

# Review



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

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## **The Guardian**

By Tim Ashley, 9 January 2011

## **LSO/Roth**

The subject of François-Xavier Roth's concert with the London Symphony Orchestra was the relationship between Liszt and Berlioz. The two composers were friends, drawn together by a shared sense of high Romantic iconoclasm. In 1833, Liszt bailed out the impoverished Berlioz by performing a piano transcription of the *Symphonie Fantastique*, which did much to restore both the latter's fortunes and his symphony's.

Roth, a maverick himself, prefaced the *Fantastique* with Liszt's *Mazeppa* and his *Second Piano Concerto*. One expected him to be equally successful with both composers, but on this showing, he's more at ease with Liszt than with Berlioz. Understanding the former's mix of poetry and flamboyance, Roth pitched his music at a high emotional level. *Mazeppa* was thrill-a-minute stuff delivered with ferocious exactitude. The concerto is no masterpiece and can sometimes seem discursive, but in this instance it had tremendous integrity and shape, thanks to both Roth's scrupulous sense of its pace, and to Barry Douglas's weighty, wonderfully intense playing.

Roth approached the Berlioz, meanwhile, with much of the same fury and fire, which curiously managed to diminish its range. We were conscious throughout of the symphony's origins in the sensibilities of Gothic melodrama, but not always aware of its power to transcend them. There were fine things – a notably feverish Waltz and a very baleful March to the Scaffold. But elsewhere, particularly in the first and third movements, we were aware of exaggerated effect rather than integration of gesture and meaning. I have huge admiration for Roth, but this was by no means an example of his finest work.