



*'Friday night's two Proms...had Olympic associations'*

The Guardian (London); 11 August, 2008; Tim Ashley; p. 32

---

'Friday night's two Proms, inevitably perhaps, had Olympic associations. Early in the evening, Leonard Slatkin and the Royal Philharmonic gave the world premiere of Chen Yi's *Olympic Fire*. The late-night concert, meanwhile, found Kristjan Jarvi and the BBC National Orchestra of Wales tackling Michael Torke's *Javelin*, written in 1994 as a prelude to the Atlanta games.

The first woman in China ever to receive a master's degree in composition, Chen now divides her time between Beijing and Kansas. *Olympic Fire* sounds like *West Side Story* relocated to Chinatown. The melodies are pentatonic, the orchestration clatteringly percussive and gaudy. Its view of Chinese history is revisionist: a Tibetan folk tune is deployed at one point to evoke China's "ethnic minorities". The shout from the arena of 'remember Tibet' at its close was nothing if not timely.

*Javelin*, meanwhile, is a fine example of Torke's minimalist postmodernism. The score is reminiscent – perhaps too much so, occasionally – of Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloe*. Woodwind-driven and curiously sexy, this is music that suggests both propulsive movement and the cool perfection of Attic Greece. It also suits Jarvi's snappy conducting style like a glove.

Slatkin's clever, pointed programming allowed him to end with the bitter, Cold War realities of Vaughan Williams' *Sixth Symphony*, though he failed to take it to the requisite angry extremes. Olga Kern was the dour-sounding soloist in a dull performance of Rachmaninov's *Paganini Rhapsody*. Jarvi's programme, bracingly delivered, consisted entirely of American music, though China's history raised its head in John Adams's *The Chairman Dances*.

Jarvi closed with Duke Ellington's *Harlem*, a tour de force for the BBC NOW, which brought the house down.'