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FIRST NIGHT

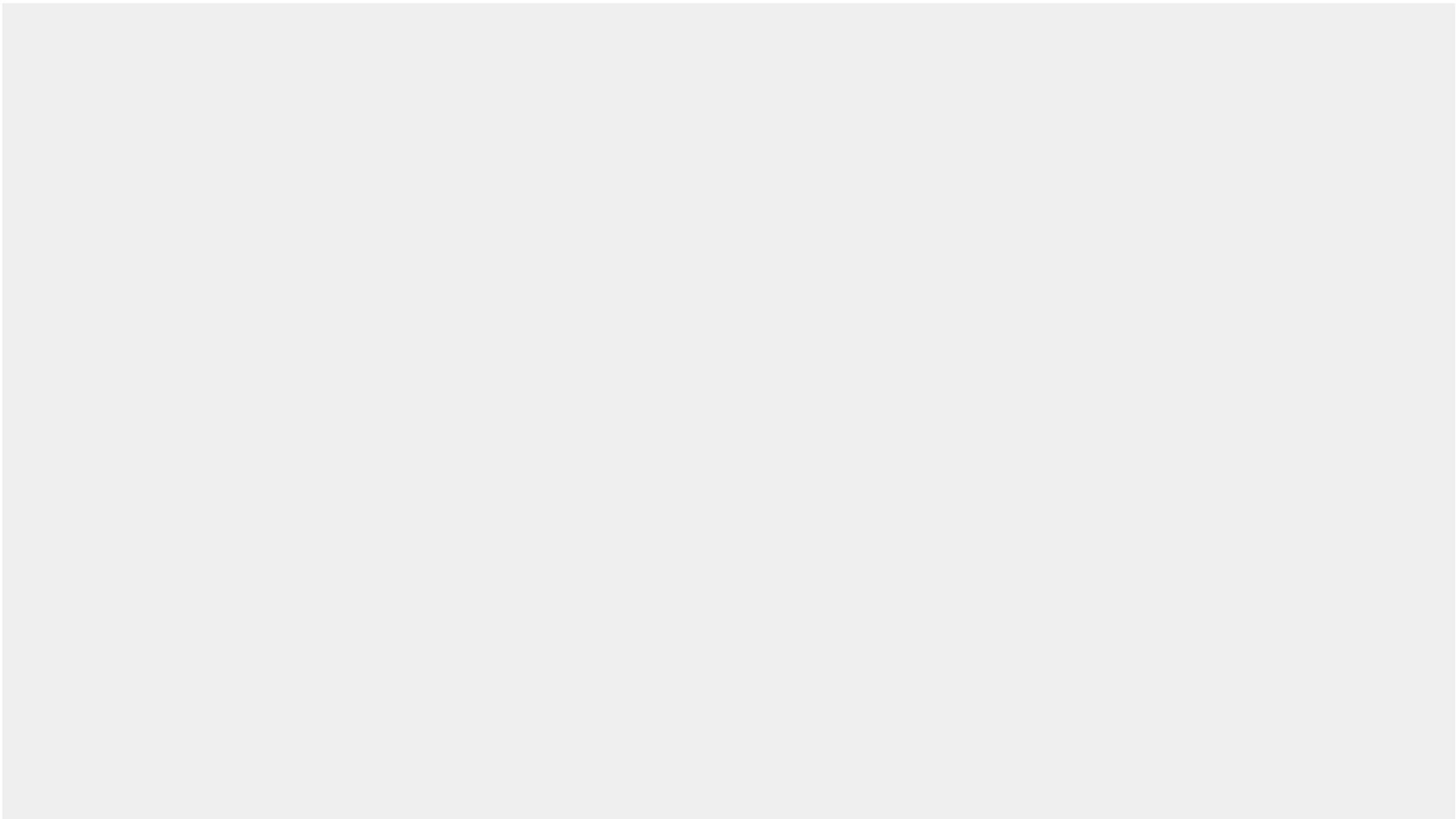
Concert review: LPO/Mena at the Royal Festival Hall

The LPO responds to Mena's fancy footwork with an ideal mix of force and finesse in a fulfilling celebration of spring

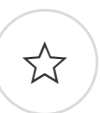
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Geoff Brown

February 22 2018, 5:00pm, The Times



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★★★★★

If asked to assemble a list of instructions for concert planners, one of my first commandments would be: Do not programme *The Rite of Spring* too often. The last

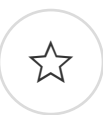
thing we need is for music of such savage force to become commonplace: if it doesn't pack an exceptional wallop, it's nothing. The wallop luckily was intact in the London Philharmonic's piercing rendition on Wednesday night. My bones jangled, my pulse raced. At 105 years old, Stravinsky's ballet score still felt raw, dangerous and new.

A specialist in Iberian warmth and exotic colouring, Juanjo Mena is a conductor easy to underrate. Yet here his fondness for bright detail only increased the impact of Stravinsky's rhythmic barrage and the angular beauty of serpentine woodwinds quietly pondering the next onslaught. Under his darting baton, *The Rite of Spring* ceased being the textbook leviathan of musical modernism and became, supremely, music for dancing — urgent but lithe. Mena's such a fancy mover too. At peak moments of stress he leapt about as if struck by lightning — his limbs jagged, his feet off the floor.

The LPO responded with an ideal mix of brute force and finesse. The subtlest tones came in the spellbinding nocturnal textures launching Part Two, though before *The Rite* our ears had already been tickled by the verdant colours in Debussy's *Printemps* and the elegantly pungent kaleidoscope of Ravel's Piano Concerto for the Left Hand. Benedetto Lupo was the muscular soloist — his right hand gripped the piano stool, determined not to interfere. Decorative but evanescent Delius's early *Idylle de Printemps* inevitably sounded wan next to the rest of the bill, but Mena seemed pleased with his novelty, and with a concert as fulfilling as this I'm not in any mood to complain.



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