

Review



François Xavier Roth
Conductor

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
www.icartists.co.uk

Evening Standard

By Barry Millington, 7 January 2011

Liszt captured in poetry and motion

We're going to be hearing a good deal of Liszt, I suspect, in his bicentenary year. Not that I'm complaining: as a paid-up member of the Liszt Appreciation Society, I can't wait.

In last night's concert by the LSO under Francois-Xavier Roth we had a taste of things to come, with two scores — the symphonic poem *Mazeppa* and the Second Piano Concerto — I haven't heard live for many years.

The orchestral works of Liszt, including his series of symphonic poems, are perhaps a source of fascination and intermittent inspiration rather than consistently crafted masterpieces.

Mazeppa is a case in point. Telling the story of the Cossack hero tied naked to the back of a wild horse and taken on a hair-raising ride across the steppes, the work hovers on the edge of brass-heavy vulgarity, sometimes straying beyond.

And unlike the slightly later symphonic poems *Orpheus* and *Hamlet*, it fails to tap Liszt's more poetic or introspective vein. Roth and the LSO delivered on the level of frenzied excitement but did little to dispel the prejudice that as an orchestrator Liszt wasn't in the same league as his contemporaries Wagner and [Berlioz](#).

That impression was somewhat mitigated in the concerto, where occasionally the dense clouds part to reveal a sun-kissed chamber texture of, say, solo strings and piano. Barry Douglas, looking all the more raffish and Depardieu-like in his open-necked informality, rose to the occasion with some magical playing in those passages, dispatching more extrovert material elsewhere with appropriate bravura.

Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* gave Roth a chance to show what could be done with a score by a master orchestrator. The dreamlike ballroom scene of the second movement was evoked with a light Gallic touch. Unlike Liszt, in *Mazeppa* at least, Berlioz keeps his big guns in reserve.

The brass scarcely get a look-in during *A Ball* and the *Scene in the Country* and their entry is all the more startlingly effective in the *March to the Scaffold*, here unleashed with all due grisly menace.

Perhaps the phantasmagoria of the final witches' Sabbath can only be fully realised with the pungency of period instruments. Roth and his players did their best, driving this obsessive, hallucinatory, truly fantastic symphony to an exhilarating conclusion.

