

Katie Derham introduces Proms iWonder Guide #5: Why do people wave flags at the Last Night of the Proms?

Katie Derham: Why do people wave flags at the Last Night of the Proms? Is it about patriotism or jingoism, or is it just the right to be silly at Britain's national classical music knees-up? And of course flag-waving is just one of the things the Promenaders get up to. Don't forget the hats and the silly costumes, and the streamers and the party poppers, or the duck calls and the car horns or those chants that flash between the Prommers in the arena, up to the gallery and then to the musicians on stage. The Proms is nearly 120 years old so when did all these traditions start? Well as we're going to find out, after World War 2, it was that debonair conductor Sir Malcolm Sargent who really helped turn the Last Night of the Proms into a national party. If ever there were a maestro for the TV age, it was Sargent, and with his encouragement television started to feed off that special atmosphere in the Proms; and indeed television itself then started to shape the Last Night of the Proms. If he were alive today he would relish the fact that you could link up audiences from the Proms in the Park events in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales with the audience here in the Royal Albert Hall for a live singalong. But for all the tomfoolery of the Last Night of the Proms, the Promenaders are actually the season's greatest asset; they stand there in perfect silence with their ears wide open to music both old and new, and are widely regarded as the best, most attentive audience in the world. Prommers really do play a very important role in the social history of British concert-going as we're going to

find out in this exploration of traditions – both real and invented – in this BBC Proms iWonder Guide.