

## MUSIC

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### EU flags, Gershwin and a lot of old tosh

**T**he *Last Night of the Proms* is more a socio-cultural phenomenon than just a concert, with an interesting ambiguity in the degree to which its ritual of flags and patriotic songs is innocent high spirits or the smiling face of something sinister. So far as I could see there were at least as many European flags on show this year as Union Jacks, which I interpret as a good sign.

As for music ... well, the *Last Night* always follows substance in the first half with a lot of old tosh in the second. This year had Wagnerian soprano Nina Stemme featuring in both – appropriately in the

*Liebtestod* from *Tristan und Isolde*, but so far beyond her comfort zone in Broadway numbers by Kurt Weill and Gershwin that you wanted to go up onstage and rescue her.

A little-known *Te Deum* by Kodály was worth hearing. Otherwise, the national anthem was played in an arrangement made by Arthur Bliss during the 1960s, where it should have stayed. And the conductor Sakari Oramo delivered an impressively bland speech from which all risk of controversy had been cut, removing any trace of entertainment in the process.

One thing you can guarantee about Italian music festivals is that they have no guarantees. And the new festival **Suoni dal Golfo**, which I've just experienced at Lerici on the Ligurian coast, was true to form in promising a grand orchestral concert on a floating stage, with the performers literally (if not artistically) at sea. It would have been spectacular but for the local health and safety officers who stopped it all at the last minute, so the concert happened on the beach. But even there it had unquestionable magic,

bathed in moonlight as the final bars of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* edged towards the early hours of morning (it had, needless to say, started late) accompanied by the soft wash of the tide.

The town of Lerici is where the poet Shelley lived (in an austere sea-facing villa) and then drowned (after a boat trip in a storm). As Byron also lived nearby, the area acquired the nickname Golfo dei Poeti, developing strong English links which this new festival confirmed – created as it was by Gianluca Marciano, a conductor born in Lerici who moved to London and became a well-known figure on the British country-opera circuit. For his opening season he assembled an outstandingly good ad-hoc orchestra of young musicians, many of them soloist material. And as soloists they performed in places like the Shelley villa, where I heard a virtuosic Russian harpist play in the saloon whose terrace Mary Shelley would have paced, watching the sea for Percy's non-returning boat. One hopes the music pacified her ghost.