

François-Xavier Roth

We talk to the French conductor about why Liszt is still underrated as a composer



Last year, in the medieval town of Laon, about an hour outside Paris, conductor François-Xavier Roth and his orchestra [Les Siècles](#) gave a performance of Liszt's *Dante Symphony*. The concert was recorded and the resulting disc has just been released on the orchestra's own label. At the recording session we spoke to him about his championing of this rarely performed

work.

Why did you choose to record the *Dante Symphony*?

I have a very big love for Liszt's music in general. We chose to do this work especially because it's one of the less played symphonies. We also wanted to recreate the orchestra that performed this piece – so the musicians are all playing instruments from the second half of the 19th century.

Why do you think the *Symphony* isn't more often performed?

Firstly, Liszt as a composer today, as when he was alive, is only considered as a piano composer. People like to put great men and women in boxes and he was so popular as a soloist and as a virtuoso. It's difficult to realise today how big a superstar he was in his time. People would have died to listen to him in a recital – people say that he had something demonic in him. I think that this image of a virtuoso was something that worked against him as a composer. Secondly as a composer and especially a composer of symphonic music, he never wanted to do what was done at the time. He was really in this sense a modern man. This symphony, for example, is not a symphony. It's something between a symphonic poem and a symphony.

How aware are you, as a conductor, that a concert is being recorded?

The principle of recording live concerts is, for me, something very important. It's not just that you have the excitement of a live performance – which I hope you can hear on the recording too – but it's also about a new way to have a relationship with our audience. In the pop world, pop singers have studio recordings and live recordings and they're completely different. For us, sure, the piece is always the same, but the character of the recording, the atmosphere is so special in a live recording.

You've said that you strive to make each performance sound like a premiere. Can you explain a bit more about that?

It's more an attitude. The performer should study, rehearse and perform the pieces as if it was the premier – there is no question over that for me. You can't perform a piece as if the piece has been played 10,000 times. If you have this attitude as a performer you will only recreate something that people already know. No composer wrote a piece of music thinking 'I'm going to write a piece that will sound good the 2,000th time it's performed.' It's really a philosophy of mine and the orchestra that when we rehearse a piece we rehearse like the composer is close to my music stand.

The recording will be released on [Les Siècles Live](#), the orchestra's own orchestra. Why have you set up an independent label?

It's about the choices we have for what we want to record. And it also means that the label belongs to the musicians, so their attitude is extremely dynamic and committed both in recording sessions and when we decide what to record. We also choose the pictures for the cover, the booklet notes, the design – it's our baby.

François-Xavier Roth's recording of Liszt's Dante Symphony is [available now](#)