

Review



François Xavier Roth
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By John-Pierre Joyce, 6 January 2011

LSO/Roth

With the bicentenary of his birth underway, we are heading for something of a Liszt fest this year. The London Symphony Orchestra under Francois-Xavier Roth celebrated early with a fine performance of *Mazeppa*, one of Liszt's many symphonic poems. Criticised then, as now, for being structurally weak and inept or overblown in their orchestration, the symphonic poems have sunk into relative obscurity compared to his more celebrated piano works. The LSO and Roth whipped through the score with boundless energy in their recount of the imaginary three-day horse ride of would-be Cossack liberator Ivan Mazeppa. Punchy brass and swirling strings generated real excitement, although they were not able to gloss over some of Liszt's banal repetitions and awkward thematic switches.

Liszt came a unstuck over matters of form in his two piano concertos, although the second in A major works best in its transformation of unfolding themes. The work had an ideal advocate in Barry Douglas, whose delivery mixed truly virtuosic playing and moments of high drama with contrasting tenderness. He lingered soothingly over the unfolding lyricism of the opening Adagio, stirring almost reluctantly into the agitated, martial central section of the score. The whole performance was characterised by an intimate connection between soloist, conductor and orchestra. Principal cellist Tim Hugh put in an intense solo, although the vibrato was a little overdone. Lovely interjections, too, from horn, woodwind and double bass players.

Excited by these two works, listeners expected great things from Roth's take on Berlioz's ultra-Romantic *Symphonie Fantastique*. In the end, though, the performance didn't quite live up to expectations. Roth gave a fairly straight reading of the emotionally charged first movement, which made the faster-than-usual ball scene come as a bit of a shock. But once the ears had become accustomed to it, the accelerated tempo made perfect sense. The incessant drive forward well represented the artist's excitement and frustration in seeking out his beloved. It also reinforced Berlioz's deliberate undermining of the 'respectable' waltz. The third movement ('Scene in the Country') was exquisitely played as an extended pastoral symphonic poem in the manner of Beethoven. But the 'March to the Scaffold' was simply too fast – although the clarinet managed to put in a nicely pained *idée fixe* just before the final guillotine drop. The concluding Witches' Sabbath veered between some wickedly off-kilter playing and rather bland passages. The concluding coda was rushed through and sounded hasty rather than fantastic.