There is no knowing what will take the Prommers’ fancy. Supposedly sure-fire programmes sometimes fail to take off. Others — such as this unlikely pairing of Rachmaninov’s First Symphony and Puccini’s one-act opera *Il tabarro*, neither exactly familiar to London audiences — attract full houses. Put the same programme in the Barbican or Royal Festival Hall in October and you would struggle to get a fraction of the 5,000-odd punters who turned out on Monday.

The link between the two halves was the musical personality of Gianandrea Noseda, an Italian to his fingertips — although you would never have guessed his nationality from this Rachmaninov performance with the Manchester-based BBC Philharmonic, of which he is chief conductor. Where an Italian, especially one of Noseda’s charisma, might have been expected to offer emotionalism, mining the score’s late-Romantic neurosis, Noseda summoned Tchaikovskyan classicism. The unwieldy opening allegro unfolded with rare coherence: no spotlighting of big tunes, no pulling-about of tempo. The middle two movements were almost balletic in their light-footed trajectory; the finale combined drama and majesty. Not for nothing did he serve a long apprenticeship in St Petersburg.

If Rachmaninov’s student essay emerged with greater stature than its reputation suggests, Noseda’s performance was equally a reminder of how good the BBC Phil is — section by section, it has more personality than the BBC’s flagship orchestra in London — and its handling of the quasi-impressionist instrumental effects in *Il tabarro* (*The Cloak*) provided an atmospheric foundation for the vocal drama. In concert what came through was not so much the dank mist of the Seine — the opera is set on an industrial barge in Paris — as the warmth of the Mediterranean sun, Puccini’s lyrical flourishes launching forth into the Albert Hall like whispers of romance in the night.

And this was what I call a real concert performance — with a cast that had left their scores backstage so that they could inhabit their parts and take us on a path of fantasy. Barbara Frittoli and Miroslav Dvorsky were the ill-fated lovers, Lado Ataneli the vengeful Michele. Barry Banks, Jane Henschel and Alastair Miles gave spirited cameos. We listened and believed.

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