



by Katherine Cooper

Formed in 2003, François-Xavier Roth's Les Siècles are an historically-informed ensemble with a difference: focusing mainly on French music of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they specialise in reviving works which have rarely seen the light of day (or at least the red light of the recording-studio) and throwing new perspectives on well-known scores which were written at a time when orchestral instruments differed so subtly from their modern counterparts that on paper it seems that giving them the period-instrument treatment will be an interesting academic exercise rather than a revelatory sonic experience. But with each instalment I've become increasingly aware of just how much the use of gut strings and in particular woodwind instruments of the time (the booklet for this latest release lists bassoons, clarinets and an oboe by Buffet Crampon and a cor anglais by Lorée, all dating from the turn of the century) alter the landscape of Debussy, Stravinsky, Ravel et al, and this enchanting trio of relatively early works by the latter composer is no exception.

The two major works here were both originally conceived for piano, and orchestrated by the composer shortly afterwards: *Le tombeau de Couperin* was premiered by the pianist Marguerite Long, whilst the four-handed suite *Ma mère l'Oye* (*Mother Goose*) was composed for the two young children of the Polish artist Cipa Godebski, to whom Ravel would tell stories whilst visiting their parents' Paris salon – though the work was too challenging for the pair to actually perform. (Roth presents Ravel's later expansion of the work, with an additional prelude and four interludes, which was premiered as a ballet at the Théâtre des Arts in Paris in 1912). From the mysterious opening chords of the prelude and on through the musical depiction of an old woman at her spinning-wheel, the softer-grained timbres of Roth's gut strings and narrow-bore winds make their presence keenly felt – we're truly in a world of childhood and enchantments, and the mellow timbre of the nineteenth-century contrabassoon and clarinets render the later dialogue of *Beauty and the Beast* as something infinitely touching and tender rather than grotesquely caricatured. Likewise, the tale of 'Petit Poucet' (which depicts two children lost in a forest after birds devour the breadcrumbs with which they've marked their route) comes across as more akin to the nocturnal wanderings of *Pélleas and Mélisande* than the macabre adventures of *Hansel and Gretel*. The period-instrument pay-offs continue through *Le tombeau*, where the neo-Classical elements of the work leap to the fore, particularly in the lightly-sprung closing Rigaudon.



Sandwiched between the two orchestral transcriptions is *Shéhérazade* – not the oft-recorded song-cycle on poems by Tristan Klingsor, but an 1898 'ouverture de féerie' which Ravel composed whilst still a student under Gabriel Fauré and intended as the curtain-raiser for an opera which never materialised: disheartened by reviews which lambasted the young composer's 'mediocre talent' and over-reliance on Russian influences, Ravel set the score aside and it remained unpublished until 1975. In Roth's hands it brims with youthful energy and hints of Ravel's burgeoning talent as an orchestrator of great originality: any potential bombast is soft-pedalled by the transparency which he and his period instruments bring to the textures (I was put in mind of Hervé Niquet's recent advocacy of some of Gounod's juvenilia on the Ediciones Singulares label), and the fragile sonorities of the woodwind in particular cast a hazy glow that points in the direction of not only the song-cycle which shares its name but also the unique sound-world of *Daphnis et Chloë* (which Roth recorded last year with the same band to great acclaim).

I've come away from this recording with a substantial shopping-list of related works which I'd love to hear through the prism of Roth's historically-informed band. It says much for the keen sense of narrative and character which permeates this disc that two of the front-runners are operas: Ravel's magical *L'enfant et les sortilèges* and Debussy's equally other-worldly *Pélleas et*

*Mélisande*, which I gather Roth is currently being nudged towards by one of his younger colleagues...let's hope he takes the suggestion to heart, and soon.



**Ravel: Ma mère l'Oye, Shéhérazade overture, and Le tombeau de Couperin** ★

Les Siècles, François-Xavier Roth

Available Formats: CD, MP3, CD Quality FLAC, Hi-Res FLAC



**Ravel: Daphnis et Chloé** ★

Marion Ralincourt (flute), Les Siècles & Ensemble Aedes, François-Xavier Roth

Available Formats: CD, MP3, CD Quality FLAC, Hi-Res FLAC