

Banker, Baronet, Saviour, 'Spy': Sir Edgar Speyer and the Queen's Hall Proms, 1902-14

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Of the thirty-two Proms seasons before 1927, those spanning the years 1902-14 marked a pinnacle for Henry J. Wood and the Queen's Hall Orchestra. The high standard of works performed, quality of artists engaged and success at building a large popular audience for serious orchestral music were all unprecedented, in Britain or anywhere else. Rosa Newmarch called it 'a time of wonderful expansion and unostentatious educational value [...] a period of modernism and [...] productive idealism'. Today I want to revisit the achievement of 1902-14 and consider its larger implications. Not until the 1930s (some would say the 1960s), under the BBC, would anything like the same level be reached again. And yet aspects of this chapter in Proms history remain clouded or forgotten. We need to ask why. For if there had been no visionary new leadership in 1902, when Robert Newman could no longer finance the concerts, there probably wouldn't have been any Proms left in 1915, let alone in 1927 when the young BBC wished so keenly for right of entry into Queen's Hall – for other broadcasting purposes. Both the history of this Proms period and its neglect invite examination.

One difficulty is the lack of source materials. Unlike researchers into later Proms seasons, for example, I've had no archive or cache of in-house documents to study, other than published programmes. The proprietor controlling the series from 1902 was a London investment banker called Edgar Speyer, working with the redoubtable Proms founder and orchestral manager Robert Newman, and of course with Wood as conductor. Speyer and Newman left few trails. Relevant documents may have been destroyed with the Queen's Hall itself in May 1941. But already by June 1915, Speyer, who'd set up 'Queen's Hall Orchestra Ltd' and headed it since 1902, had been driven out of England in the wartime hysteria over people with German surnames, especially those of Jewish extraction and considerable wealth. He took his papers with him.

I've therefore had to look laterally, combing histories, memoirs and letters touching places from Antarctica to Whitechapel. Speyer's patterns of activity and habits of mind are indeed wide-ranging and revealing. But let's start with the basics. His name was *Edgar* – not Edward Speyer (an older cousin and classical-music patron with whom he is often confused); and he was born in the USA, not Germany, in 1862.

What do we know of this man? Though born in New York City, Speyer returned as a child with his parents to the family home in Frankfurt. He and his older brother James (1861-1941) were educated there and became partners in the family's international merchant banking group – Lazard-Speyer-Ellissen (of Frankfurt), Speyer & Co. (of New York), and Speyer Brothers (of London, at 7 Lothbury, behind the Bank of England). James settled in New York in 1885 and was later head of that

branch. Edgar, at only 25, became senior partner in the London company in 1887; he was naturalized as a British subject in 1892.

At a glance, it's the nature and scale of this firm that rivets attention. In the late eighteenth century the Speyers were the wealthiest Jewish family in Frankfurt, well above the Rothschilds. Early to realize potential in America, by the 1870s they were one of the top five issuers of American and Mexican railroad securities, their nearest rivals being Kuhn, Loeb & Co. and J.P. Morgan. In fact it was from Morgan that Edgar Speyer wrested the power, in March 1902, to sell shares in a new British railway company known as the U.E.R.L. – Underground Electric Railways Co. of London Ltd, set up by the American tycoon C.T. Yerkes. Mobilizing large amounts of capital was a Speyer Bros. hallmark, but even they were stretched in this new undertaking, aiming to raise some £16 million to electrify the existing (Metropolitan) District Railway, erect a huge power station at Lots Road, Chelsea, and build three new deep Tube lines – major sections of what we now know as the Bakerloo, Piccadilly and Northern lines.

For now, let's skip the share allotments, percentages and tunnelling techniques. Suffice it to say that predictions of profit seemed good; Speyers' stability augured well; and takeup for the first £5 million was brisk, notably among New Yorkers and Bostonians, the British, and supporters in Amsterdam, Frankfurt and Paris. The rest of the money came harder, until Yerkes devised some dubious 'profit-sharing notes' (junk bonds). *Voilà*: construction began. Unbelievably, the plan worked. Electric trains started running on the District in July 1905; the three Tubes were opened between March 1906 and June 1907. Londoners benefited all round, while Speyer received a baronetcy in mid-1906 (becoming 'Sir Edgar'). Possibly it helped that he was friendly with the new Chancellor, Herbert Asquith, and a major supporter of the Liberal Party which had just won a general-election landslide. Shareholders, however, lost out when the expected U.E.R.L. revenues were not forthcoming: *ridership* of the trains proved slower to develop than the projectors had imagined.

