

François-Xavier Roth: Mahler's Symphony No 3 review

French conductor conjures up a stunning reworking of the German composer's classic

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To get in training for this amazingly fresh account of Mahler's Symphony No 3 from François-Xavier Roth, I recommend looking at the YouTube channel of the conductor's German orchestra, the Gürzenich-Orchester Köln. There you will find a live streaming of the interpretation presented on this album. You can also find an encore of Roth singing (sort of) Charles Trenet's *La Mer*, although luckily that's from a different concert. The valuable thing, though, is to study the close-ups of Roth conducting: the tight little movements of his fingers (no baton), the furrowed brow, the eyebrow shifts, the electric bolts that shake his body a flick of a second before the thunderstorm hits.

This is how he conjures up sounds so precise and crystal clear from the distinguished orchestra who gave this symphony's first performance in 1902. Timbres matter a lot to Roth, as they do historically to French composers, and the detailed interplay of colours and solo lines stand out spectacularly, from baying trombones to a glockenspiel's sugared ping. Dynamics are equally finely graded, heard at their most kaleidoscopic in the movement that Mahler first labelled "What the Creatures in the Forest Tell Me." Here, Roth creates a genuine

feel of the fantastic, although he never forgets that some of the creatures have very sharp teeth.

Beyond the playing's characterful array there is Roth's firm sense of structure in a six-movement epic almost as boundless as the natural world and mythical forces that it attempts to describe. He and his talented Cologne musicians neither wallow nor preen, they simply let the music speak, expertly navigating the extended first movement's shifting moods and letting the final slow movement's measured crescendo reach its peak without any prodding.

Sara Mingardo's dark hues may not bring everyone pleasure as the fourth movement's contralto soloist, but they surely suit Nietzsche's midnight words of warning to mankind, soon to be swept away by the bright ding-dong of the children's choir and the finale's steady climb towards universal, harmonious D-major bliss. Throughout the performance no sound emerges from the concert audience — clearly as stunned as I was. (*Harmonia Mundi*)