

**CA 2:** June 2007 Classical Source Editorial:

## **'Royal Festival Hall Restored'**

By Colin Anderson

It has taken longer and will be more expensive than first planned, but the Royal Festival Hall, closed for nearly two years, is about to be re-opened. Not that the South Bank has been quiet! For the associated orchestras – Philharmonia, London Philharmonic, OAE and London Sinfonietta – it has been business as usual in the Queen Elizabeth Hall, which found perhaps hitherto unsuspected performing space to accommodate a full orchestra. The acoustic was perfectly fine, too. And the programming took imaginative turns it may not have had the RFH refurbishment never happened.

Acoustic is key to the transformed yet still familiar Royal Festival Hall. There have been 'acoustic tests' over recent weeks to which the public has been invited; and the press had its turn on May 29. My first impression was very favourable – and I liked the sound of the old place! Its tonal faithfulness and clarity were always welcome, but it depended where you sat and musicians themselves had reservations. Now, heard from the top level to the stalls level, the sound now seems consistent; it has warmth, clear detail and carries very well. Furthermore the redesign of the platform looks especially handsome. As we walked through the auditorium, Vladimir Jurowski and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment were rehearsing Rossini; given the relatively small forces and the use of 'period' instruments, there was no lack of impact in all parts of the Hall. It will be interesting to hear a piano recital in the RFH (Brendel is there on 14 June) and the full 'wallop' of a large symphony orchestra should be thrilling. The Philharmonia plays Mahler on the 12th and the LPO brings Prokofiev on the 13th. The OAE has a 21st-birthday concert on Saturday the 30th.

This augurs well. The opening Gala concert on 11 June offers a varied programme shared between the resident orchestras to really 'test' the RFH and there's plenty that will follow the first night. On the weekend leading up to the 11th, there's a jamboree of free events. The Royal Festival Hall is a special place – for many reasons (I've loved the Hall since 1975, an LSO concert with the recently deceased Rostropovich conducting) – and is set in an area rich in fine views and many attractions. Two years without the Hall has flown by, which is partly a tribute to the bustling activity of the QEHL. This first taste of the future is a very positive one and makes the opening of the RFH and the years thereafter something to keenly anticipate.