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JOHN
ALLISON

LSO/Roth Barbican, London

★★★★☆

STRAUSS'S MIGHTY *Alpine* symphony ought to have dominated last Sunday's **London Symphony Orchestra** concert, but when ill health prevented André Previn from making the torturous ascent – or even journeying to London – a change of programme and conductor was arranged. In Previn's place came **François-Xavier Roth**, with an American-inspired programme that actually made more coherent sense than the originally announced bill.

But it took time for Roth's Frenchman-in-America style to settle. Although a fastidious conductor, he sometimes cuts an apologetic figure on the podium. Having won the LSO's Donatella Flick Conducting Competition a decade ago and had two years' apprenticeship with the orchestra, he clearly enjoys good rapport with the players, yet took time in the suite from Copland's *Appalachian Spring* to establish the dewy atmosphere. The score's livelier, hoedown episodes were more successful.

Another American classic,

which also shows its composer breathing new life into a fundamentally conservative idiom, Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* found Roth on more focused form. But his good intentions were thwarted by the soprano Barbara Bonney, who made heavy weather of what ought to be a balmy summer nocturne. Her exposed opening phrase showed that the sweetness and flexibility of her voice have gone, and a widening vibrato emphasised her intonation problems. The streetcar famously evoked in the Tennessee writer James Agee's text just about remained on the rails, but few words came across.

Roth finally got a chance to show his mettle in a crackling account of Dvorák's *New World* symphony. Maintaining taut control of the symphonic argument, he unleashed powerful playing from an orchestra that seemed grateful to be playing for him. Indeed, the musicians relished Dvorák's big-hearted melodies without ever suggesting over-familiarity; even the slow movement's overexposed cor anglais tune was teased out magically. And with exhilarating Slavonic rhythms never far away, Roth also showed how the composer was looking back to the Old World with nostalgia.