

## Prom 42: An exotic banquet to savour from François-Xavier Roth and Les Siècles

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*Von Mark Pullinger, 17 August 2017*

My reputation in certain quarters for having a sweet tooth is done no favours by delectable concerts like this one. French composers led the orientalist charge in the 19th century, so it was truly *magnifique* to welcome French period instrument orchestra [Les Siècles](#) and [François-Xavier Roth](#) to the [BBC Proms](#) for a highly perfumed programme of exotic sweetmeats on which to feast greedily. From an Indian bazaar to the Arabian desert, from a voyage down the Nile on to biblical Gaza, it was a veritable travelogue for the musical gourmet, performed with Gallic panache.



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In a recent interview in *The Times*, Roth offered this Prom as a “chapeau” to us Brits, given that the repertoire – “never played in France” – is usually found in recordings by British orchestras. Indeed, there was something Beechamesque about the bonbons on offer: a Saint-Saëns’ overture and piano concerto, a rare symphonic poem and no less than twelve ballet movements, the final one being a typical Beecham lollipop.

Central to the evening’s success was [Cédric Tiberghien](#), whose scintillating pianism resulted in a fabulous reading of Saint-Saëns’ *Piano Concerto no. 5 in F major*, rejoicing under the title “the Egyptian”, largely because of the second movement with its croaking frogs, chirping crickets and an evocative melody based on a Nubian love song heard by the composer as he sailed down the river in a dahabieh whilst on holiday in Luxor. Tiberghien is clearly a fan – this was the [second time](#) I’d heard him play the concerto this year. With a period instrument orchestra though, a period piano was required; here, a gorgeous 1899 Bechstein, crisp and clear in its upper register, resonant and bell-like at the bottom, sounding like two utterly different instruments at times. Tiberghien, crouched low over the keyboard, played hypnotically in the central movement before reverting to Parisian swagger for the finale, more a bustle down the boulevards for me than the glittering sea voyage the composer had in mind.



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After a hint of Moorish Spain via a Debussy encore with rocking habanera rhythms, Tiberghien returned after the interval for the piano obligato part in César Franck's symphonic poem *Les Djinns*. It is based on a poem from a collection by Victor Hugo entitled *Les Orientales* in which the poet set out the text in a towering plume of words that bulge and billow in the middle verses before tapering to nothing. No granting of wishes here though – this genie was definitely the malevolent variety. The brass rasped angrily but never obliterated the rest of the orchestra, through which Tiberghien conjured his spell.



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It was a joy to hear *Les Siècles* in this repertoire. The strings, dusky and veiled in the concerto, had snap in the ballet music from *Lakmé*, where crotales chimed seductively and lemon-drop oboe added acidic piquancy. Nutty woodwind chords opened the selection from Eduard Lalo's ballet *Namouna*, the highlights including a Moroccan dance infused with cinnamon and nutmeg and Marion Ralincourt's meringue-light flute which tiptoed through the "Parade de foire". Whooping horns and muscular timpani volleys (despite a dropped stick) brought the house down in the orgiastic Bacchanale from Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila*. Too sweet a menu? Impossible to resist. Anyone requiring me today should find me in the dentist's chair...

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