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François-Xavier Roth: Berlioz review — a *Symphonie fantastique* that is little short of sensational

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Geoff Brown

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The period-instrument orchestra Les Siècles



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Surprisingly, until now there hasn't been a really good new recording of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* to mark the 150th anniversary of the composer's death. Late in the day, François-Xavier Roth and his period band, Les Siècles, ride to the rescue with an interpretation that is little short of sensational.

Part of the joy of this studio account of Berlioz's extraordinary autographical fantasia, made on the back of numerous live concerts, lies in its idiosyncratic instrumental timbres, particularly audible among winds and brass in the middle two movements, the countryside reverie and *March to the Scaffold*. Among the massed gut-stringed violins, there's an 1824 bassoon, an 1830 oboe and, from 1837, an ophicleide, the weight-watcher's version of a tuba. The period-instrument rule breaks down a bit with the church bells cast in 2013 for Berlioz's home town, La Côte-Saint-André, but their resonant clang adds such atmosphere that only the silly would complain.

The lively character of the orchestra's sound is further enhanced by the recording's warmth and bold attack. Yet there's not only surface brilliance here; Roth clinches the album's triumph by freshly shaping phrases and dynamics after close inspection of Berlioz's manuscript. The pauses inserted into the opening stretch immediately set my ears twitching. Nor did they relax thereafter. If this performance isn't "fantastique", I don't know what is.