

HOW DO YOU BRING THE FAURÉ REQUIEM TO VISUAL LIFE?

British artist Mat Collishaw outlines his thoughts on the need for gravity alongside grace

Feature by Jessica Duchon

When the British artist Mat Collishaw received an approach to illustrate the Fauré Requiem, it came as a bolt from the blue. The conductor Teodor Currentzis's organisation, musicAeterna, called to ask if he would consider creating an installation to run with a live performance of the work, in a project co-produced by the Festspielhaus Baden-Baden and the Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris. "I've never art-directed anything like this before," Collishaw says. "It's a leap in the dark."

Collishaw came to prominence through the movement generally called Young British Artists or "Britart" - a generation of creators who over the past several decades have built powerful reputations, producing artwork that is immediate, startling, sometimes shocking, with a heart of darkness that speaks to a wide audience in today's world-on-edge atmosphere. Others among them include Damien Hirst, Tracy Emin, Angus Fairhurst and Abigail Lane. Collishaw has worked in a tremendous range of mediums; his creative processes can include such diverse matters as collaborating with a CGI expert across the globe, booking a special type of bird-handler for filming, or creating digital images for 3D printing in white nylon - and much more besides.

His first meeting with Currentzis took place in Paris at the launch of the highly controversial 'Dau' project, an ambitious film-based installation in which the conductor played the leading role of Soviet scientist Lev Landau. In a quiet side room away from the opening-day throng, he says, the conductor "wafted in like an enigmatic 19th-century character," surrounded by a circle of assistants. "He outlined what he was after: something that would engage an audience in the way that some performances do not."

One inspiration that Collishaw says Currentzis particularly mentioned was *All Things Fall*, a terrifying impression of the Massacre of the Innocents. It is one of Collishaw's extraordinary "zoetropes": a construction rooted in the first 19th-century attempts at creating animation. These optical illusions involving strobe lighting and images that build through centrifugal motion to startle the viewer in a way that modern computer animation never quite manages. Other notable examples have included his dazzling *Magic Lantern*, for the cupola of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2013, involving the projected impression of gigantic flying moths.

"*All Things Fall* was an elegantly realised work, something compelling and seductive to look at. You're engaged with it before you really understand what exactly you're looking at - by which time it's too late, because you're complicit, enjoying looking at the animated effect," Collishaw explains. "That was quite a good reference to help me know what he wanted - because it doesn't get more barbaric than that."

“I was trying to read his intentions, because he is quite elusive as a character and I don’t think he wanted to give me anything too explicit. He seemed to take total confidence in the fact that I can deliver on this, despite the fact that I’ve never done an art direction for musical performance before. But he did seem to want something that would put people on the edge of their seats – maybe something that was appalling in a way, knowing that we could then pull back to the real power of the Fauré. I think he felt that without that ingredient, it ran the danger of being just a nice piece of music, and to serve it up as such would actually be to disrespect the piece itself.

“Our job as performers should be to create something that really lets people feel the music. Obviously with scores written hundreds of years ago, people know them and they lose their edge. They’re not new compositions that we’re hearing for the first time and it’s easy to become immune to their power. Our job is to engage people again, without being disrespectful or sensationalising the piece. We’re trying to get people to feel the music again by adding a little bit of grit.”

The Fauré Requiem, he suggests, can risk sounding too sublime for its own good. He first encountered the work as a teenager, in a series of magazines with recordings devoted to a different composer every two weeks. “One of them was about Gabriel Fauré. I loved the Requiem, but found it a little bit difficult.” That intensified with the prospect of being the work’s art director. “If it had been the Mozart Requiem, which has some really dark moments, I think I’d find it easier, because you already have a dark, shadowy template to work with. In the Fauré there’s not much angst; there’s not a lot of gristle to ground it. It’s very ‘floaty’. This immediately creates a problem, because with my work I try to capture both the gravity and the grace and I couldn’t really feel the pull of gravity in the music. We thought we have to get something in there to engage people – and then the sublime will be that much more sublime. To make that transcendent moment happen, there has to be something else to it.

“It seems that Fauré was quite good-natured about the idea of passing on. His father had just died when he wrote this piece and he was seeing death as a sweet embrace, a sublime release, looking at it with positivity rather than conjuring up morbid terror. But to visualise it, if you just use images of angels, clouds and sunshine, it’s not going to be very interesting.”

A recurring theme in Collishaw’s work, along with the “gravity and grace” he mentions, is the mingling of the sublime with the horrific, the evocation of historic forms with contemporary horrors. For instance, his *Last Meal on Death Row, Texas*, presents images of food chosen by inmates before their executions – burgers, chips, milkshakes and so forth, but portrayed in the style of 17th-century Dutch still life paintings, “the Vanitas paintings about the accumulation of worldly goods and the transience of life”.

His artworks often have, too, an undertow of religious imagery – possibly a result of his upbringing. “I never used to think that your own biography should be important in what an artist does, but looking back, I think the work I’ve done is

soaked in it," he says. "Religion does proliferate in everything I do, because I was brought up quite intensely. My parents were Dawn Christadelphians, which is quite an iconoclastic thing - they don't believe in the crucifixion and they don't go to church, so all of those visual cues that Christianity has been using became very loaded for me."

He is not personally a believer in resurrection or reincarnation. "I don't think my thoughts on life and death are literally in the piece that's going to be created," he says. "For me, it's more a technical problem about how to make the work sing and breathe. That's not an insignificant thing - for an artist it's an incredible responsibility. How do we bring this to life, engage people and leave them charged by that music, feeling they've had an experience, perhaps thinking about the Requiem slightly differently - and, essentially, being moved by it? In art these days, moving people seems to be deeply unfashionable. It's become so cerebral. This is a real shame, because art and music can cut through everything else to get to that core. I'd like to be part of trying to bring that quality back."

It is to that end, then, that he seeks the mingling of opposite poles of experience - gravity and grace, beauty and horror, sacred and profane. "The poet I was reading when first I started making artworks was Baudelaire, who takes decadence, corruption and disease and gives them an exquisite and elegant beauty. That resonated for me; this is what I'm trying to do. If you're just making a picture of a flower on a greeting card with a little dewdrop hanging off it, you don't really appreciate the flower. Unless the thorns are there, potentially ready to prickle you, you don't feel the essence of the beauty. It's the same ingredient in an artwork: something a little bit challenging will make the sweeter things be sweeter.

"People do have a voyeuristic appetite for spectacle. They're not only drawn to beauty and pleasurable things. Everybody has tragedy and suffering in their lives. If art doesn't reflect that, they probably recognise subconsciously that there's something missing, whereas if it does, they are more likely to respond to it intuitively as something they recognise as human experience. Having the whole spectrum of experience in there is fundamental."

All of this feeds intensely into different aspects of Collishaw's film installation, which also involves making use of the depth of the huge stages in both the theatres, and necessitates Currentzis to coordinate his conducting with the projected images. Without giving away the project's secrets, I can say that he has found a remarkable way to capture the aerial quality of the Fauré Requiem, its purpose as a funeral rite, and its sense of peace with the forces of nature, while also drawing out sometimes shocking elements of sorrow and horror lurking beneath. Chances are that we will never hear the Fauré Requiem in quite the same way again.