

Les Siècles/Roth at Cité de la musique, Paris

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Although already eight years old, the youngest and most exciting orchestra in Paris only crossed my radar a few months ago, with a revelatory recording of Stravinsky's *Firebird* made on period instruments. After that I simply had to hear at first hand whether the musicians of François-Xavier Roth's Les Siècles are as electrifying in the flesh as on disc.

The answer is an emphatic, and four-fold, oui. First, because their very body language suggests energy and an intense desire to entertain and stimulate. Second, because after the main concert they whizz into the foyers, period instruments still in hand, and serenade departing punters with trios and quartets, or maybe by explaining the mysteries of the ophicleide — which take some doing.

Third, because they have the boldness to introduce visual art into the concert hall. In this case, Liszt's *Dante* Symphony was matched by projections of William Blake's often horrifying illustrations of Dante's *Inferno*. I found this mismatch of aesthetic worlds sometimes provoking and sometimes disturbing, but at least someone had the wit to make an overt connection between two 19th-century responses to the same 14th-century epic.

And fourth, because of the musical approach. What distinguishes Les Siècles from other period-instrument bands is that they switch happily on to modern instruments, and between thematically-linked repertoires from different epochs. So this concert, part of a series with the title of "Rituels — La vie, la mort", opened with a brilliantly zestful account on modern instruments of Ligeti's *Mysteries of the Macabre*, before the players turned to their 19th-century instruments for Liszt's *Totentanz* and *Dante* Symphony.

The authentic timbres make a huge difference. Just one example: using a beautiful 1881 Erard piano, with its bell-like upper sonorities and comparatively dapper bass superbly exploited by Jean-François Heisser, made the *Totentanz* sound far less aggressive and doom-laden than when hammered (as it usually is) on a modern Steinway.

But even more exciting than the timbres is the virtuosic flair with which these musicians exploit them, and the infectious flamboyance of Roth's interpretations. I loved the moment when the harpist abandoned her strings and bashed a cymbal instead, adding an extra fortissimo frisson to the symphony's climax. You don't see that in the Vienna Philharmonic. It's time that Les Siècles were invited to the Proms. They would bring a Gallic gale of fresh air to the Albert Hall.