



Annelien Van Wauwe on clarinet as Ryan Bancroft conducts the BBC National Orchestra of Wales at the Royal Albert Hall

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BBC NOW/Bancroft review — John Adams's big balloon and a dim premiere at the Proms

Royal Albert Hall



If I were the sun, I'd be a bit upset. Here was a piece ostensibly inspired by the celestial fireball's beauty, magnificence and dangerous force, and out came little but dim illumination, easy listening and music that jogged along without much point.

Much of the audience, I should quickly add, obviously relished the world premiere of Derrick Skye's BBC commission *Nova Plexus*, yet all I heard in the Los Angeles composer's creation, dashingy performed by the BBC National Orchestra of Wales and their conductor, Ryan Bancroft, were rhythmic and melodic distillations of multiple global musical traditions paraded and layered with changing densities but little dynamic force, and at 18 minutes too much length. The pleasures of the mildly ear-tickling don't last for ever.

American music of greater substance quickly arrived with Copland's Clarinet Concerto, written for Benny Goodman. The King of Swing would surely have admired the splendid Belgian soloist Annelien Van Wauwe, a former BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artist who boasted mellow tone, lively inflections and utter confidence no matter how jazzy, vertiginous or sparely beautiful the music became. The one bothersome quirk was Van Wauwe and Bancroft's over-speedy approach to the concerto's declamatory final bars.

Slimmed down for the Copland, the platform forces expanded enormously for this American evening's climax, John Adams's 1981 epic *Harmonium*, here festooned with 224 voices from the BBC National Chorus of Wales and Crouch End Festival Chorus. Whatever the pitch, they sang their hearts out. It's just a pity that this big balloon of a piece, from Adams's early years of mixing minimalist practise with romantic ardour, leaves the words of Emily Dickinson and Donne shredded into syllables or boringly lays them out in a way that might excite a bricklayer, but does nothing for their poetry or meaning. Bancroft's exertions were equally exemplary. So full marks for effort all round, and I'm not denying passing excitements. But ballast, Adams, ballast!