Indeed U.E.R.L. barely held on. That it survived at all was owing in large part to Edgar Speyer's careful supervision. After Yerkes's death in late 1905 Speyer became U.E.R.L. chairman. He hired the best managers, encouraged prudent fare setting, pressed ahead with modernization and co-ordination of the whole system, supported his managers' efforts to improve publicity and build a brand identity, and worked hard to educate the public about how to use the Underground, with maps and posters showing its ease, safety and convenience.

The numbers improved a bit, but not enough. At one point, Speyer attempted partial sale to the London County Council in return for financial help, but this came to nothing and Speyer Bros. had to pay out large amounts of interest, restructuring the debt. Two years later, in 1910, the three Tube lines were amalgamated. Profitability went up, and Speyer next had to face competition from the tramways and, above all, the petrol bus. His chief strategy, with his managers, was to buy up competitors, including the profitable Central London Railway and nearly all the bus companies. By early 1914 Speyer and Albert Stanley (later Lord Ashfield) had finally mastered most of the London transport system. Turning competition to advantage, they invested in long-term prospects and made possible the ultimate creation of a single transport authority for London – a huge and lasting achievement.

Although order of magnitude is completely different, this picture of the expanding Underground suggests a broad parallel with the developing British concert industry at exactly the same time. Managing an expensive infrastructural change from steam

to electricity (or from one-off mixed vocal, instrumental and amateur choral events to systematized professional orchestral concerts); integrating a network of separate lines (or musical tastes) such that large numbers and all kinds of people could enter at different levels and move about freely; educating both new and more experienced users to make the most of new cultural experience through maps and posters (or musical programme notes), encouraging 'ridership' – these initiatives were not a million miles away from what Speyer was also doing, with Wood and Newman, at Queen's Hall.

Meanwhile he pursued a range of other interests. A privy councillor from 1909 (carrying the title 'Rt Hon'), Speyer actively advised Asquith's government on investment matters and maintained a glittering social life, with a palatial home in Grosvenor Street where he entertained Grieg, Grainger, Elgar, Debussy and Strauss (the last a longtime friend). He also built a mammoth 'cottage' at Overstrand on the Norfolk coast, near Cromer. Approached by good causes from hospitals to Indian famine relief, Speyer was open to real need but cautious about people's pet ideological projects – including the London School of Economics co-founded by Sidney and Beatrice Webb.

Among endeavours he wholeheartedly supported were the Whitechapel Art Gallery, opened in 1901 to provide free exhibitions of art works, both traditional and modern, in the impoverished East End of London; and Robert Scott's British Antarctic Expeditions of 1901-4 and 1910-13. Speyer contributed more than £2500 to the Whitechapel building and served as a trustee for fifteen years. He pressed for an endowment fund, high quality in modern art work, educational goals and public recognition for the gallery's dynamic young director (all of which have a clear echo in his initiatives at Queen's Hall). Speyer's contribution to Scott's work was more romantic. No doubt he was motivated by personal pride and national prestige as much as by science and the urge to push geographical frontiers. But Scott truly valued Speyer's moral support. The explorer named a newly discovered Antarctic mountain after Speyer on the first trip, and the banker in turn served as Scott's honorary treasurer for the ill-fated second trip, to the South Pole. Once Scott realized he'd never complete his return from the Pole, on the 16th of March 1912, he wrote one of his first 'final letters' to Edgar Speyer, reiterating his personal gratitude.

'Your dear kind wife' before Scott's signature on that letter brings us at last to music and Leonora von Stosch, an American violinist who'd studied in Brussels, played for Walter Damrosch and Arthur Nikisch, and was already a Proms artist when Edgar met her. They fell madly in love, and married in February 1902. Three months later, when over-extension bankrupted Robert Newman, the Speyers were close at hand. Newman was Leonora's musical agent, and Wood, her friend. Edgar, a keen music-lover, stepped forward - 'to please my wife', he said. It was a godsend.

