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THE  TIMES

Prom 4: Les Siècles/Roth Albert Hall, SW7

Geoff Brown

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In this scintillating Prom, François-Xavier Roth and his marvellous period instrument band Les Siècles took an extra step toward musical authenticity. He conducted Lully’s sweetly corseted dance music by stabbing out beats on the floor with a staff. Luckily Roth stopped short of replicating the baroque composer’s cause of death: gangrene, the eventual result of stabbing a foot.

Equally luckily, Roth abandoned the staff long before this otherwise courtly ballet programme (Les Siècles’ Proms debut) reached its much anticipated destination, *The Rite of Spring*.

I won’t quickly forget the sound of Stravinsky’s big drum and timpani punching holes in the air: just one amazing element among many in this searingly clear, rainbow-textured account, featuring French instruments old enough to have been used at the noisy 1913 premiere. Poetic valveless horns, fresh-voiced flutes, pellucid bassoons, quicksilver trumpets: they electrified the air.

The widened colour range wasn’t the only reason why this *Rite* in this year of *Rites* proved exceptional. Textures, dynamics and rhythmic accents, only found in the original manuscript, had been painstakingly restored. Everything was brighter, sharper, weirder, more savage — also more beautiful, particularly in the mysterious night scenes opening Part Two.

Beyond the pristine “authentic” sound — equally beneficial to Lully and Rameau and the selections from *Coppélia* and Massenet’s *Le Cid* — lay the players’ musicianship. Les Siècles think as one, feel as one. They even bow to the audience as one, with an elegance uniquely French. Hearing their confectionery from *Coppélia*, last at the Proms in 1932, I almost wept at the delightfully powdered chestnuts denied to us over the decades by rigorous Prom planners.

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Claire Willis

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