

IS PROMENADING WORTH IT?

Joy Through Strength at the Albert Hall

COME to the Proms, comrades, for it is good that mankind should mortify the flesh and exalt the spirit! But, just in case you are harbouring any illusions, I think it is only fair to warn you that *this is going to hurt*.

OF course, there are several minor adjustments which you can make in order to soften the ordeal. You can take a stock of nice standard loaf sandwiches with you and devour them in the queue. If you know your way around the bowels of the building, and run like the devil, you may be lucky enough to grab one of the seats which line the Arena. If you are very cautious, and the people around you are very tall, you may be able to get away with sitting down on the floor for a minute or two during the performance. And, finally, it is always open to you to faint.

But it takes some time to become acquainted with these minutiae of promenading. The smug sect of Season Ticket Holders could teach you if they wanted to, but they are innately conservative, and see no reason why they should be instrumental in helping you to avoid the growing pains which they themselves have had to suffer. And, at any rate, I don't think that anything you could do would afford much more relief than would be given to a victim on the rack by reading him shaggy dog stories.

Not everyone agrees with me, I am afraid. Here, for example, is Harold Rutland writing in the *Radio Times*:

After 20 years of promenading at the Queen's Hall I ought to have remembered that the discomfort of standing is as nothing compared to the advantages. How much more immediate and satisfying is the impact of the music in the Promenade; how much more one shares in the thrills, the arduous and endurances, of the performers!

It is very difficult, naturally, to disagree with Mr. Rutland when he writes such pretty prose; but one can only suggest that 20 years of promenading would be sufficient to make even the best of us write like Mr. Rutland.

But, anyway, come and queue up, and you can decide for yourself.

THE statistics of the Proms are easily disposed of. This is the 52nd season; there is a different concert every night, except Sunday, between July 27 and September 21; the orchestras

are the London Symphony and the BBC Symphony; the conductors are Basil Cameron, Sir Adrian Boult, and Constant Lambert; the soloists include Muriel Brunskill, Elisabeth Schumann, Alfredo Campoli, Eileen Joyce, Alan Loveday, Oscar Natzka (sic!), Max Rostal, Moiseiwitsch, Ida Haendel, Menuhin, Szegedi, Heddle Nash, and Louis Kentner; the prices for reservable seats range from 7/6 to 5/-, the Balcony will cost you 3/-, and the dear old Promenade a

Written for "The Listener"
by RONALD L. MEEK

couple of bob; the show starts at 7.0 p.m.—and, my God, it's half-past three now, and we'll be a mile down the queue if we don't get a move on!

So we dive down into the nearest Underground, and are whooped along efficiently in the murk to South Kensington Station. Whence, threading our way carefully through the welter of museums in that vicinity, we arrive at the Albert Hall.

THE Albert Hall looks rather like a cross between an ornamented hat-box and a wedding cake made by Joe Lyons. Its main defect, however, is its proximity to the Albert Memorial. (I heard the following in a food queue the other day: "My dear, the Germans are absolute sadists! They knocked down all those lovely buildings in such-and-such Square, but they didn't even slice a single knick-knack off the Albert Memorial!") Once you purge your mind of the unfortunate nomenclatural and geographical associations, however, you have to admit that the Albert Hall serves its purpose admirably—it can hold 10,000 people, and a fair proportion of them can hear reasonably well. There's even a fountain in the centre of the Arena, which plays nightly for your comfort and edification. It is alleged to contain goldfish, but I couldn't find any.

It is Friday, which is Beethoven night, and Max Rostal is playing the Violin Concerto, so there are already a hundred or so people in front of us in the Prom queue by the time we get there. (It is about four o'clock.) But before you can take your place in the queue, there is a little ceremony in which you have to take part, whether you like it or not.

How the people of London love ceremonies! I don't mean things like the show at Buckingham Palace every morning, but the pageant in the fish shop when the fish-monger wraps up a pound of herrings in the *Daily Worker*, or the countless little dramas performed in the five-bob-maximum restaurants. Or, if you like, the ceremony you are now participating in—hiring a theatre stool.

