

you.

Something else that's opera is the conventional layout of the pit, with the orchestral players massed between the stage and a conductor who directs them face-on. But it wasn't always so. And last week I saw a period-style performance of Offenbach's *Les Brigands* at the Opéra Comique, Paris, where the conductor stood close to the footlights with most of the band grouped behind him – looking toward the stage but at his back, as would have been the case in the 1860s when *Les Brigands* premiered.

The conductor here was Francois-Xavier Roth, whose wide-ranging interests stretch from cutting-edge contemporary (he's presenting a new work by Simon Holt in the Proms this summer) to Rameau on old instruments. Offenbach falls somewhere between the two and you might not think it had a lot to gain from period performance practices. But Roth insists it does, not least because French woodwind changed dramatically around the 1900s. And he thinks that having most of the orchestra face the stage produces a different performance dynamic, more engaged with the singers (if less with the conductor). For myself, I'm slightly sceptical about all this, but I can't deny that the orchestra – Roth's own, ultra-versatile ensemble Les Siècles – sounded good. Considerably better than the Opéra Comique voices on the stage, which were more capable than memorable.

As for the show, *Les Brigands* is a rarity so I was pleased to see it. Done with cheerful painted flats and slapstick humour, it proclaimed traditional French comic values with a sort of "authenticity". But that said, there's a sometimes fine line between period performance and old-fashioned tosh. And here, the line was virtually transparent.

