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## Oriental Musical Fantasies at the Proms from François-Xavier Roth and Les Siècles

19/08/2017



 [United Kingdom](#) **2017 BBC PROMS 42** – [Saint-Saëns](#), [Delibes](#), [Lalo](#), [Franck](#): Cédric Tiberghien (piano), Les Siècles, François-Xavier Roth (conductor) Royal Albert Hall, London, 16.8.2017. (GD)



Les Siècles and François-Xavier Roth (conductor) (c) Mark Allan

**Saint-Saëns** – *La princesse jaune* – Overture; Piano Concerto No. 5 in F major, 'Egyptian'; *Samson and Delilah* – Bacchanal

**Delibes** – *Lakmé* – Ballet music

**Franck** – *Les Djinns*

**Lalo** – *Namouna* – Suites 1 and 2 (excerpts)

French writers and commentators of the 19th century were fascinated by the 'Orient', not just in the sense of French Colonial rule, but also in the aesthetic and poetic sense. Famous French writers like Flaubert, Hugo, Nerval and Zola, to name just a few, all wrote extensively on the Orient, but always through Western eyes, perceptions. Edward Said has written in detail about such Western perceptions. For instance, there was a fantasy that Oriental women, especially dancers and slave girls, were very

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highly sexed to an extent never known in the West. As Said noted female snake-charmers and belly-dancers were seen to have an almost occult and dangerous – but fascinating – sexuality and allure, fantasies of sexual pleasures only dreamt of in French women. Of course, such self-fulfilling fantasies were not confined to French culture, they very much set the tone for Verdi's *Aida*, and Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. All the works in tonight's excellently programmed concert were by composers who were similarly fascinated with Oriental culture but always from a Western aesthetic and ruling perspective. So although the music chosen tonight represents, to a greater or lesser extent, Oriental sounds/music, it is always through a Western invention and perspective.

The most substantial work tonight was the Saint-Saëns Fifth Piano Concerto, known as the 'Egyptian'. It is arguably the subtlest of the five piano concertos he wrote. The elegant string phrasing and dialogue with the soloist, particularly in the first movement, has a Mozartian tone, and of course the great composer from Salzburg was a kind of musical God for Saint-Saëns. There are all kinds of allusions to the sights and sounds of a land the composer had much affection for. The blinding light of an Egyptian dawn, and the croaking of frogs in the Nile Valley, are all there if one listens hard enough! But this is really a concerto thoroughly in the Western tradition. Tiberghien's playing was superb in its range and contrasts, a splendid rendition which reminded me of Pascal Rogé. Here soloist and conductor worked in perfect dialogue with each other.

The most famous (well known) piece tonight was in the form of the *Bacchanal* from Saint-Saëns's relatively early opera *Samson and Delilah*. It is an extremely exciting piece of mock Arabic musical kitsch, with blaring horns and sharp timpani rhythms. As tonight's programme note writer puts it so well, this is a piece of 'fake orientalism' conjuring up all the dangerous burlesque dancing and eroticism (if that is the right word?) from the imaginary prism of the Western mind. Beecham (who was said to be a 'first rate conductor of 2nd, or 5th rate music') used to play this piece with great panache. I don't think tonight's performance was quite in the Beecham class, but it was arguably played with more musicality and taste, if indeed 'taste' is the right quality here? But the audience of the Opéra Comique Paris, who would 'scream for encores', adored this ersatz harem music, much to the young composer's delight.

It is an absolute mystery why works like Franck's *Djinns* are so little played, or remembered. Here there is none of fake oriental sounds, or allusions to non-Western otherness. The only Oriental tone here comes from the Arabic mythology of the Genie who conjures up the disruptive forces of the demonic world, counter-posed by the tortured then calm of humanity; here the full orchestra represents the former, and the piano, the latter. Franck, who was fascinated by the duality of good and evil took, as his inspiration, a poem by Victor Hugo which outlines these interacting dualities. Roth conjured up massive orchestral tuttis reminding me of the climaxes in Wagner's *Ring* Cycle. Again soloist and conductor worked in total dialogue, and Les Siècles produced some awe-inspiring sounds, overlaid with *Parsifal*-like solemn chorales. It was thrilling to hear all the woodwind textures coming through the orchestral storms with absolute clarity. Les Siècles grainy textures certainly paid off here.

The ballet music from *Lakmé* (another Oriental favourite with its kitsch-sounding *Bell Song*) was brought off with great elegance and charm. Again demonstrating the exceptionally wide range of orchestral textures of Les Siècles, with especially grainy woodwind (although they are also capable of a wonderful tonal finesse, particularly when they are playing together in *concertante* style).

Lalo's *Namouna* Suites (from a ballet score) are even less known than the Franck work. But at times I thought perhaps it is better that they remain unknown. Of course there are some nice tunes, and orchestral antiphonal effects (helped enormously here by divided violins), but this was certainly not in the class of Lalo's wonderful songs (*melodies*), or his impressive symphony; another Beecham speciality. Too many of the climaxes, and effects, have a predictable and contrived tone. The rather cheesy plot is typically Oriental – from Said's notion of a Western Oriental perspective – concerning, as it does, a slave girl, who is used as nothing more than exchange value, to pay off a debt.

The concert opened with a spirited and idiomatic rendition of the overture *La princesse jaune* by Saint-Saëns.

After the first half as an encore Tiberghien gave a captivating reading of the Third Prelude from Book II of Debussy's *Préludes* – *La puerta del Vino*. With its drone – habanera-like bass figure a whiff of

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Oriental musical perfume was just discernible.

Roth gave what sounded like a rather long introduction to the closing encore, I couldn't hear much of what he said because he didn't use a microphone to project his voice in the vast space of the Royal Albert Hall. The encore was actually in the form of a Latin-American number; 'Get Lucky!' scored for the French duo, Daft Punk, arranged for Les Siècles by the conductor's son Felix.

He might as well have just said 'now for something completely different'. And indeed it had nothing to do with the main concert themes. But it was great fun, with wild rhythms, demonstrating once again the enormous range of Les Siècles. Altogether an amazing and unforgettable Prom.

**Geoff Diggins**

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1. *sonicsinfonia* says:

20/08/2017 at 09:59

Geoff – Roth's speech (impromptu and unexpected so mic/speakers would not have been set up in advance for this concert by BBC!) was about the programme being about French composers reaching out to other countries – Orient, Africa etc, so now a surprise from Paris – a French band, Daft Punk, reaching out to the USA. You can build walls, he said, but music has no boundaries. So yes, completely different but also in the same ethos as the rest of the programme.

Sadly not mentioned in the programme but announced on the radio, the piano was an 1899 Bechstein, fitting the orchestra's use of instruments of the period of composition of the music they play. The sound was distinctive, clear, light and well-balanced – a perfect fit for the orchestra and the pieces.

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