

Proms 2013: Les Siècles, Albert Hall, review

French orchestra Les Siècles gave an exotic twist to a difficult version of the Rite of Spring, says Ivan Hewett.

★★★★☆



Les Siècles Photo: Ansgar Klostermann

By Ivan Hewett

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The Proms was bound to salute the centenary year of the Rite of Spring, and this concert from the French orchestra Les Siècles (The Ages) found an intriguing and original way to do it.

Normally Stravinsky's great ballet is presented as the explosion that launched modern music, but here it was the cataclysm that brought something to an end.

That something was the exotic, highly-coloured tradition of French ballet. We were offered a whistle-stop tour through the tradition, beginning with Lully's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* of 1670. Les Siècles aren't the first to play this music on the correct "period" instruments, but they certainly do it with tremendous swagger. The dances were launched with a tinkle of antique cymbals and tambourines, plus a wedding-cake assemblage of brass bells for the Turkish movements. Conductor François-Xavier Roth even followed Lully's practice of beating time with a staff.

Everything in this and the following suite from Rameau's *Les Indes Galantes* of 1735 was maximally vivid. The delightful little bagpipe-inspired *Musette* was faster than I've ever heard it, as were the *Tambourins*, but I couldn't help feeling this obscured the vein of tenderness in Rameau. Then we jumped forward a century, to Delibes' *Coppélia* and Massenet's *Le Cid*. The orchestra at least doubled in size, with the addition of French *cornets à pistons* and Wagner tubas. Here Roth's fleet tempos and imperious way of holding pauses like a traffic policeman worked perfectly, allowing the tangy, reedy colours of those period winds to shine through.

Much the same could be said of the *Rite of Spring* after the interval, which we heard in its original 1913 version. Often this worked wonders, especially at the very beginning, where the bassoon solo had exactly the strangulated, piercing sound Stravinsky must have imagined. But not everything came off so well. "Period" alto flutes just aren't as powerful as modern ones, and that was a problem in the *Ritual Action*. The electrifying polyrhythms of the *Adoration of the Earth* only worked so well because Roth added an extra "scraper" or *guero*. The last chord in this performance proved that Stravinsky's description of it as an "undifferentiated noise" was exactly right — which is why he recomposed it later. But if the composer wasn't satisfied with the ballet's first version, why should we be? There was a contradiction at the heart of the enterprise, which all the exotic colours couldn't compensate for.

Hear this concert for one week at bbc.co.uk/radio3. See it on BBC Four on 21 July