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Thursday, 17 August 2017

Adventures in exotic worlds - Cédric Tiberghien, François-Xavier Roth Prom



Adventures in exotic worlds ! A vibrant Prom, with François-Xavier Roth, Cédric Tiberghien, and Les Siècles, in an unusually stimulating programme of music by Saint-Saëns Délibes, Lalo, and César Franck. The French fascination with exoticism wasn't mere decoration. By absorbing alien sounds and values, French composers were able to explore new ideas. developing a genuinely original synthesis which would transform the French aesthetic. From the expansive worldview of Louis XIV to Rameau, to Debussy and beyond - limitless exploration of new horizons and ideas
The music of Saint-Saëns is currently enjoying a revival. François-Xavier Roth is a Saint-Saëns specialist - his father is the organist Daniel Roth - so it was good to hear the overture from Saint-Saëns' opera *La princesse Jaune* op 30 (1872). In this opera, a young man called Kornélis is obsessed with things Japanese. He experiments with opium and is transported to a fantasy land with a "Yellow Princess". Although the piece is entirely western,

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Saint-Saëns shows an awareness of alien form quite remarkable in that the opera was written only two years after the World Exposition at Paris sensationally brought Asia to the West. Recently, Roth conducted Saint-Saëns *Le timbre d'argent* written at about the same time as *La Princesse Jaune*, a joint production between l'Opéra-Comique, Paris and Palazetto Bru-Zane. (please read more about *Le timbre d'argent* [HERE](#)). From Délibes *Lakmé*, not *The Bell Song* which is so famous that it's even used on TV ads, but some of the ballet music. It's possible that Délibes had an inkling of what Indian wind instruments may have sounded like, for the flute solo is decidedly un-western. It's significant, too, that this was written for dancers, giving a firm rhythmic structure to the piece.

Roth has conducted Saint-Saëns' *Concerto for piano and orchestra no 5* (The "Egyptian"), numerous times with different orchestras, but hearing it here with Les Siècles and Cédric Tiberghien, also a passionate advocate of the piece, was a special occasion, made even more unique by the use of a period piano, an 1899 Bechstein, with a remarkably agile, almost bell-like voice. As Tiberghien says in the BBC Radio 3 rebroadcast, in this piece a modern concert grand would sound "ugly". Certainly, this performance revealed the fragile beauty in the piece which is so important to interpretation.

Although it was written in Luxor, where the composer went on holiday, it is fundamentally an example of Belle Époque syncretism : Fantasy Egypt, not reality, an Egypt where the present is coloured by dreams of the past. For men of Saint-Saëns' generation, European civilization was the height of progress, and that civilization encompassed the world. Napoleon's conquest of Egypt differed from the British conquest of India, just as French and British colonialism followed different models. The difference between French and British attitudes to colonialism affected music history : much more integration on many levels between the colonies and metropolitan France.

Ultimately, Saint-Saëns' *Piano concerto no.5* is not picturesque, and not "light music" to be kitsched out with fake palms and camels. It's a work of bold musical inventiveness and originality. Tiberghien faced the fearsome technical challenges : arpeggios flew with faultless confidence and elegance, making the frequent changes of imagery flow naturally, like the Nile Delta, with its confluent tributaries, building up a panorama of great richness and detail. Vaguely Arabic motifs blend into harmonies that are "modern" and European. Thundering passages suggest constant flux, with swirling diminuendos and passages of flamboyant brilliance. Nothing backward here, though the references may come from things remembered.

This is where the period piano and orchestra proved their value. Saint-Saëns' *Piano concerto no.5* isn't "about" Egypt but about the experience of being in place where you're only in temporary sojourn : tourists enjoying luxury, dreaming of a past that colours the present. Hence the idea of fragility, so beautifully evoked in this lively yet delicate performance. The pyramids are evidence that even great pharaohs aren't immortal (except in legend). All too soon, the tourist will be gone, notice the brisk, no nonsense ending! Back to daily reality. Tiberghien made the piano sing, almost like an Arabic string instrument, its plaintive voice much more in keeping with the flutes and other winds, and the horns and trumpets. This piano wasn't a heavy-handed colonial barking orders at the natives, but one prepared to speak to the orchestra in terms of respect and familiarity. A truly exquisite performance, sparkling with light, but with great depths of insight.

Tiberghien's encore solo was the Debussy *Prelude for piano La Puerta del Vino* L123/3, a reverie on Moorish Spain, nicely hushed and intimate. Then, making the most of this unique combination of period piano and orchestra, the Prom continued with César Franck *Les Djinns* inspired by a poem by Victor Hugo about supernatural spirits in an Islamic fantasy. Elaborate figures in the piano part, matched by inventiveness in the orchestral writing. A strong sense of movement, the piano moving in and out from the orchestra, suggesting the sound of bells. Are the Djinns flying amongst clouds ? We use our imaginations and wonder.

Namouna (Suites Nos. 1 and 2) (1881) comes from Lalo's ballet based on a poem by Alfred de Musset. More supernatural spirits in Near Eastern fantasy ! Here, Roth and Les Siècles demonstrated the variety of their instruments. Each of the ten sections depicts a scene, coloured by different sounds. Three sets of percussion - the "bass" with large side drum, the "baritone" with wider, flat drums and the "tenor" beating a tambour whose sound can be adjusted by tightening the strings that hold the leather to the wood. Timpani are thrilling, but these very individualistic voices sing with a warmer, more subtle tone. Plus they don't blast away other instruments, At one point the sound of a triangle rang out loud and clear. Then to the blockbuster : the Bacchanal from Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila* so theatrically exotic and so famous that it's become synonymous with "oriental" music in popular culture. What energy and what fun ! Ideally suited to Roth's sense of humour.



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Roth's a born communicator, who has been known to sing to his audience! ([read more here](#)), and often speaks to them. When the Orchestra of SWR Freiburg Baden Baden was on the point of being disbanded, Roth made an impassioned speech at the 2015 Proms in support of his players and the orchestra's traditions. This time he spoke about this Proms programme and the way music can break down walls between cultures. And thus the encore, a French arrangement (by Felix Roth, son of the conductor) of Get Lucky a song about America by Daft Punk with castanets and maracas, sassy and breezy and full of fun.



at August 17, 2017



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