

MUSIC

François Xavier Roth, the Proms' secret weapon

'FX' Roth tells Richard Morrison about crossing musical lines with his super-chic Parisian orchestra

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François-Xavier Roth, nicknamed Special FX

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In a studio deep inside Paris's gleaming Philharmonie concert-hall complex, François-Xavier Roth — drily dubbed Special FX by British musicians — is taking a break from recording *Le timbre d'argent*. It's the first opera composed by the 19th-century French composer Camille Saint-Saëns, but if you've never heard of it, don't fret. It didn't ring any bells, silver or otherwise, with the French either until Roth conducted his pioneering orchestra Les Siècles in six performances at the Opéra-Comique this summer — its first staging since 1914.

"I was amazed by its quality," the 45-year-old Parisian says. "It's really *The Tales of Hoffmann* before Offenbach wrote it. At the end of each of our performances people were shouting their joy."

A conductor isn't perhaps the most objective person to gauge his audience's enthusiasm, but one can't help admiring Roth's boundless appetite for revisiting forgotten corners of his country's music. Londoners will get a taste of that when Roth and Les Siècles come to the Proms on Wednesday. Sadly, they won't be bringing *Le timbre d'argent*, but three other *petits morceaux* of Saint-Saëns are included in a concert that also has late 19th-century rarities from Édouard Lalo and César Franck (OK, Belgian-born, but Parisian to his fingertips) as well as ballet music from Léo Delibes's opera *Lakmé*.



Roth specialises in neglected French works

“Yes, with this concert we offer *un chapeau* to you British,” Roth says. I am confused. Is that an example of the famous Parisian sense of humour? “Not at all,” Roth says. “It is a genuine tribute. When I discover these scores of French romantic pieces that are never played in France, such as Lalo’s ballet *Namouna*, and then I go on YouTube to see if there are any recordings, I usually find that it is a British orchestra performing them. Conductors like Sir Thomas Beecham did a huge amount for French music.”

Isn't the truth, though, that — compared with the great French generation of Debussy and Ravel who came a few years later — Lalo and Delibes are just a bit second-rate? Roth looks horrified by the suggestion. "Not true," he exclaims. "When Debussy and Ravel heard *Namouna* as students, they were shocked. It was a revelation to them, showing what possibilities could be explored with the modern, enlarged orchestra. The same with Delibes: the exoticisms he introduced into *Lakmé* and *Coppélia* had a huge effect on later French composers."

Why, then, have they largely disappeared from concert programmes — even in Britain? "Sometimes it is inexplicable why certain composers or pieces are totally abandoned," Roth replies. "Lalo wrote a huge amount of symphonic and chamber music, but today we know the *Symphonie espagnole* and the Cello Concerto and that's it. And it's not just French music where that's true. How can you explain that 80 per cent of what Stravinsky wrote is almost never played? The same even for Tchaikovsky."

Roth has made his career — or at least a substantial part of it — out of remedying these quirks of musical history, but it transpires that there is a more political impulse behind the programme he is offering London. Yes, it's another Prom telling us subtly, or not so subtly, to keep our borders open and our minds receptive to outside influences. As Roth delights in pointing out, nearly all of the music, including Saint-Saëns's *Egyptian Piano Concerto* and the Bacchanale from his opera *Samson and Delilah*, demonstrates the centuries-old habit among French composers of taking inspiration from the "exotique", whether it's Africa, Arabia or Asia.

"We already see it in the 17th and 18th centuries, in Lully and Rameau," Roth says, "and certainly in the 19th. Composers such as Saint-Saëns travelled a lot, especially to the former French colonies, and absorbed what they heard, while others such as Debussy and Lalo experienced the exotic through books and paintings. Whatever way, though, there was a strong feeling that these distant countries could bring something very valuable to French culture and widen the French view of what is life and what is art."

And should we adopt the same stance today? "*Absolument!*" says Roth. "As a musician, but even more as a citizen, I believe that the culture of one's country is best when open to influences from abroad. Through music we know that the concept of borders is ridiculous. Culture travels all the time."

I expect my players not only to change their instruments, but also how they think

So does Les Siècles, if by travel we mean through the repertoire of many lands and many centuries. Roth founded his super-chic Paris-based band in 2003, initially to play early 20th-century music on instruments of that period, which are still abundant in Paris (he brought a sensational period-instrument account of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* to the Proms four years ago). Now, however, Les Siècles has evolved into an ensemble that tackles everything from early baroque music to Pierre Boulez.

"It's really a Utopia we have created," he beams. "And I must say, it is exhausting. In a healthy way, though. You see, what I expect from my players is not only to change their instruments, but also the way they think; their tuning; the way they listen and shape the sound. It is the new gymnastics. It is also dangerous. We take risks, but we love these wide

parameters because it means our music-making never gets comfortable. It means we avoid one of the biggest problems for professional musicians, which is repetition.”

The son of one of the world’s greatest organists, Daniel Roth, and a fine flute player before he turned to conducting, Roth is nothing if not ambitious. Paris and Les Siècles remain at the centre of his life, but he has also become a leading musical figure in two other cities. One is Cologne, where he became Generalmusikdirektor two years ago. The job involves being chief conductor of the Cologne Opera and the venerable Gürzenich Orchestra, the band that premiered Mahler’s Fifth Symphony as well as several pieces by Strauss and Brahms. Roth is determined to make it a significant force again with a series of highly adventurous projects.

Next season, for instance, he will conduct a staging of one of the 20th century’s most complex operas: *Die Soldaten*, by Bernd Alois Zimmermann, who was born in Cologne in 1918. With its 26 singing and speaking roles and its requirement for a 100-strong orchestra playing a huge variety of strange instruments, it should satisfy even Roth’s appetite for a challenge.

And the other city is London, because this autumn the London Symphony Orchestra formalises its deepening relationship with the Frenchman by making him principal guest conductor — with, unsurprisingly, a Debussy series (including a UK premiere) scheduled for his first season. That appointment, of course, coincides with the arrival of Simon Rattle as the LSO’s music director. Does Roth envisage a good working relationship?

“It will be wonderful,” he enthuses. “Simon is one of my inspirations. When I first started conducting he was the model — not just because he is one of the world’s best conductors, but because he showed us all how to make interesting programmes and how to get people curious about music they didn’t think they would like. His arrival in London should be a signal for everyone in your country to make music a bigger thing in their lives.”

Roth and Les Siècles are at the Royal Albert Hall, London SW7 (020 7589 8212) on August 16