

# Concert: Les Siècles/Roth at the Festival Hall

Sometimes a party piece, Ravel's Concerto for the Left Hand was turned into a tempestuous and impetuous ride

5 stars

★★★★★

I thought I was sick of Mother Goose's clucking. Conductors love to programme Ravel's *Ma mère l'Oye*, painting its colours, playing dress-up in its fairytale costume box. Yet orchestras never seem to enjoy story time as much as the maestros do.

Hearing this music delivered by François-Xavier Roth's French orchestra, Les Siècles, however, was a different matter. The group, founded by Roth in 2003, plays on instruments appropriate to when the music was written — not a big shift when it comes to scores from the early 20th century, but with enough differences for you to notice.

Roth used fewer strings here, but their sound was fiercer; the cellos a little “stringy”, the basses woodier. The winds and brass had more of an edge too, and overall the balance between the sections was more even. All this heightened the fierce gleam of Ravel's textures: the feral purr of the sad monster in *Beauty and the Beast* (contrabassoon), the lonely sighs of *Tom Thumb* lost in the forest (cor anglais).

Plus, we had animated images, drawn live by the French animator Grégoire Pont but (presumably) programmed to move in sync with the music. Owing something to the visual style of Saint-Exupéry, they were cute, lo-fi and not over-dominant. It's a pity that while in London Les Siècles wasn't doing a children's concert that could have focused on Pont's ingenious skills.

As it was, grown up, rough and tough French modernism made up the rest of the programme. Jean-Efflam Bavouzet played Ravel's Concerto for the Left Hand on a 1890s Pleyel piano brought specially from Paris. It was an elegant creature with thunderous but crisp bass notes. Both orchestra and pianist turned what's sometimes a party piece into a tempestuous and impetuous ride. Bavouzet then took the Pleyel for a gentler stroll in Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*, brilliantly done.

Debussy began and ended the night with his last orchestral work, *Jeux* — its dancing patterns given a sharp, dangerous edge — and *La Mer*, a seascape with the barnacles very much scrubbed off. A minor setback — a harp string snapped halfway through — possibly even enhanced the sense of danger and restlessness that Roth cultivated, in a performance almost as bracing as a wild swim in November.