

First Night of the Proms, Royal Albert Hall, London

(Rated 3 / 5)

Proms' opening blast fails to hit the high notes

Reviewed by Jessica Duchen

The arena is heaving with promenaders; the bust of Sir Henry Wood, founder of the Proms, is back on its pedestal.

The Proms are here again, set to dominate London's summer music for the next two months. And the grand-scale opening Prom is ready to roll, launching into a brand new piece by Judith Weir, *Stars, Night, Music and Light*, commissioned specially for the occasion. A setting for chorus, organ and the noisier instruments of the orchestra of lyrical words from "Man" by George Herbert, it has Weir's characteristic lightness of touch and much lyricism, despite its hefty forces – though its throbbing repetitions sound startlingly post-minimalist, as if she's been listening to quantities of John Adams.

A more traditional opener was next up: Brahms' *Academic Festival Overture*, with added power in the addition of the massed chorus – BBC Symphony Chorus and BBC Singers together – joining the work's embedded college song "Gaudeamus igitur" plus a rogue line that was once chucked in by Sir Malcolm Sargent; it translates as "Long live music colleges!" (Amen to that.) That made everyone sit up – but otherwise this Brahms sounded very academic and, other than the terrific singing, not too festive. The programme should have been fizzing with excitement by now.

Who's to blame? The buck has to stop at the top, with the man waving the baton. Jiri Belohlavek, the BBCSO's chief conductor, had as his next victim the brilliant young pianist Benjamin Grosvenor, making his Proms debut days after his 19th birthday.

Liszt's *Second Piano Concerto*, an imaginative one-movement rhapsody, isn't the Hungarian bicentenary boy's finest hour, but aspects of it suit Grosvenor to the core. That boy seems to have a sonic variety of liquid gold in his fingers. He's a natural romantic, sensing exactly how to shape an ecstatic arc and pace a rubato; Liszt's music cries out for his flexible poetry. But

Belohlavek's stolid direction seemed to squeeze the life and joy out of everything. Lacklustre orchestral playing and an emotionally blank cello solo were shown up by the beauty, elegance and spontaneity of Grosvenor's tone.

It takes a special type of courage to go into a packed Royal Albert Hall and play so softly.

Fortunately, Grosvenor was able to give an encore – a virtuoso transcription by György Cziffra of Brahms' Hungarian Dance No 5 in which, let off the leash, he showed us a palette beyond anything imaginable in an orchestra, let alone this orchestra.

It also takes a special kind of leadenness to make Janáček's Glagolitic Mass dull. Belohlavek managed it. First performed in 1927, this work – given tonight in a new edition – is a celebration of life and love, mystical, pantheistic, uniting the spiritual with the sensual. High points did arrive as the chorus rose to the occasion magnificently in the highest, most ecstatic writing. Of the soloists, Híbla Gerzmava's luminous soprano stole the show, and David Goode's organ solo provided much needed oomph.

Janacek is portraying a glorious dream of marrying his beloved Kamila Stosslová. We got perfunctory Czech dumplings. The BBC Symphony Orchestra and its chief conductor urgently need to raise their game.