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## Vintage performance offers Fantastique new sounds

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**I took a break at the beginning of the month and found myself setting off on a wee adventure of musical exploration to which I will devote today's short space.**

I had just reviewed a new recording of Stravinsky's Rite Of Spring by a French orchestra called Les Siecles Live. It is on their own label of the same name. I probably should have known about them: they have been around, are extremely famous in France with their own television slot, and have played at the Proms. As is the way of these things, they were new to me: maybe I had been ill or busy elsewhere.

The band, which describes itself as a chamber orchestra, was founded in 2003 by conductor Francois-Xavier Roth. Their specialism is playing on instruments of the period. Nothing new in that. But with The Rite Of Spring? Just a century old, and surely on instruments that are of today's vintage? Not so, I discovered, with brass instruments smaller than today's, woodwind of different technical capabilities, and a string section playing on catgut, not the modern steel strings with all their brilliance and projection.

The result? Completely different textures with more intimate and detailed lines, a clarity I simply have not heard, and a very different sound-world that will either pin you to your seat or bring you to your feet: it did both to me. I could not stop listening and am listening still. The band itself is sensationally virtuosic: the key word is "live". And that is exactly what it sounds like.

I sent an e-mail to Harmonia Mundi, the company that distributes their recordings in the UK, and they kindly sent me a set of Les Siecles Live CDs.

If you do not know them, I urge you to investigate, particularly the orchestra's enthralling version of Berlioz's Symphonie Fantastique and, above all, a mind-blowing

account of Saint-Saens's beloved warhorse, the Organ Symphony, recorded live in the church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris, totally refreshing and re-evaluating the piece in an astounding performance.

Seek them out if you do not know them. They will open your ears.

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