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BBC Proms: Les Siècles, Royal Albert Hall, London – review

By Richard Fairman

An authentic 'Rite of Spring' was the highlight of this period-instrument orchestra's programme



François-Xavier Roth conducts Les Siècles at the BBC Proms

Here was what you might call the shock of the old. Among the many events marking the centenary of the first performance of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, nobody else (at least in the UK) has thought of going back to how the music might have sounded in 1913. But the French period-instrument group Les Siècles offered a Prom that lived up to its name: ranging across the centuries, it played a selection of ballet music that stretched through the Baroque and Romantic eras as far as the Stravinsky.

This was quite an undertaking. Different instruments were needed for each period and the orchestra for *The Rite of Spring* was huge by period-instrument standards. It was another Prom spectacular (even if it did not equal in numbers or outlandish instruments the orchestra assembled for a period performance of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* a couple of years ago).

In the Baroque dances – Lully's *Le bourgeois Gentilhomme* and Rameau's *Les Indes galantes* – Les Siècles were lithe and elegant. François-Xavier Roth, the group's founder, conducted these in the 18th-century French manner by striking the ground with a cane (though, fortunately, he did not jab it in his foot as Lully did, causing gangrene and death shortly after). The 19th-century extracts from Delibes' *Coppélia* and the ballet music from Massenet's *Le Cid* brought a bigger scale and expressive wind playing.

The Stravinsky, though, was the eye-opener. It was good to know that Roth had gone back to the original manuscript to reinstate some particularly difficult writing that the composer later excised, though most of this detail was lost in the general welter of sound. What really made a difference were the timbres of the period instruments. Early 20th-century French horns, especially, are far softer than their later counterparts, resulting in an orchestral sound that felt re-arranged from top to bottom.

The whole performance was light on its feet – truly dance music, not a power-house orchestral showpiece – and Les Siècles refused to wilt in the face of some of Roth's very fast speeds. As an idea of what might have been heard in the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris in 1913 this was fascinating. All that was missing was the riot that rocked the theatre. Now that really would be authenticity.



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