

Recording of the Week, Berlioz from François-Xavier Roth and Les Siècles



by Katherine Cooper



It's just six weeks since François-Xavier Roth and the period instruments of Les Siècles delivered an outstanding reading of the Debussy *Nocturnes* to mark the centenary of the composer's death, which not only made it to our Top Ten Recordings of the 2018 but also prompted the Presto team to name Roth as our Conductor of the Year. This year they're getting in early with their anniversary tribute to Hector Berlioz, who died 150 years ago, and the distinctive sonorities of their narrow-bore woodwinds and gut strings throw as much new light upon Berlioz's High Romantic, Gothic and at times almost psychedelic sound-world as they did upon Debussy's more ethereal writing.



The album opens with a tour de force of spellbinding storytelling in the form of the 'symphony with viola' *Harold en Italie*, commissioned by the legendary virtuoso Paganini as a showcase for his new viola and prodigious technique and notoriously rejected for the comparatively understated solo role. The slightly translucent qualities of the period instruments pay remarkable dividends in a work where the solo instrument can so easily be swamped by a more opaque approach, given the viola's tricky tessitura and the self-effacing nature of much of the solo writing – Tabea Zimmermann never has to battle to be heard, even in Berlioz's most high-octane passages, and she takes full advantage of the fact with playing of extraordinary delicacy and inwardness which conjures a more multi-faceted and introspective Byronic hero than usual. There's

also a deliciously open-air, folksy feel to the opening scene in the mountains and the rustic Serenade of the third movement, courtesy of the buzzy early nineteenth-century horns and (in the latter instance) a marvellously lachrymose cor anglais Triébert.

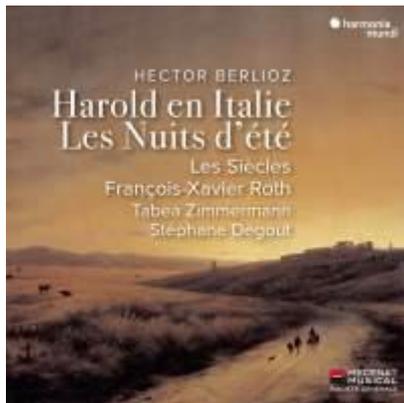
The period instruments pay even greater dividends in *Les nuits d'été*, which receives a performance of quite extraordinary intimacy that's rendered still more distinctive thanks to the 'casting' of a male soloist, the French baritone Stéphane Dégout. Though Berlioz conceived the original piano version for mezzo or tenor, and dedicated two of the six subsequent orchestrations to male singers (at least half of songs set poems with an implicitly male voice), the cycle has become almost exclusively the province of sopranos and mezzos. There's a handful of distinguished exceptions (Nicolai Gedda and José van Dam both committed the work to disc and there's a live recording from Ian Bostridge, Ludovic Morlot and the Seattle Symphony in the offing), but this was the first time I'd heard the entire cycle performed by a male voice, and I found the experience consistently compelling and in places downright revelatory.



The uncanny but exquisitely tender *Spectre de la Rose* (in which a sleeping girl's fading corsage hymns her beauty by her bedside after a ball) is perhaps where the gender-shift registers most strongly: without wishing to sound doggedly heteronormative, I've never been so aware of the eroticism of the flower's desire to die on its wearer's breast, or indeed the darker undercurrents of its voyeuristic frisson at being present in her boudoir without her consciousness. Dégout conveys all of this ambiguity and more with the textual sensitivity and wide range of subtle vocal colours which have made him such an outstanding Pélleas, and the players respond to every tiny nuance: the softer timbre of the gut strings and period flutes seem complicit as he pledges not to wake the slumbering girl, and evoke her gentle breathing and nocturnal tossings and turnings to perfection.

The opening *Villanelle*, in which a couple ramble through the woods to gather strawberries (and possibly to indulge in more exciting al fresco pleasures along the way), has an earthy exuberance and energy - the woodwinds in particular are on enchanting form as they characterise each animal which crosses the lovers' path, and the whole song has a conspiratorial intimacy that's heightened by Roth's decision to drop down to single strings here and there.

For anyone who loves Berlioz's vivid orchestration as I do (or indeed for those who usually find it a little too brash and full-on), this early anniversary tribute is compelling, nay essential listening.



Berlioz: Harold en Italie & Les Nuits d'été

Tabea Zimmermann (viola), Stéphane Degout (baritone), Les Siècles, François-Xavier Roth

Available Formats: CD, MP3, CD Quality FLAC, Hi-Res FLAC