From this point Speyer rightly claims attention as a saviour in London cultural history. His ideas invigorated Queen's Hall, modernizing the Proms' format, means of production and programme content. It is no exaggeration to say that the presentational and aesthetic shift he fostered – not just his cash – made the series a model in national concert life, and helped to redeem Britain's musical reputation abroad. What we don't know for certain is who Speyer bid against for the Proms. Wood later stated that there were other interested parties in 1902, including an unnamed firm of publishers, and that *that* arrangement would have been disastrous. Clearly the Proms' best chance lay in an independent, open-minded sponsor rather

than in linkage with any particular kind of music or musical product, English or otherwise.

In such a way, Speyer rescued not only Newman and Wood (and the Queen's Hall Symphony Concerts); he saved the institution of the Proms from almost certain slow death and extinction – a generation before the BBC. How? By helping to transform Victorian ballad-concert and music-hall-style events into challenging symphony concerts. The changes were gradual but perceptible. Anyone can readily see them in the programmes of 1902-6, and then again in 1912-13: a steady drop in the number of items a night (from eighteen or twenty short numbers to more like ten or twelve longer ones); a gradual replacement of the operatic *pot-pourris* in each concert's second half by new, real orchestral works known as tone poems; and a conscious cultivation of the symphony, from Haydn to Mahler (both of whom were new to the repertory in this period).

Even before the 1902 season started, subtle change appeared in the form of the first Proms prospectus – a simple four-page leaflet listing thirty orchestral works to be performed for the first time in London and the artists engaged for the season. Promised works include Tchaikovsky's First and Second symphonies, D'Indy's *Wallenstein*, and Franck's Symphonic Variations (which were indeed given in 1902), as well as Mahler's First Symphony and a Rutland Boughton novelty (which were not, both postponed until 1903). The leaflet also linked the Proms singularly to Queen's Hall (not to Newman, as in previous advertising), and the Queen's Hall Orchestra prominently to Wood. It was thus a clear corporate statement designed to reassure loyal audience members; to focus public attention, and the in-house team, on an ambitious season; and to attract new subscribers at the high end – an obvious marketing strategy now, but never before tried for Newman's Proms.

Of course once you raise expectations, you have to deliver. And what Speyer had in mind required serious reform of London orchestral conditions, assiduous cultivation of the listener, at the right level – hence the hire of Rosa Newmarch as programme note-writer from 1908 – and a strong flow of the best orchestral music, new and old, Wood could find.

The amount and quality of new music introduced in this period is staggering – by Reger, Strauss (*Till Eulenspiegel* appeared on 'Popular' Nights by 1903), Schoenberg (*Five Orchestral Pieces* was a world première in 1912), Fauré, Bruneau, Debussy (*Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* was a favourite from 1904), Ravel, Sibelius (*Finlandia* was a huge success from 1906), Busoni, Sinigaglia, Enescu, Glière, Scriabin, Delius, MacDowell, Arensky, Stravinsky, Dohnányi and Bartók, to name but a few composers. Much of it lasted. And while the international list grew, there was no loss of pace in the British one. Out of some 220 new British works given in the first twenty-five years of the Proms, more than a hundred belong to the Speyer era, including music by Bantock, Ethel Barns, Bax, York Bowen, Bridge, Coleridge-Taylor, Walford Davies, Elgar, Balfour Gardiner, Edward German, Harty, Holbrooke, Percy Pitt, Stanford, Quilter, Cyril Scott and Vaughan Williams. The real push in this direction began in 1903.

Reports suggest that Speyer injected, every year, something like £4000 of his own money into the Queen's Hall Orchestra – not just to cover losses at the (main-season) Symphony and (summer) Proms series, but to build up the orchestra. Far from being a casual philanthropist, he worked hard as a good investor, tracking progress and making sure his money would achieve increased benefit down the line. Here are five tactical moves from the period 1902-14, for which I believe Speyer was more or less directly responsible at Queen's Hall:

- the dramatic deputy-system challenge of May 1904, which enabled performing standard to rise and famously triggered the founding of the rival London Symphony Orchestra
- the eager pursuit of new music from Elgar, Debussy and Strauss
- the securing of Wood's knighthood in late 1910
- the establishment of an orchestral endowment fund as a measure of social security for QHO players
- the vast increase in rehearsal time allotted to major new works, such as Schoenberg's.

