

ARTS

Conductor Francois-Xavier Roth eyes fresh twist on tradition with Cleveland Orchestra

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Conductor Francois-Xavier Roth leads the Cleveland Orchestra this week in an amended program featuring works by Ravel and Stravinsky, and a recently re-discovered work by Debussy. (HOLGER TALINSKI)

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By Zachary Lewis, The Plain Dealer

CLEVELAND, Ohio – Don't stay home from Severance Hall this week on account of a little program change.

The Cleveland Orchestra may no longer be memorializing shuttle astronauts, but with innovative French conductor Francois-Xavier Roth on the podium, the group still has a great deal of interesting work to do.

“I feel I am a very old musician, from a time when all these boxes between old and new music didn't exist,” said Roth, founding director of the eclectic ensemble Les Siecles, by phone from his Cleveland hotel.

“I like to conduct music from all periods, and our time. We have to trust the idea of who we are and who we want to be.”

Sadly, Roth won't have the chance to showcase who we are this week. On Monday, citing illness, violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja canceled her scheduled performance of Peter Eotvos's “Seven,” a musical memorial to the victims of the 2003 Columbia shuttle disaster. In her stead will be pianist Javier Perianes, performing Ravel's G-Major Piano Concerto.

That leaves the program rooted entirely in the past, a musically “conservative” situation Roth said he ordinarily wouldn't enjoy. His preference is to make room on concerts for modern works that already have had their world premieres, thereby giving contemporary scores second lives.



But this program is different. Eotvos may be gone, but Roth's plate this week still includes the U.S. premiere of "Reve" ["Dream"], a reconstructed work by Debussy, and Stravinsky's ballet "Petrouchka," a piece for which Roth is a self-described "fanatic."

"You have such an amazing tradition [for Stravinsky] here," Roth said, recalling that when the late Pierre Boulez would return to France from performances in Cleveland, "he would love to me such amazing stories about the way they make music here."

Roth's objective here will be to put a fresh twist on that tradition. His goal will be to conjure some semblance of the ensemble Stravinsky heard in 1947, when nations had distinct musical identities and orchestras around the world still had what Roth called "their own personalities, like a signature."

"I have it in my being, my soul, my heart, that experience of these instruments, and I hope I can make other orchestras sound a little bit different," said Roth, referring¹ to the string, woodwind, and brass instruments of the early 20th century.



The Debussy, meanwhile, may be the next best thing to Roth's beloved contemporary music. The original suite from which it's drawn may have been penned in 1884, when Debussy was still a student, but the re-discovery and orchestration of the music by Roth's colleague Philippe Manoury all took place in the 21st century.

With or without a truly 21st-century work at its side, "Reve" is a fascinating glimpse of a 22-year-old composer still finding his voice but already developing into a musical thinker destined for immortality.

"It's young Debussy, but also an extremely mature Debussy, and very fresh," Roth said of the piece. "I'm so glad to have contact like this with such great composers. It's one of the great honors of my life."

PREVIEW

Cleveland Orchestra

What: Francois-Xavier Roth conducts Ravel, Debussy, and Stravinsky



When: 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 28 and 8 p.m. Saturday, March 2.

Where: Severance Hall, 11001 Euclid Ave., Cleveland.

Tickets: \$21-\$165. Go to clevelandorchestra.com or call 216-231-1111.

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