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[Michael White](#)

Michael White was voted Britain's least boring music critic by listeners of Classic FM. He has made documentaries about Menotti, Britten and Nielsen

and once attempted to explain Wagner's Ring Cycle on TV in half an hour. He's the author of two books: *Introducing Wagner (Icon)* and *Opera & Operetta (HarperCollins)*.

François-Xavier Roth – the man who can do everything, and is doing it in next Tuesday's prom

By [Michael White](#) [Music](#) Last updated: August 5th, 2011

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Roth conducts Les Siècles playing Haydn's 'Farewell' symphony

François-Xavier Roth (known to his intimates as FXR) is an oddly elf-like French conductor you may not have registered yet but should – partly because he turns up in [a notable Prom on August 9](#), with a Simon Holt première and the Saint-Saëns Organ Symphony, but also because he's one of the more interesting figures on the threshold of baton-celebrity.

Ten years ago he won the Donatella Flick competition which led to a series of engagements with the LSO. Then he seemed to drop out of the picture so far as UK work was concerned, with only occasional appearances on London platforms. But in the meantime he was building a high-profile career back in France with a band of his own creation called Les Siècles. And what made Les Siècles special was that their concerts would start on period instruments, playing Rameau, Couperin whatever, and end on contemporary ones playing Boulez and Birtwistle.

Still more remarkable, they handled both the old and new with understanding and accomplishment. And FXR, for all his elfin qualities, became a TV star in the process, steering Les Siècles through a series of short but spunky programmes on one of France's popular channels that pulled 4 million viewers a time.

A few weeks ago I had an encounter with him in Paris where he was conducting an all-round period-style production of Offenbach's *Les Brigands* at the Opéra Comique. And though you might not think Offenbach had much to gain from period practice, FXR insists it does – not least because the sound and style of French woodwind changed dramatically around the 1900s. But his big statement with this show had to do with the layout of the orchestra in the pit. Needless to say, the band was Les Siècles. And the arrangement had him standing close to the footlights with most of the players behind him – looking toward the stage but at his back, as would have been the case in the 1860s when *Les brigands* premièred.

FXR 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). I'm slightly sceptical about all that; and I'm not sure how much there was to engage with in the cheerful painted flats and slapstick humour of this particular staging. There's a sometimes fine line between period performance and old-fashioned tosh; and here, the line was virtually transparent.

But I can't deny that Les Siècles were good. And so was FXR, a human/elfin dynamo. So watch out for his Prom on Tuesday. Sadly, it doesn't involve Les Siècles but the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, so you won't get a period take on Saint-Saëns. But if you're interested, there's [a recent Les Siècles recording of the Organ Symphony](#) on their own CD label (distributed by Harmonia Mundi). Worth listening to for the comparison.

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