

Prom 44
LSO/Rattle
Royal Albert Hall



There aren't many pieces that can make the Albert Hall feel small, but Varèse's *Amériques* is one of them. It's not simply the huge orchestra; it's the depth and scale of the head-spinning, modernist urban soundscape, which teeters on the edge of cacophony and feeds off the energy and rhythms of a city that never sleeps. Stories suggest themselves for the deluge of sounds: the wail of a police siren, the squeak of a subway train on metal rails, the clank of a bolt through a steel girder. This is music in which the world is constantly remade.

Thanks to its vast cast, *Amériques* isn't performed that often, even less so in this original version of 1921, and even more rarely with the scintillating flair of the London Symphony Orchestra and Sir Simon Rattle. If there could have been more of a razor-sharp glint to the playing, there were compensations, particularly the battery of percussion, from whistles to wind machines, which drew the eye and ear. As well as two timpanists, the programme listed 12 percussionists, but Varèse asks for 13 and I counted at least three more on stage.

Koechlin's *Les bandar-log* paved the way, a true rarity, although I suspect that's because it's not as compelling as the Varèse. A Rudyard Kipling-inspired "monkey scherzo", it opens in a jungle heat haze before dancing off into parodies of styles from 12-tone serialism to neo-classicism. As with *Amériques*, the ghosts of Stravinsky and Debussy haunt the score, underlined by sensitive wind solos.

The spick-and-span English choral writing of Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* couldn't have been more of a contrast. With Gerald Finley his dignified soloist, Rattle took the cantata at a cracking pace and he was impressively matched by the London Symphony Chorus, Orfeo Català and Orfeo Català youth choir as the music hurtled to a blazing conclusion.

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