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# Review: Two French musicians make inconclusive SF Symphony debuts



Joshua Kosman | March 8, 2019 | Updated: March 8, 2019, 1:38 pm



Conductor François-Xavier Roth  
Photo: Mark Allan

The San Francisco Symphony's current subscription program, which got under way on Thursday, March 8, in Davies Symphony Hall, turned out to be an odd and inconclusive undertaking. It introduced two new artists to the orchestra's audiences — guest conductor François-Xavier Roth and the young piano virtuoso Cédric Tiberghien — yet by evening's end it was hard to say precisely what distinctive gifts either one brought to the proceedings.

Of the two, Roth — a 47-year-old Frenchman with conducting posts in London, Paris and Cologne, Germany — proved the trickier person to get a bead on. What, after all, does one learn about a conductor who makes his debut with a program of familiar warhorses by Schumann, Liszt and Brahms?

You might suppose that it means Roth is a traditionalist of the old school, until you discover that he has an extensive repertoire and discography that includes music by Strauss, Ligeti, the Polish master Andrzej Panufnik, and a variety of contemporary French composers. So somehow or other — and **not for the first time** in recent weeks — San Francisco audiences are being handed drab repertoire choices from performers who are presumably capable of something more exciting.

Even more disorienting, though, was the constant up-and-down of Roth and the orchestra's treatment of this music. Again and again over the span of Thursday's concert, Roth would propose a fascinating or unusual interpretive idea, then fail to follow through on it.

From a technical standpoint as well, this was a strangely uneven showing. There were long passages of robust and sinewy playing, especially from the strings, that would then lapse without warning into uncoordinated slovenliness, as if the players had suddenly decided that watching Roth's cues was not worth the effort. The brass in particular had an alarmingly bad night, offering up one stretch after another of gray, ill-blended textures and lapses of intonation.

This inconsistency was especially infuriating because when he's on, Roth gives every indication of being an imaginative and ingenious conductor. Schumann's "Manfred" Overture began the evening in a wonderfully forthright rendition, marked by steely but pliable phrasing and a cogent rhythmic approach.

After intermission, Roth began Brahms' Second Symphony with a buoyant, dance-like lilt that emphasized the music's ingratiating charm – a welcome contrast to conductors who shape the opening measures as if settling heavily into a deeply upholstered armchair from which the music will rise again only with difficulty. That graceful air reappeared pleasantly in the third movement, giving way to a persuasively vigorous take on the finale.

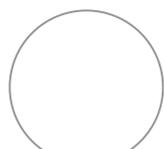
Yet, in between those highlights was plenty of dull music-making, including a lumpy, aimless account of the slow movement that almost seemed designed to justify the haters who regard Brahms' music as sodden and pompous (spoiler: it's not).

Roth and the orchestra didn't have much of interest to say about Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 1, either, but Tiberghien was on hand to help out in that regard. He's clearly a virtuoso of dexterity and originality, and he turned up a few surprises in the piece – the calm, spacious expanse of the slow movement was especially alluring – without going back on its essential theatricality.

At times, Tiberghien seemed disappointingly content to let the piece's virtuoso display stand on its own; thunderous chords and brittle, rapid repeated notes were enjoyable for their own sake without hinting at anything richer. But he offered a truly inventive encore, Liszt's late "Lullaby," whose ambiguous harmonies and delicate textures proved a telling contrast to the concerto.

Both Roth and Tiberghien came to San Francisco with impressive resumes and strong reputations. For all its shortcomings, Thursday's concert certainly made a case for hearing them both again.

**San Francisco Symphony:** 8 p.m. Friday, March 8, and Saturday, March 9. \$50-\$225. Davies Symphony Hall, 201 Van Ness Ave., S.F. 415-864-6000. [www.sfsymphony.org](http://www.sfsymphony.org)



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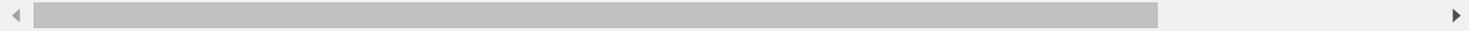
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