

Les Siècles/Roth, Middle Temple Hall, London ★★★★★

Reviewed by Bayan Northcott

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It takes a remarkable orchestra to switch in a moment from period instruments and stylish baroque performance practices to modern instruments and virtuoso avant-garderie. It takes an equally remarkable conductor to alternate between beating on a tambour like a latter-day Lully and directing with the fingertip finesse of a Boulez.

Les Siècles, founded in 2003, is such an orchestra, and François-Xavier Roth such a conductor, and their UK debut in Middle Temple Hall as part of the City of London Festival's French strand was a delight from beginning to end.

In this ancient hall, where portraits of Stuart monarchs gaze grandly down, it seemed fitting to begin with a suite from Lully's *Sun King*-aggrandising *Alceste*. Lully, as Roth explained, always emphasises rhythm like the dancer he once was; and sure enough, the young players of Les Siècles practically danced in their seats during numbers from *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, with which the concert ended. Rameau, Roth also told us, focused more on harmony, and, he might have added, gestural surprise: the dances from *Dardanus* and *Les Indes Galantes* proved full of pungent progressions and mannerist side-slips.

In between, Stéphanie-Marie Degand gave a firm-toned account of the Violin Concerto in D major, Op 2 No 2, by the plantation-born Joseph Boulogne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges – composer, violinist, swordsman and colonel of Revolutionary France's first black regiment. Correctly composed with some quite good tunes, and resembling in style the earlier Salzburg concerti of Mozart, the piece offered few surprises save for a curious anticipation of the introduction to the finale of Beethoven's First Symphony. Maybe both composers were slyly alluding to an improvisers' cliché of the time.

Les Siècles followed this with the UK premiere of *Streets* (2006) by the rising 32-year-old composer Bruno Mantovani. Inspired by the bustle of New York, scored for 10 players, and sounding like a cross between Boulez and Elliott Carter, the piece unfolds as a sequence of filigree frissons, percussive crashes and volatile solo breaks over long-held harmonies, whizzing brightly along with never a dull moment.