

**Nigel Evans**  
**Conductor's Notes, Stratford Symphony**  
**First Night of the Proms**  
**October 4, 2014**

Welcome to the Stratford Symphony Orchestra's first concert of the 2014-2015 season and the first concert of their tenth year of bringing high quality classical music to Stratford audiences! It truly is an honour to be on the podium as I had the privilege of performing (French horn) in the inaugural concert given by this orchestra.

The Promenade concerts (now the BBC Proms) date back to 1895 and were the brainchild of Sir Henry Wood. Today, these popular concerts begin in July and end with the famous Last Night of the Proms in September. Many of the works on tonight's concert have been performed many times at the Proms and those that haven't would certainly fit well with the philosophy that this world-renowned festival has always taken: the promotion of new and exciting music but never at the expense of honouring the great composers.

Our concert opens with two works by Ralph Vaughan Williams which have been firm favourites with the Proms audiences since the early twentieth century. Written in 1909, the **Overture to The Wasps** is part of a larger suite of incidental music for the play by Aristophanes. The use of folk-like melodies, a beautifully lyric central section and wonderful use of orchestral colour has meant that the overture has become one of Vaughan Williams's most performed orchestral works.

Contrasting with the ebullience of The Wasps Overture we move to a work that was just voted the most popular classical piece by Classic FM listeners in the UK: **The Lark Ascending**. Violinist Andrew Chung joins us for what must be one of the most sublime pieces of music ever composed. Vaughan Williams began this pastoral romance for violin and orchestra just before the start of World War One and then returned to it after his experiences on the battlefields of France. It's hard to imagine that this piece, based on a poem by George Meredith, isn't in some small part a lament to the loss of life and innocence that Vaughan Williams and so many others experienced during World War One.

Rounding out the first half is **Fall Fair**, a suitably autumnal piece by Canadian composer Godfrey Ridout. The SSO has programmed this energetic and enjoyable work several times during the last ten years and it's not hard to see why as this piece captures the spirit of this time of year perfectly with its fiddle tunes, various animal noises and generally boisterous mood.

We stay on this side of "the pond" for the beginning of the second half with Healey Willan's **Overture to an Unwritten Comedy**. Written in 1951 and dedicated to his good friend John Adaskin, this work would be very much at home at the Albert Hall as the strong influence of Edward Elgar is keenly felt in both its orchestration and harmonic language.

Elgar's ninth variation from the Enigma Variations is better known as **Nimrod** and, as part of the larger work, has been featured almost one hundred times at the Proms (its first performance was in 1901). This beautiful piece was dedicated to Elgar's friend Augustus J. Jaeger and is now most often performed at funerals, memorial services and other solemn occasions.

Written in 1944, William Walton's film music to **Henry V** (starring the great Sir Laurence Olivier) was performed at the first night of the proms in 1964 and says much about the mood in Britain at this time in history. Tonight we perform a concert suite of music from the original film score aided by our special guest narrator, Geraint Wyn Davies. Each of the five movements depicts key scenes from the play and range in style from gentle and intimate to fully fledged depictions of battle.

What proms would be complete without a march and we finish this evening with the quintessential Englishness of Elgar's **Pomp and Circumstance March Number One**. This march has been performed at the Proms since 1901 and is now a staple at every Last Night of the Proms along with, of course, much flag waving and singing!

We hope you enjoy a First Night at the Proms.