

Reaching heights of dizzying excitement with Simon Rattle

Prom 44

LSO/Rattle

Royal Albert Hall, London SW7

★★★★★

By Ivan Hewett

Lurking in the depths of the classical music ocean are leviathans that are normally too impractical or expensive for orchestras to take on. One of the great virtues of the Proms is that because of the Albert Hall's huge, galleried space and the institution's financial clout, it can – sometimes – bring these beasts to the surface.

We saw one of them on Tuesday night, at the London Symphony Orchestra's Prom. Edgard Varèse's *Amérique* was the centrepiece of an evening of ear-drenching orchestral colour and rhythmic excitement, of the kind Simon Rattle, the orchestra's music director, does so well. He opted to perform the original, madly extravagant version of Varèse's great musical dream of America, complete with offstage brass septet, crow-call and boat-whistle. It was worth it, as these exotics humanised the awe-inspiring cityscape and prompted a ripple of laughter, which the composer wouldn't have minded (the humorous side of Varèse is often overlooked).

But what really lifted the performance was the exquisite attention to detail of both players and conductor, and the subtle way they balanced those sinister ticking factory-scapes and craggy brass chorales. This revealed the grandeur and pathos of the piece far better than mere ear-splitting force could have done –

though there was no shortage of that in the build-up to the apocalyptic ending.

Before that we were treated to

another, only slightly less extravagant rarity: the vision of the anarchic monkeys in Kipling's *Jungle Book*, as pictured in *Les bandar-log*, by the French composer Charles Koechlin, from 1940. The piece is also a satire on the modern world's never-ending pursuit of the fashionable, particularly among composers. Rattle and the orchestra relished the angular parodies of "12-note music" and neoclassicism so much they actually became enjoyable, but it was the jungle-at-twilight mystery of the ending that clinched the impression of a true, neglected masterpiece.

The final piece, Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*, is hardly a

rarity. But it's certainly rare to see it performed by three choirs, as it was here, with the orchestra's own chorus joined by the famed Orfeó Català choir and youth choir from Barcelona. The result was a choral sound of magnificent depth and power. Together with the weighty, dignified recitation of the story from baritone Gerald Finley, the electrifying playing from the orchestra, and Rattle's superb sense of timing, it made for a performance of dizzying excitement. Rarely has *Belshazzar's* humbling by the Almighty seemed so satisfying.

See this concert on BBC 4 on Friday at 7.30pm. Listen for 30 days on BBC Sounds. The Proms continue until Sept 14. Details: 020 7070 4441; bbc.co.uk/proms



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Exquisite attention to detail: Rattle conducting the London Symphony Orchestra