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An evening at the PROM's Summer Festival

Every year, during the summer, a countless variety of classical music concerts and performances takes place in the numerous theatres and halls of one of the biggest cities in Europe: I am referring to London.

Everyone knows about the PROM Programme — that is a classical music summer festival that starts in July and ends about the middle of September — not necessarily because everyone is interested in classical music, but because the presentation and organisation of this event is so well managed, that even non-music lovers are attracted to it. The name PROM comes from Promenade Concerts, which were organised by Henry Wood's about hundred years ago in London, because the original intention was to offer a series of classical music concerts while the people were just walking around.

What basically makes the PROM Festival so successful still today it is a whole, brought together by a number of different connected aspects. Firstly, the advertising: every single performance is broadcast in real time on the BBC Radio and normally repeated the day after at a different time, in order to allow a further listening; concert listings are constantly updated on a website, which stands as the most recent and correct version; programs and performers' biographical information with critical articles concerning the composers are available in the brochures for sale in

every London bookshop. Secondly, the facilities: depending on the type of the performance, the ticket prices can vary between £ 30 (~ 95 DM) and £ 6 (~ 20 DM), but they are able also to descend to the highly tempting sum of only £ 3 (~10 DM). Because of the particular architectural structure of the Royal Albert Hall — where the concert mainly take place — over 500 standing tickets are offered for sale on a first come, first served basis. To take advantage of this you have to reach the concert place ninety minutes before the start and queue for it outside the building. Despite waiting sometimes for even more than two hours, people belonging to all different age groups are likely to be seen queuing: their only purpose is to buy a cheap standing ticket for the Gallery or the Arena where, if you are among the first, you might obtain an enviable place just in front of the stage or the orchestra pit. Finally, the magnificent scenery offered by the London theatres and halls that house the concerts and their clear acoustics have to be considered the reason for PROM's popularity too. A further remarkable factor is moreover the assured quality of the performance, since the musicians involved are above all already known worldwide.

In the context of the PROM season at the Royal Albert Hall, the concert I would like to describe in this article is one that particularly captured my attention and my interest in September because of the music played and also because of the interpretation. Alfred Brendel who has performed as soloist in the Mozart's Piano Concerto n. 25 in C major K503 supported by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, has celebrated just this year his 70th birthday and honestly I do not think that the choice of this piano concerto was accidental at all.

Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli said once something rather curious in an interview. In his opinion, Mozart was the kind of composer whose music can be understood and therefore performed only in two specific periods of a pianist's life, namely in his childhood and in his old age. It is quite problematic and challenging too to establish where or rather at which age technical and interpretative maturity may find its balance with ingenuousness, giving birth to a natural spontaneity, which is indeed always one of the main characteristics of Mozart's compositions. It is true that a certain predominant feeling of an only apparent lightheartedness should emotionally lead the audience to believe Mozart's music to be so easy. Frankly all this could technically be achieved by a talented young pianist as well as by a more mature one. Anyway, although several musicians do not completely agree with Michelangeli's assertion, this does not have to be taken as totally wrong and therefore discarded. The fact is that nowadays it is really necessary an effort to find the name of Mozart on a piano concert program, apart from international piano competitions where Mozart might be played just because it is compulsory. Clearness, sharpness, phrasal elegance, moderated little pedal, cleanliness of clusters and scales, controlled dynamic which means sounds intensity, are skills required from a pianist who aims to play Mozart.

To risk playing any one of his compositions by heart it presupposes having achieved a high grade of control over the composition, especially mental. A pianist ought to show *perfection*, pure and simple. Perhaps the awareness of that pushes some interpreters to avoid performing Mozart particularly because they are scared by the idea of being faced by a

musical whole that does not admit the slightest error. Every single note is stressed and well pronounced by Mozart, so as a consequence nothing can be hidden or masked — and certainly not a memory blackout — by pressing down at random the right pedal, for example. According to Michelangeli's theory, let's imagine that a child plays through a piece by Mozart thanks to the absence of *interpretative anxiety* just because a child might be concentrated exclusively on the accuracy of the notes rather than on their expressive meanings and harmonic interaction. But in a paradoxical way the result would be the same in the case of an older pianist who, in spite of being conscious of the challenge he is going to undertake, can turn the pianist's dread of performing Mozart into his own advantage because his deeper emotional experience permits him to. However, we cannot allow ourselves to be sidetracked by this topic with its psychological implications, but it is very interesting though.

Alfred Brendel grew up in Austria and studied in Vienna. Known worldwide as brilliant interpreter of Beethoven and Schubert, he presented to London a wonderful Mozart. I really enjoyed listening to Brendel and I was astonished by the bright freshness which flowed from the beginning of his performance straight to the end of it. The dialogue with the orchestra, conducted by Sir Charles Mackerras, was never interrupted. Brendel had to return on the stage for eight times: while he was shaking the first violin's hand the audience was wild with excitement. Whenever you have the opportunity to present a life concert do not miss it, especially if Mozart is played: through it you can estimate whether or not you are listening to a great pianist.