

# Review



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**François Xavier Roth**  
**Conductor**

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International  
Classical Artists  
The Tower Building  
11 York Road  
London SE1 7NX

T: +44 (0)20 7902 0520  
F: +44 (0)20 7902 0530  
E: [info@icartists.co.uk](mailto:info@icartists.co.uk)  
[www.icartists.co.uk](http://www.icartists.co.uk)

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## The Times

By Richard Morrison, 15 November 2010

## BBCNOW/Roth

St David's Hall, Cardiff

Even among Britain's more esoteric composers the phrase "I've wanted to write a piece about centaurs for years" surely isn't uttered very often. But Simon Holt not only talks the man-beast talk, he walks the walk, too. His *Centauiromachy* is a marvellously imaginative conception — musically, emotionally and intellectually.

It's a double concerto, for the unusual combination of flugelhorn and clarinet. One revelation of this superb premiere — given by Philippe Scharz, Robert Plane and the BBC National Orchestra of Wales conducted by François-Xavier Roth — is that although one instrument is made of metal and the other wood, their timbres are surprisingly similar. In fact the flugel, though related to the trumpet, reveals its mellow gentleness here, and the clarinet its strident edge. And perhaps this is the first point that Holt is subtly making about the centaur: that its man-half and horse-half are not so different, and that sometimes humans can be beastlier than beasts.

But that's my speculation. What Holt has provided is a wonderful, five- movement, musical fantasy. It draws on several centaur myths: two movements refer to the famously wise centaur Chiron, said to be the teacher of Achilles; and another to the Centauiromachy itself — the drunken brawl (depicted on the panels of the Parthenon) between the Centaurs and the Lapiths. However, the concerto also brilliantly exploits the technical resources of the two soloists, their streams of notes fizzing and cartwheeling over an orchestral background that is highly evocative without being blatantly pictorial.

Sometimes — in the opening movement, for instance, or for a brief moment in the haunting Elegeia finale — the two instruments seem like twins, so intuitively linked that each instantly knows what the other is about to say. But elsewhere, as in the nervy middle movement, it's as if the centaur's two natures exist in different worlds. Examine the score and you discover that this is exactly the case, in musical terms. The parts for the two soloists are totally unhinged, metrically, from each other and from the orchestra.

So, what could have been a dusty rehash of Ancient Greek legends turns out to be a disquieting journey into the murky world of dual personalities. In a sense we are all centaurs, struggling to reconcile head and heart, id and ego, primordial desire with imposed

rules and society etiquette. *Centauromachy* sets you thinking about your own dark side. But it's also a dazzlingly virtuosic showpiece. Catch it on Radio 3 tonight.