If at first Speyer saw QHO Ltd as a kind of private passion on the side, he soon saw more, and helped make the Proms into an engine of social and cultural change. Audiences kept coming, returning again and again and spreading the word. By 1913 'a crowded hall and money refused at the doors' was the norm; and still Newman and Speyer kept prices down, a season ticket remaining at the equivalent of 4d. a night (only about 95p even today).

All the more shocking, then, is the treatment meted out to Speyer and his family when war erupted in August 1914. In common with several highly placed financiers of German-Jewish background, Speyer was vilified as an alien by right-wing publicists. He immediately severed connections with the German part of his business, but was still targeted for his membership in the New York branch, where his brother James was openly pro-German. Edgar resigned from that firm as well, but to no avail. At the height of the English hysteria, he was even accused of signalling to the German fleet from his house on the Norfolk coast (because he happened to be one of the first owners of a 'wireless'). Many friends deserted him.

His initial response in May 1915 was to offer Asquith the resignation of his baronetcy and privy councillorship, which the Prime Minister in turn refused, calling the charges baseless and malignant. But the attacks continued. Speyer declined to write a 'loyalty letter' in the press, and by June he'd had enough. A final straw was William Boosey's refusal to continue subletting Queen's Hall to him (Boosey later fatuously claimed Speyer's programmes had always been 'aggressively German'). Edgar sailed for New York with his wife and daughters and settled there, writing back to Bernard Shaw that he would never forget nor forgive what had happened.

In the event, his right to retain his British naturalization and honours was confirmed in December 1915, but withdrawn six years later on a series of trivial technicalities (despite warm and articulate support from Edward Elgar whose patriotism was well known). It was the end of a long nightmare. Edgar, and Leonora too, gradually awakened to other things. By 1926 he could write to Mathilde Verne, an old musical friend in London: 'I am entirely indifferent to what they say or don't say about me. My reward lies in what I have done, and in the loyalty of people like you, who have preserved a sense of justice, and of the fitness of things. *The others do not matter.*' He died in 1932, Leonora in 1956.

It may be that Speyer's ill-treatment was motivated less by anti-Semitism than by concern for political corruption inside the British government, which was thought by some to have contributed to the outbreak of war. For no one with any brain seriously believed Edgar was a German spy – though one way the rumour got started is clear from Speyer Brothers' stationery, which from the 1890s used 'Spy, London' as the firm's telegraphic address! Naturally the spy label had legs, especially in 1914. It was quicker to spread and easier to stick than any provable case of honours trafficking: witness the fictional work that did so much to promulgate spy fever in 1915 – John Buchan's best-selling adventure novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. Would you believe,

indeed, that Edgar Speyer was Buchan's model for the quiet, intelligent, but sinister villain 'Appleton' – the retired Jewish stockbroker with multiple identities, a house on the coast (where a German rescue boat, *Ariadne*, waited offshore), and political connections at the highest level? It's been suggested by more than one historian; and if true, might further explain the utter loss of appreciation for Speyer's full contribution to British culture, in preference to casting him simply as villain or victim – the last privy councillor to be struck off (a prevalent modern construction). Cooler heads, fresh research, and a more nuanced understanding of party-political fallout in post-1918 Britain will surely lead to a posthumous clearing of Speyer's name one day.

For now, I believe the Queen's Hall Proms of 1902-14 both illuminate Speyer's other activities and become more meaningful beside them. As I've shown elsewhere, the Edwardian Proms' immediate context was the rise and rise of orchestral music in this country, to which Speyer contributed so much. Their direct legacy is nothing less than the intelligent mix, musical modernity, high quality and wide social access we celebrate at the Proms today. Long may our present memories be deepened by an understanding of this fuller past, while the BBC Proms – as well as the Whitechapel Gallery and the London Underground – continue to move us forward.

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