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Prom 42 Les Siècles/Roth Royal [...]

Prom 42 Les Siècles/Roth Royal Albert Hall {{{(If nothing else, François-Xavier Roth's Les Siècles should win a prize for the most deliciously incongruous encore at this season's Proms. With the percussionists weaving a syn-copated web of shaking and scraping, the Parisians played a big-band arrangement of Daft Punk's Get Lucky - on Victorian period instruments.

I felt I'd got lucky well before that. In its 14-year history, Roth's ensemble has explored many centuries of music using instruments and techniques appropriate to the repertoire. Here, however, it returned to where it began: the late 19th-century era when French instrument-makers led the world and French composers were eagerly trying out subtle new son-

rities.

Roth threw in an extra element: exoticism. What linked all the pieces he chose was the inspiration of Africa and the East, but in typically Gallic fashion these sinuous arabesques were mingled with grandeur, mysticism and whimsy. And in the hands of these virtuosic players, music hardly heard in concerts today - ballet music by Delibes and Lalo, or a rare Franck poème symphonique called Les Djinns - sounded as fresh as it must have done to Parisian audiences in the 1880s. It's unlikely, though, that those audiences heard such precise and beautifully delineated interpretations.

I must admit, however, that I most like this era of French composers when they

are at their frothiest. When they try to get serious and symphonic, I lose the plot, perhaps because they already have. That was my feeling listening to Saint-Saëns's "Egyptian" Piano Concerto No 5. I can't imagine its rippling passage-work more deftly played than it was by Cédric Tiberghien, yet still the music sounded like a random quiltwork of charming ideas. Saint-Saëns was much more convincing when evoking the lurid dances of the Philistines in the celebrated bacchanale from Samson and Delilah, which this orchestra delivered with irresistible élan. Richard Morrison

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