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Elegant and exhilarating all-American Prom from Ryan Bancroft and the BBC NOW

By Mark Thomas, 01 August 2023

This all-American Prom was not your stereotypical Americana. Talking big, Aaron Copland said that music gives expressive meaning to the human spirit. Quite right. He also said “A melody is not merely something you can hum,” to which [John Adams](#) added, “I don’t think you can be a great composer unless you have a feeling for harmony.” So there you have it. Music in a nutshell, summed up by two of tonight’s composers, two of America’s finest, and captured in a concert that provided stark contrasts between calmness and turbulence. That and the intoxicating power of rhythm to further stir that spirit.

The on-form BBC National Orchestra of Wales under Principal Conductor [Ryan Bancroft](#) gave the world premiere of Derrick Skye's *Nova Plexus*, a glittering piece taking inspiration from the “resplendent elegance and invigorating might” of the sun. Skye's exciting brand of music draws on many musical traditions from around the world, and this new work incorporates influences from West African, Indian, Balinese gamelan, Jarai and Persian music.

With all of this, there was much to enjoy, Bancroft and the orchestra revelling in the vast array of tonalities, sparkling dissonances, explosions of colour and exhilarating rhythms, contrasting occasionally with moments of meditation. It felt as though there was almost too much going on at times, but the overall effect was thrilling and there was no loss of cohesion. It was like an exotic journey in an open-topped convertible.



Annelien Van Wauwe and the BBC National Orchestra of Wales

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Copland's *Clarinet Concerto*, commissioned by 'King of Swing' Benny Goodman, is a different sort of fusion, one of North and South American music. Soloist [Annelien Van Wauwe](#), gave a stunning performance with a wonderful sense of phrasing and meandering effortlessly across upper and lower registers. The elegiac first movement oozed reflection, Van Wauwe's soft edges easing into each note, the orchestra luscious and sensitive under Bancroft's thoughtful direction.

The virtuosic cadenza linking the two main movements was an electric display, the clarinet's crystal clear tone ringing out in all the corners of the Royal Albert Hall, heralding the fun and games of the jazz-infused second movement. Van Wauwe was playful and precise, Bancroft and the orchestra were jagged and dynamic, and the combined effect was like malfunctioning clockwork – think Stravinsky at the rodeo. And this was just as it should be.



The BBC National Chorus of Wales, Crouch End Festival Chorus and BBC NOW

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John Adams' *Harmonium* for chorus and large orchestra was one of the pieces that put him and his own brand of Minimalism firmly on the musical map. The combined forces of the BBC National Chorus of Wales and the Crouch End Festival Chorus, rounded and even-toned, joined the orchestra to provide intense dynamism as Bancroft took impressive control of Adams' penchant for Brucknerian build-ups, the piece ebbing and flowing like a series of slow burns on a large canvas. Hints of Steve Reich and Philip Glass were revealed in the pulsing and harmonic shifts of the first movement, Bancroft masterfully interspersing the overlapping layers with explosive splashes of clarity to thrilling and sometimes cathartic effect. There was a slight lack of precision here and there, but this could be down to the hall's acoustics, and the overall effect was scintillating.

