

Floyd classic soars again

POP

Atom Heart Mother

CADOGAN HALL, LONDON SW1

THE Chelsea Festival is a high-brow mix of classical music, literary references and light comedy: think Vaughan Williams, Vikram Seth and Sandy Toksvig.

It was a surprise, then, on its opening night, to be presented with a spectacular blast of all-out prog rock. The sight and sound of Pink Floyd's David Gilmour wrenching a pristine solo from his electric guitar while concert host Ron Geesin hammered the inside of his piano like a xylophone, all accompanied by a 40-strong choir, a brass ensemble and virtuoso cellist Caroline Dale, was one the audience won't forget in a hurry.

Pink Floyd's 1970 album *Atom Heart Mother*, named after a newspaper article about Britain's first mum with a pacemaker, was created when the band were trying new directions following the parting of the ways with lead songwriter Syd Barrett.

Ron Geesin was (and is) a playfully eccentric composer and orchestrator, who had recently worked with the band's Roger Waters on the soundtrack for a biology documentary film. When they needed someone to marshal ideas for an unfocused new album, Geesin received the call.

The result was prog rock at its most opulent and Pink Floyd's first UK number one album.

Geesin told the story of the album with a slideshow straight after the evening's interval. The first half had consisted of his more recent, often oddball pieces, including a composition for choir with samples of slowed-down blackbird song, and a piano piece wherein he all but stamped through the floor with his feet while hammering the keys like Jerry Lee Lewis.

The night's main dish, however, was the *Atom Heart Mother* suite, one whole side of the original vinyl album for which Geesin received equal writing credit with the band. It started slowly and atmospherically, but, when Italian covers band MUN Floyd crashed in and Gilmour let rip with exhilarating lap steel guitar, 20th-century rock and much older musical traditions complemented each other startlingly.

Prog has often and correctly been derided for its naff classical pretensions – Rick Wakeman's notorious *King Arthur on Ice* spectacle or the entire career of Emerson, Lake & Palmer stand testament to the wisdom of this – but here the orchestral instrumentation's sheer sonic bombast met the power of a tasty recurring riff and soared.

Thomas H Green