

Jessica Duchen: Prestigious commissions come with a health warning

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It's in the nature of commissioning a new piece of music that nobody knows how it will turn out until it is too late, but a Proms premiere is an especially dangerous undertaking. It presents unique challenges; and, in rising to them, composers sometimes trip up. Working in the warmth of prestige, for performance by a top-quality orchestra in a huge hall, there's an understandable temptation towards over-ambition or impracticality. Works might turn out lengthier than desired, or demand unusual, hard-to-find instruments, or fall foul of the place's size and acoustics. And when disasters occur, they do so very publicly.

In 2007, Sam Hayden's *Substratum* was truncated at short notice with only three of seven movements performed. A slip in the programme told the audience simply that it had "proved impossible" to prepare the whole thing. Another case was John Casken's *Symphony No 1, Broken Consort*, spanning more than half-an-hour and including a Gypsy ensemble, cimbalom and all, among the orchestra. Its 2004 premiere received plenty of advance publicity and critical acclaim, but it still awaits another outing.

Last year the much-admired *Cello Concerto* by Unsuk Chin proved to have considerable staying power. With a devoted soloist to champion it (in Chin's case, the cellist Alban Gerhardt), a fine new concerto has a particularly strong chance of gaining a foothold on the concert circuit. So, too, does any work that is co-commissioned with other orchestras: if three different orchestras in three different countries chip in, each giving three performances, that piece receives considerable exposure.

Nevertheless, an aura of glamour hovers around the first presentation of, so to speak, virgin music. Afterwards it dissipates; and unless a composer is as popular as John Adams or Steve Reich, the word "premiere" is more likely to put off than attract the audience.

That's because, even if closer scrutiny reveals otherwise, there's still a widespread perception among concert-goers that a typical Proms commission is the work of an earnest, young, white, male Brit in thrall to Birtwistle, Britten or Berg. How often have we sat there anticipating a new piece only to hear, yet again, instrumental strata emerging in succession from the space in dissonance after gaping dissonance, topped by a vainly poetic title? We watch our neighbours roll their eyes towards the hall's acoustic mushrooms and mutter, "One of those".

It's interesting to look at those in the past who have not received Proms commissions. Composers as contrasting as Birtwistle, Richard Rodney Bennett, Malcolm Williamson and Peter Maxwell Davies have had numerous return invitations. But Benjamin Britten, considered the world over as the UK's greatest composer and today often viewed as a reference point for the "establishment", wrote his Piano Concerto for the Proms of 1938, where it was conducted by Sir Henry Wood. Nothing more. They never commissioned anything from him.

Commissioning music always involves trial and error. Most new pieces are bound to disappear; that has always been the case. But to find new masterpieces it's essential to keep taking the risks. This year's commissions include works by Mark-Anthony Turnage, Robin Holloway, Alissa Firsova, a violin concerto for Alina Ibragimova by Huw Watkins and a Last Night piece from Jonathan Dove, among others. Will there be some transformations? There's only one way to find out.