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Festival de Laon, France

Elizabeth Davis discovers a vibrant and varied autumn festival in an unexplored area of France

It was only after I'd climbed the countless hundreds of steps from the 'new' town of Laon to the medieval quarter that I noticed the cable cars carrying people up the same route. *Tant pis*, as the French say.

I was headed to Laon Cathedral to watch a concert of Liszt by the [Les Siècles](#) orchestra under conductor François-Xavier Roth – and I hadn't been expecting the mountaineering. The town is about 140km north east of Paris and has an embarrassment of architectural riches for a town so little-known outside France.



The centrepiece is a 12th-century gothic cathedral (left), similar in style and layout to the Notre Dame in Paris. Laon's version may be smaller but it is picked out in guide-books for having fine stone carvings: lively gargoyles line the roof, a hippo yawns above the main entrance and a mermaid spews water from the gutter.

But I was not here to admire the architecture. The cathedral is the main venue for the annual [Laon festival](#), now in its 23rd year and boasting appearances this month and next from violinist Viktoria Mullova, the [Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France](#) (with conductor Myung-Whun Chung) and the [Idomeneo Quartet](#).

For that evening's concert, Roth had chosen an all-Liszt programme to celebrate the composer's 200th anniversary (see the October issue of [BBC Music Magazine](#)). Organist Vincent Dubois opened the evening with the superbly dramatic *Fantasia and Fugue on Ad nos ad salutarem undam*, which showed the cathedral's Cavaillé-Coll organ off to great effect. The work was originally for solo organ but Dubois and Les Siècles performed a version for orchestra and organ, transcribed by Marcel Dupré.

The main event of the evening, though, was Liszt's *Dante Symphony* – more a tone poem than a symphony in its narrative drive and musical picture-painting. The music describes the souls in purgatory, thrown around in the swirling winds, the innocence of Francesca's sinful love (the same Francesca who provided inspiration for Tchaikovsky's *Francesca di Rimini*) and the finality of the dread words on the gates of Hell, 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here' – words which Liszt wrote on the score of his work, in the original Italian.

Roth and his orchestra revelled in the imposing surroundings of the cathedral and its dramatic acoustic, which was especially suited to the apocalyptic subject matter of the *Dante*. In their hands Liszt's Symphony – often seen as a turgid and awkward beast – had real bite. And the *Ad nos ad salutarem undam* made a gripping and convincing claim for greater recognition within the Hungarian's output.

When I spoke to Roth before the concert he explained the choice of repertoire: 'Liszt was considered to be a piano composer when he was alive and I think his orchestral music suffered a lot because of this image. And today, it's still the same.'

In the composer's centenary year, Les Siècles are setting out to change that.



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