

“Bruckner, the Progressive”: Interview with François-Xavier Roth

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French conductor François-Xavier Roth is a musical pluralist. Equally at home navigating angular contemporary works as weighty Romantic classics, he has used his energetic style to steer his orchestra, the [Gürzenich](#), into interesting new realms in the two years he has served as Chief Conductor. He continues to work as Artistic Director with Les Siècles, the period instrument orchestra he founded in 2003, and as of September this year he is Principal Guest conductor at the London Symphony Orchestra. 3rd October sees him take on an unusual pairing of Ligeti and Bruckner in [Gürzenich Orchestra's first live stream of the season](#), so we caught up with Roth to talk about the curiosity of Cologne, the excitement of broadcasting and Bruckner as a utopian.



BT: In your upcoming live streamed concert, why have you chosen to pair Ligeti's *Violin Concerto* alongside Bruckner's *Third Symphony*? They don't seem natural bedfellows!

FXR: In his time, Bruckner was a composer who was definitely misunderstood by the majority of the audience. Even many of his admirers convinced him to change his visionary artistic works because the architecture of his inventions was beyond their and any others' imagination. In my Bruckner Cycle in Cologne, I would like to change the point of view on Bruckner. I would like to discover, together with the audience, the utopian aspects of his oeuvre: Bruckner the progressive. We started with Bruckner's Fourth in combination with Boulez and Schönberg, we continued last season with [Bruckner's Eighth](#) and a [piece by Helmut Lachenmann](#): all composers who radically changed our knowledge of what a symphonic work can be and what orchestra can sound like. Just as Bruckner did.

Bruckner's Third is a piece where these seemingly contradictory aspects are especially obvious, particularly when you look at the first version which we will perform in Cologne. On one hand you hear what he owes to Wagner, to whom he dedicated this symphony. On the other hand you also hear the influences of the old German contrapuntal tradition. And then there is this sometimes naive and very pure side of his invention. That is something I find in Ligeti, too: musical invention on the highest abstract level and a wonderfully alienated folk aspect, obligations to an old form – in this case the concerto – but a total transformation of this model from a modern point of view. These are the reasons why I think that these two pieces will lie next to each other marvellously. On another level the Ligeti *Violin Concerto* is a piece that belongs to our Cologne heritage: It was premiered by our neighbour orchestra, the WDR Symphony. It is rare that a city has two great orchestras who are at the same time so deeply involved with the contemporary creation. I think this is typical of the curiosity in Cologne.

You are well known as the founder of Les Siècles. Do you try and apply “historically informed performance practices” to your work with the Gürzenich?

Yes, in a way. Of course with the Gürzenich Orchestra, we do not perform on period instruments, but the experience of using period instruments in Les Siècles influences my work with the Gürzenich. I am always interested in knowing how the music would have sounded back in the time when it was première. And I always keep this in mind and transfer my experience and knowledge when I am working with the Gürzenich Orchestra.

Characterise the qualities of the Gürzenich Orchestra.

A very important characteristic of the Gürzenich Orchestra is its flexibility. This results mainly out of their work in the opera as well as with our symphonic concerts at the Philharmonie. The Orchestra is capable of finding the specific sound for each work, period and composer, which makes them such an extraordinary orchestra. Beside this, the orchestra has a very warm string sound and the brass sound is brilliant and shiny.



Roth with the Gürzenich Orchestra

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How do you keep a symphony like [Beethoven's Fifth](#) fresh to audiences who have, perhaps, heard it hundreds of times?

The key point is not to fall into a certain routine, but to always play and perform the pieces as if it was for the first time. And you always have to bear in mind what the composer's main idea and goal was. What did he have in mind and how would he have wanted it to sound? And how was it for the audience in their time to listen to this piece? You should never get tired of asking yourself these questions. Once you start rehearsing and performing with this attitude, I hope this also transfers onto the audience.

How important is streaming in getting the work of the Gürzenich Orchestra out to a wider public? What else can orchestras do to encourage new audiences?

The Gürzenich Orchestra has a very rich history and a big tradition. The orchestra premièred a lot of major pieces, for example Mahler's Fifth Symphony or Strauss' *Till Eulenspiegel*. People aren't necessarily aware of this and of the rich history of our orchestra. So streaming is a chance for us to not only share our concerts with an audience across the planet, but also to present the orchestra and its history to them, and therefore to become more renowned internationally.

Furthermore I think orchestras of the 21st century also have to keep up to date with developments – be it social changes or technical evolutions. You have to be open for new influences, even though of course nothing can replace the experience of a live concert and this will always be our main work.

Does it feel different when you know a performance is being live streamed?

It is a different feeling when you know that a concert is being streamed live or when it is broadcast on radio. It is not, of course, that I enter the stage with more energy, because I put the same energy into any concert – no question as to whether it is “only” for our audience in the hall or also broadcast. But it is more about a certain excitement, knowing that people around the world can follow, listen and watch our concert!

François-Xavier Roth sings "La Mer" by Charles Trenet with Gürzenich-Orchester Köln

We enjoyed your encore of Charles Trenet's *La mer* in our live stream last summer. How did this come about?

When we were talking about the programme we were always joking that this piece was missing. I generally also sing quite a bit during rehearsals, and when we started working on the programme I just thought, “We have to do it!” Luckily Mathias Kaufmann, the arranger, was crazy enough to write the arrangement literally overnight!

If you could travel back in time to meet one composer, who would you meet and what would you ask him/her?

This is interesting! You would want to meet different composers for different reasons. So I would like to meet: Bach, in order to meet him and get to know him as a person, Bruckner, in order to be able to ask him questions about all the enigmas that appear in his scores, and Berlioz, to get confirmation about his ingenious craziness.

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