

Berlioz: Harold in Italy, Les Nuits d'Été review – Roth's piquant period performance

4/5stars4 out of 5 stars.

Roth/Les Siècles/Zimmermann/Degout (**Harmonia Mundi**)

This historically accurate performance is truly convincing, adding transparency and emotion to Berlioz



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Balance and intelligence ... conductor François-Xavier Roth. Photograph: Marco Borggreve

Even now, when period performances of much of the 19th-century orchestral repertoire are almost commonplace, discs of Berlioz's works recorded on the instruments for which they were composed are relatively uncommon. Despite the pioneering work of Roger Norrington and John Eliot Gardner in the 1980s, historically informed versions of even Berlioz's best-known score, the *Symphonie Fantastique*, can still be counted on one hand. One of those is a 2010 version from François-Xavier Roth and Les Siècles. The group returns to Berlioz to mark the 150th anniversary of the composer's death with recordings of two works that have received even less attention from historical specialists. There appears to have been

just one previous period performance on disc of the song cycle *Les Nuits d'Été* (by [Lorraine Hunt Lieberson](#) with the San Francisco-based *Philharmonia Baroque*) and none at all of the symphony with solo viola, [Harold in Italy](#).

Roth's version of the *Symphonie Fantastique* demonstrated how Berlioz's always vivid orchestration seems even more piquant and transparent when realised by the forces for which it was conceived, and that is equally true of both works here. *Les Siècles* use woodwind and brass instruments from the middle decades of the 19th century, which, combined with the gut strings, create busy, buoyant textures over which [Tabea Zimmermann's](#) solo viola can soar with ease, though there is no lack of tonal weight when the orchestra takes centre stage, as it does increasingly through the course of the work. The balance between soloist and orchestra is equally convincing in the song cycle, which uses much more modest forces. Though *Les Nuits d'Été* is most commonly heard nowadays with either a soprano or a mezzo singing Théophile Gautier's texts, Roth opts for a baritone, the superbly intelligent and light-toned [Stéphane Degout](#), whose delivery of these songs is impeccable.