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**Triumphant Mahler symphony more successful than an eccentric Bartók concerto**  
by Bernard HughesFriday, 31 March 2017



François-Xavier Roth, new LSO Principal Guest ConductorMarco Borggreve

In musical performance, if you get the start right and the end right, you can get away with a lot in between. In last night's LSO concert under François-Xavier Roth there was a mixed bag of more and less successful beginnings and endings, but lots of fine playing sandwiched in the middle.

Mahler was only 24 when he began work on his first symphony, but it is a work of astonishing ambition and mastery for such a young composer. It originally had a detailed programme note narrating the story behind the music, and a descriptive name: "Titan". By the time of the revised version Mahler had thought better and rejected both, although the music retains a vivid sense of drama.

The introduction, a depiction of dawn, lasts a full five minutes before the real substance of the piece begins, but the pacing of the woodwind snippets and off-stage trumpet calls is faultlessly composed in. [Roth](#) managed the transition from static string chords to teeming movement with a subtle accelerando. By contrast, the start of the second movement is vibrant, with Roth, batonless in sober suit and tie, literally dancing along with the rustic Ländler. The funeral march of the third movement emerges through the most famous double bass solo in the symphonic repertoire, a minor key "Frère Jacques" delivered dolorously by Gunars Upatnieks.

The last movement is where Mahler's constructional genius is seen best, as he combines passages recalling earlier material with new ideas including a love theme reeking of Hollywood, written before Hollywood was Hollywood. The ending had the horns in full swaggering voice over Nigel Thomas's striding timpani. The glorious finish was marred only by a man, clearly determined to be the first to shout "bravo", shouting "bravo" marginally before the music was done with. Well done, him.



The less successful moments came in the first half. I have previously reviewed the LSO playing Bartók's Third Piano Concerto, when I was very pleased with Yefim Bronfman's interpretation. I was less taken with Simon Trpčeski's reading, especially of the opening. This late work sees the previously uncompromising Bartók relaxing his style into something more populist. The opening is one of the most wonderful melodies he ever wrote, lithe and elegant, with a clear through-line. Trpčeski **(pictured above)** decided to break this line up with a disjointed and somewhat mannered delivery which I really didn't enjoy. Neither did I like the slow tempo, which I found made the middle of the movement slightly laboured.

Like *The Rite of Spring*, premiered just two weeks later, *Jeux* still sounds unbelievably contemporary. The second movement is truly transcendental, and was more successful. The alternation of polyphonic string phrases with chordal, hymn-like responses from the piano had a hushed intensity, and some beautifully voiced woodwind chords. These passages showed Trpčeski at his sensitive best. The finale raced along, heading towards the big Gershwin-esque tune in which the orchestra let rip. Indeed, the last couple of minutes were the best bit, and nearly expunged the memory of the first couple.

The concert had started with [Debussy's \*Jeux\*](#), an extraordinary masterclass in orchestration. Like *The Rite of Spring*, premiered just two weeks later, *Jeux* still sounds unbelievably contemporary. It is never atonal, but never is it quite tonal either, finding a tantalising middle ground. The structure is fluid, flitting from idea to idea capriciously, with solos spread around the orchestra. After a slightly uncertain start Roth fully inhabited the music, now pressing forward, now on tiptoe at the back of the dais. Only in the throwaway ending does Debussy disappoint, a strange punchline that is out of keeping with the rest of the piece, despite Roth and the orchestra's best efforts.

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