considerable pain on the evening. At the very last minute, in order to give himself a few more minutes of peace, he asked me to go on stage and announce his Sextet, one by one, with a brief biography of each. It was the first time in my life I had walked in a spotlight on to the Royal Albert Hall stage and, hopefully, it may well prove to be

the last! Quite apart from being totally terrified, I instantly realised that, as soon as I had walked up the ramp, the audience thought I was Benny Goodman and I am still trying to work out whether that was flattering to me or to him!

All in all though, my fifteen years of putting on shows there have been incredibly happy. I remember well Lord Olivier agreeing to narrate "Carnival of the Animals" with the Philharmonia Orchestra in 1965 and, as I stood in terror at 9.55 a.m. for a 10.00 a.m. rehearsal, determined that Larry was late, he had quietly slipped in a side door and begun rehearsing before I got back to the stage! There was a late curtain rise on Paul Simon, who did not arrive from the Dorchester Hotel at 7.30 for the prescribed time. Knowing him to be a man of such punctilious habits, I kept calling the hotel and getting no reply from his suite. I subsequently found that he had sent the suit that he had specially chosen for his London debut to the cleaners and it had been returned shrunk beyond all measure and he was completely unable to get into it! He therefore appeared in T-shirt and jeans and at least forty-five minutes late!

These words have rambled on, but they have done so intentionally. I can never say too much about the Royal Albert Hall, its staff, its management and the very feeling that it creates to someone like me. It really is the pivot of everything that is excellence in British entertainment and that is how I am sure it will always remain.