

**Koechlin**

Les bandar-log

**Varèse**

Amériques [original version]

**Walton**

Belshazzar's Feast

Gerald Finley (baritone)

Orfeo Català, Orfeo Català Youth Choir &amp; London Symphony Chorus

London Symphony Orchestra

Sir Simon Rattle

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007v097/episodes/player>

## Prom 44: LSO – Simon Rattle conducts Les bandar-log, Amériques, and Belshazzar's Feast

Tuesday, August 20, 2019 Royal Albert Hall, London

*Written by Richard Whitehouse*

Shares

Simon Rattle has often used his Proms appearances to schedule works of notable dimensions (hence Gurrelieder in 2017), and this concert was no exception in featuring three pieces which ideally need the Royal Albert Hall acoustic to convey their fullest impact.

The 'scherzo' among his sequence of tone poems evoking scenes from Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, *Les bandar-log* (1940) is also the only one of Charles Koechlin's orchestral works to enjoy revival in the UK. Having given it in London and Berlin (sadly never in Birmingham), Rattle accordingly has the measure of music whose recalcitrance is never at the expense of a greater profundity. The successive depictions of the monkeys (i.e. establishment lackeys) as purveyors of respectively serial, neoclassical, then fugal orthodoxies was realised with acute irony by the LSO, as too that culmination of percussion-clad anarchy, yet it was the preternatural otherness with which the forest is conveyed that left the strongest impression: the music posing questions not so much unanswered as essentially unanswerable.

If the composing life of Edgard Varèse was one of continual frustration over the fulfilling of his grander conceptions, the heady experiences of his early years in New York at least found realisation in *Amériques* (1921) – here in its outsize original version unheard for six decades after its infamous premiere with Leopold Stokowski. In truth, such a process of cumulatively developing variation often feels obscured by the sheer textural abundance Varèse judiciously streamlined on revision; additionally rewriting sections in which the presence



of Schoenberg and Stravinsky might be thought a little too overt. No matter – this remains a testament to the recklessness of the creative spirit, Rattle urging the 140-strong LSO through to a peroration whose visceral onslaught remains jaw-dropping almost a century on.

Had this piece made it to the UK then rather than forty-five years later, the impact of *Belshazzar's Feast* (1931) might have been less remarkable. Not that William Walton failed to grasp the challenge as the Leeds Festival took up a BBC commission for a cantata on the

fall of the Babylonian king, its double chorus complemented by organ and an orchestra only seeming modest in the context of this programme. Gerald Finley was on hand for an authoritative rendering of the baritone part – 'shopping list' and all – that projected effortlessly around the RAH expanses.

The masses forces of the London Symphony Chorus, along with combined youth and adult choirs of the Barcelona-based Orfeo Català, were given their collective head – Rattle being mindful to underline the potency of such inward passages as the initial lament of the Jews in exile or elegiac remembrance of an empire fallen just before the end. Nor was the apotheosis wanting for impact – antiphonally placed brass bands duly adding their weight (and decibels!) amidst the ensuing charge through a tirade of "Alleluia"s then on to that concluding orchestral QED.



Quite a concert: three opulently scored works – each heard to advantage in a venue such as befits their scale – might be thought exactly what the Proms is there to provide.

- Broadcast live on BBC Radio 3 (available on BBC iPlayer for thirty days afterwards)