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Some items to consider

RECORDING OF THE MONTH

Maurice RAVEL (1875-1937)

Daphnis et Chloé, complete ballet (1909-1912)

Ensemble Aedes

Les Siècles/François-Xavier Roth

rec. live, 2016, various venues

HARMONIA MUNDI HMM905280 [54:49]

When I was first getting into music, I was mostly rather put off the music of Ravel in general (and *Daphnis et Chloé* in particular) by recordings that gave the sound texture a rather gloopy homogeneity. Unable to find my way through the soup, I gave up and went for clearer, more Germanic sounds.

There is no one better positioned to clean up that mess than François-Xavier Roth and Les Siècles. Their recent recordings have done their best to strip the patina off lots of familiar works, applying the principles of the historically informed movement to music that is much more recent than the Baroque. Their previous results have been a revelation, and this *Daphnis* is every bit as good.

Roth is using a new edition which corrects long-running errors in the score, but the real revelations come thanks to his choices of instruments. His musicians play on instruments that are contemporary to Paris at the time of the work's premiere, so they use, for example, gut strings with little vibrato. More importantly, however, Roth points out that Paris was the capital of wind instrument making in the first decade of the twentieth century, and that French composers wrote to show them off. Consequently, Les Siècles use instruments that many a modern symphony orchestra wouldn't recognise, with different bores and sizes to what we are now more accustomed.

The results are magnificent, and made me hear this score with fresh ears. Those who know *Daphnis* well will find plenty to chuckle about in Roth's revelations, but it will also appeal to someone getting to know the work for the first time, even though its freshness will spoil them for any other recording. Roth says he was aiming for "sweetness and intense sensuality" in the orchestral sound, and he pretty much nails that.

In fact, it hits you right from the beginning with a beautifully shimmering opening, and throughout the brass have a slight wheeziness that I really liked. The woodwinds are excellent, too. The oboes' birdsong at the opening sounds flexible and very human, and the flutes have a lovely glimmer to them, with a gorgeous deep flutter at opening of part three, over which the violins sing beautifully.

The strings sound lovely, too. They have a definite shine on them, but with gut strings and less vibrato they have a slightly cool edge which I thought worked very well. They still have bags of character, however: listen, for example, to the violas, and then the violins, that slither brilliantly at the opening of the *Danse suppliante* in Part Two. The harp is also caught very well, and the percussion sound *fantastique* in, for example, Dorcon's grotesque dance in Part One, even if elsewhere the wind machine goes a bit crazy at times.

The chorus of the Ensemble Aedes seems to be balanced a little further away than the orchestra at the beginning, but Roth writes in the notes that he wants to recapture Ravel's *mise en scène* where the chorus moves closer and further away. I'm not sure how he does it, be it through clever engineering or different takes (the booklet lists seven different venues in which the disc was recorded!), but it works, and they sound eerily close-up in the *Interlude*.

François-Xavier Roth understands the unfolding structure of the piece very well. He knows how to pace the opening so that it feels purposeful rather than flabby, and he switches to become snappy and precise in the *Danse religieuse*. He also gets right inside the swing (or should that be the *élan*?) of the concluding *Danse générale*, which sounds great, and which hangs in the air for a good few seconds after he brings them off the note.

In short, this is a hit, perhaps the most important *Daphnis* to come out since Charles Dutoit's very different version from Montreal. How lucky we are that Les Siècles have made this sort of musical archaeology their business!

Simon Thompson

Previous review: [Dan Morgan](#)



Leticia Gómez-Tagle (piano)



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