THE Woman of the Stools is very conscious of her power. She is not only a hirer of stools, but also a hirer of labour—there is a man on the steps around the corner mending the stools for her, maintaining her capital intact. The Woman of the Stools knows that economists (if they ever went to symphony concerts) would recognise in her profession the only genuine example of pure monopoly extant in this unhappy world of State enterprise, and she is

proud of it. She retains remote control of the stool even when you have actually hired it and are sitting on it, keeping her eye on the whole line of stools as if she were a broody hen and they were her chickens. She tells you exactly when to sit down, and it is part of the ceremonial rites that you should not sit down more than a second or two before or after she gives you the word. If you move the stool even half-an-inch after she has put it in the appropriate place, or if you don't sit down when she tells you to, she looks at you with a withering sort of basilisk stare, and says: "I don't know what's come over you people this season. It never used to be like this."

When the woman has departed with your sixpence to another part of the queue, you know that the ceremony is over, and it is now permitted that you should take stock of your neighbours. The remarkable thing about the Promenaders, which you notice immediately, is that at least 90 per cent. of them are under 25. They are nursing food and newspapers and miniature scores and raincoats and books and programmes, and talking about how Alan Loveday played the Tchaikovsky Concerto last Monday, and how they liked or didn't like the new Britten Pianoforte Concerto which was slipped into the Beethoven programme last Friday week, and what *The Rape of Lucretia* is going to be like. I have heard it suggested that the extreme youth of the Promenaders is due to the fact that most of them die off after about 10 years of it; but I am afraid that the real reason is much less romantic—namely, that the Promenaders graduate to the Circle as soon as their financial circumstances permit, being apparently perfectly willing to sacrifice "the more immediate and exciting impact of the music" for the duller but more soothing environment of a plush seat.

I AM afraid that buskers are sheer opportunists. They endeavour to suit their performances to the tastes of the particular queue they are entertaining. The other night, waiting for the doors to open for Gielgud in *Crime and Punishment*, we heard a number of eloquent passages from *Henry V* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Waiting for the Beatrice Lillie Revue a few nights later, we were given a high-speed second-sight performance by two characters who were obviously very anxious to get away to longer and more wealthy queues. And the buskers favouring the Proms with their presence to-night, obedient to the rules of the game, are all musical.

There is, first of all, an elderly individual who announces himself as an old miner with T.B. and a number of other complaints, and who sings "a few of Bing Crosby's songs." A little while later

there appears a mouth organist with one leg. He, scorning the usual introductory sob-story, proceeds slowly up the queue, with his mouth organ crammed into his mouth with one hand and his hat in the other. But the third and last busker is the cream of them all. He is a real artist. He stands in the middle of the road near the peach-vendor's barrow ("Ripe peaches, only sixpence each!") and sings two short songs. You don't know whether to laugh at his singing or not, because you've been caught so often—you have laughed, and have later been informed by the busker that the defects are due to some awful and unimaginable disease.

But the third busker, when he has finished his songs, starts talking to us.

He tells us that he knows there have been others here before him, and he will quite understand if we can't spare anything else for him. But if we can, he will be doubly grateful to us for giving it to him, because he will know that we can ill afford it. He apologises, too, for the fact that his voice was no better (we will have

noticed that he was forcing his voice) but this is because he is suffering from nerves and is under the care of Doctor So-and-So, and he has also got a serious stomach complaint; he cannot get work and he isn't eligible for a pension. He doesn't like being reduced to this sort of work, but what can a man in his position do? What would we do, if we were in his position? And he hopes that we'll be able to spare a copper or two for him, even though we have already been so kind to the others who have been before him, and But by this time half the queue are feeling in their pockets for their programme money, and the third busker collects a noble haul about three times as big as he would have collected had he been the first on the scene.

AND then Sir Adrian and (presumably) Lady Boult are seen walking along the street towards the hall; they take no notice of the queue, and the queue takes little notice of them. The queue isn't being disrespectful—it merely holds the view that the music is more important than its interpreters. This healthy outlook pervades the printed programmes, too: these concentrate entirely on the works to be presented, and the names of the performers, however exalted they may be, are printed once in inconspicuous type underneath the title of the work. We do not read in these programmes, thank heaven, of the number of husbands whom the contralto has discarded, or the number of times Menuhin changes his shirt in the course of an evening's recital.

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"There is a wild rush to buy the tickets"



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