



*'Olympics past, present and future put the hop, skip and jump
into this pair of Proms'.*

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'Olympics past, present and future put the hop, skip and jump into this pair of Proms. Chen Yi's *Olympic Fire* came first in Leonard Slatkin's programme with the Royal Philharmonic – only fitting on the opening day of the Beijing Games. But had this crowd-pleaser been written by anyone but a Chinese national, we'd have considered it a cheesy Western imitation of traditional Chinese music. Chen Yi's future was brutally put on hold during the Cultural Revolution, and the compulsory 're-education' has clearly informed her work.

The *Olympic Fire* spluttered through the relentlessly motoric outer sections. The spirit of competition was present in the percussion section, with a virtuosic last-minute spurt from the RPO's timpanist, Matt Perry, snatching the gold from his colleague on xylophone. A bronze for Chen Yi. and for Olga Kern in Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. One felt the kinship between her and Slatkin throughout – an essential part of the work's intricate alchemy. But for all her pianistic elegance and her beautiful, unforced sound, this was a performance lacking in vital capriciousness and passion.

We were back in business with Slatkin's sweeping account of Vaughan Williams's *Sixth Symphony*. Rarely can its cynical tub-thumping have disintegrated into so uneasy and numbing a pretence of peace.

The Olympic flame still burned at the Late Night Prom with a decent throw for Michael Torke's *Javelin* from the BBC National Orchestra of Wales under the charismatic Kristjan Jarvi. Chen Yi would have smiled at Madame Mao's moves in John Adams's 'The Chairman Dances', but the real wonder came with the cellist Han-Na Chang in Leonard Bernstein's 'Mass: Three Meditations'.

Olympic gold? Jarvi's sizzling rendition of Duke Ellington's 'Harlem', the biggest big band ever to go cosmic with uptown jazz.'