



Rainbow over Proms at St Jude's

RON FINLAY

There was sunshine, showers and finally a rainbow for the Proms at St Jude's Festival this year – metaphorically as well as literally.

SUNSHINE

On the sunny side, the events were first-class and highly enjoyed by everyone who attended.

Perhaps the best loved concert was the one that might be least expected to 'wow', and that was the combination of soprano voice,

organ and saxophone performed by the Suburb's Grace Davidson, Libby Burgess and Christian Forshaw under the title of their recent album, Historical Fiction (see review opposite). In the unprompted words of one visitor, "It was superb – probably the best I've seen/heard at Proms ever. All the performers were exceptional and they used the church acoustics to perfection. I do hope they will return. Thank you again for bringing such wonders to our doorstep."

Highly popular were Fantasia Orchestra with prize-winning pianist Alim Beisembayev stepping in late to play Rachmaninov's 2nd Piano Concerto; the Darius Brubeck Quartet performing jazz from South Africa and the Dave Brubeck portfolio; and the Joni and Me evening, starring Joanna Eden with Chris Ingham and Andrés Lafone.

Suburb stars Noah and Robert Max were acclaimed, as always; Orchestra Nova charmed audiences with Mendelssohn and Schubert; the Gould Trio impressed with their expertise; Nevill Holt Opera sang beautiful arias; and the Armonico Consort brought cheers to their reprise on music for the Queen's coronation.

LITFEST

The Henrietta Barnett School Hall was filled early on a Sunday morning to hear Jon Sopel in conversation with Simon Lewis. The two had known each other since their youth, when they had summer jobs at the former H R Owen garage in the Market Place. One subsequently became BBC North American Editor and the other Director of Communications at 10 Downing Street.



Anjana Ahuja (Photo: David White)



Enjoying the comedy (Photo: Michael Eleftheriades)

Audiences were also treated to Suburb resident Claudia Roden reminiscing with Dan Saladino of BBC Radio Four's Food Programme over recipes and places she associated with them; and BBC Health Editor Hugh Pym discovering first hand from leading scientist Jeremy Farrar and FT reporter Anjana Ahuja what happened at the heart of government when a new virus from China came on the scene not so long ago.

Fiction fans got a chance to hear Francis Spufford talk about his new novel, Light Perpetual, and Charlotte Mendelson describe how she came to write The Exhibitionist. Magnificently, prize-winning author Colm Tóibín, talking to Hermione Lee, revealed by video to Proms audiences the secrets of his approach to writing over the course of his career.

In a tour de force, political commentator Steve Richards explained why The Prime Ministers We Never Had nearly made it, but not quite, and made some interesting forecasts about who would succeed Boris Johnson. If you want to know what he said, you can see his, and the other LitFest talks, online at www.promsatstjudes.org.uk.

WALKS

Many of Proms' popular Heritage Walks around the Suburb and other interesting parts of London sold out well before their scheduled date. These have become more and more professional over the years, with guides now nearly all being well established tour leaders. Besides learning about the flora and fauna of the Heath, Suburb history and architecture and famous former residents of the area, participants were able to discover what made Covent Garden the Las Vegas of its day 250 years ago, what connects Spitalfields and Whitechapel with the Suburb and what shape the new town on our doorstep, Brent

Cross Town, is likely to take over the coming decade.

GREAT ATMOSPHERE

It was wonderful to see Proms come properly to life again after two years of running on half measures, with food and drink being served, late-night comedy on the second Saturday and a full programme of free lunchtime concerts by rising stars of the music world. There was also a marvellous Schools' Prom with hundreds of local schoolchildren performing, a Sunday afternoon concert for families and two amazing Teeny Proms for under 5s.

SHOWERS – BUT A RAINBOW The dampener on all this was that audiences were down on 2019 – in common with the experience of most festivals and public events around the country. This appeared to be a combination of more people on holiday, after two years' confinement, and still some wariness about Covid risk. For many festivals, this would have meant a threat to their viability, but Proms is fortunate to rely on a hard-working team of volunteers, which keeps costs to a minimum. And while lower audiences reduced the surplus available to donate to Proms' partner charities, North London Hospice and Toynbee Hall, the good news is that fantastic generosity by loyal sponsors, Friends and donors has meant the Festival will be donating £50,000 to these good causes this year.



Teeny Proms participants (Photo: David White)

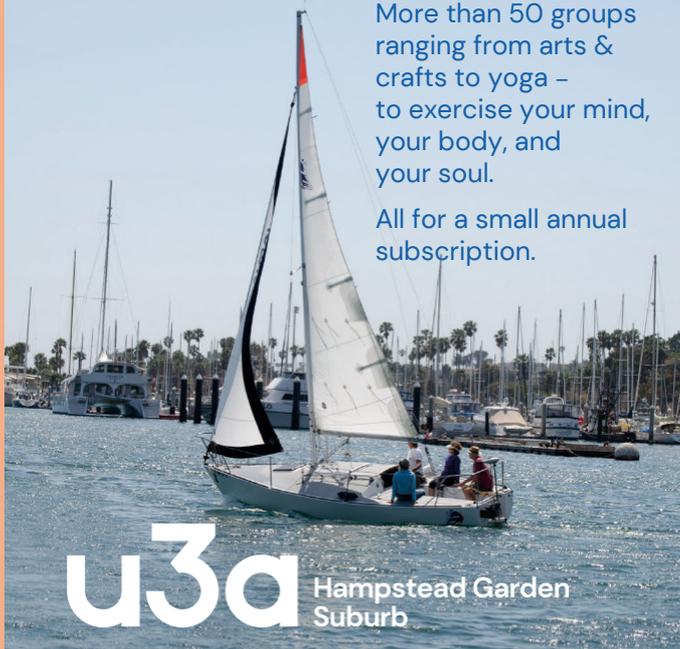
Grace Davidson (Photo: Michael Eleftheriades)



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