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- [Columnists](#)
- [Blogs](#)
- [Polls](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Property](#)
- [Holidays](#)
- [Motors](#)
- [Journey planner](#)
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Louise Jury, Chief Arts Correspondent



Box office: the Queen celebrates 56 years of the Royal Festival Hall



10.10.07

The Queen officially commemorated the re-opening of the refurbished Royal Festival Hall - and recreated a moment in history.

She returned more than half a century after she visited the Festival of Britain - of which the hall was a centrepiece - as a young princess.

As she stood in the royal box while the National Anthem was sung last night she was photographed just as she was pictured in the same box next to King George VI and Queen Elizabeth at the inaugural concert in 1951.

For last night's gala concert, professional and amateur choirs, including the Billingshurst Choral Society and the London Forest Choir from Walthamstow, appeared with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and soloists such as the bass Willard White.

The celebration ended with a performance of the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with a free translation of Schiller's Ode to Joy by Billy Bragg. It was originally performed at the public re-opening of the hall in the summer.

Bragg joined other guests led by James Purnell, the Culture Secretary, and arts minister Margaret Hodge. Ministers Ed Miliband and Geoff Hoon, Julian Lloyd-Webber, the cellist, the broadcaster Paul Gambaccini and designer Terence Conran were also at the event, sponsored by JP Morgan.

Bragg said: "It was exhilarating to hear the fourth movement of the Ninth Symphony, but when they're singing your words it's amazing. I'm not a monarchist in the slightest but I'm so pleased the Queen has come to see it and commend everything everyone has done."

Jeanette Botting, 58, an administrator from Billingshurst, said performing in the mass choir was a "once in a lifetime experience, a real honour and privilege".

Rachel Evans, 25, a TV studio manager currently preparing for The X-Factor who sings with the Philharmonia Chorus, said: "It was a great opportunity to join so many people who really have a passion for music. To do it in the presence of the Queen is pretty cool."

Mr Purnell thanked Vivien Duffield, the philanthropist who led the fundraising drive for the refurbishment.

He said of the hall: "It's still a symbol of London as a cultural capital of the world."

Before the concert, the Queen officially unveiled Spirit Level, a new learning centre expected to be used by around 100,000 adults and children annually.

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