



Dead Man Walking at the Guildhall School

Facing death through music

Michael White praises a production of Fauré's Requiem accompanied by sky burial, and a powerful opera about a nun visiting Death Row

Gabriel Fauré may have been a composer of uncertain faith but he produced possibly the best-loved, most often performed Requiem of all time. And its attractions are clear enough, presenting an image of death we'd all vote for: comforting, consoling, holding back the terror Mozart, Verdi, Berlioz and Britten talk up in their settings.

But the tenderness of Faure's music, loving you into the afterlife, can sometimes feel too sweet. A good performance holds to sugar rations. I heard a seriously good performance last month at the new Seine Musicale in Paris: a concert hall like a floating bubble on an island in the river.

The performers were Seine Musicale's resident Insula Orchestra under France's leading female conductor Laurence Equilbey (a dead-ringer for Cate Blanchett in *Tár*, at least in wardrobe) with the professional choir Accentus. And for all the many times I've heard this piece, I've never heard it done more beautifully.

But there was something else that made it special: an accompanying film by the British video artist Mat Collishaw called *Sky Burial* that had been commissioned as a visual response to the Requiem and will run alongside it as a touring project – with at least one London performance planned for later in the year.

The ancient practice of "sky burial" is Buddhist in origin, and in fact no

burial at all: dead bodies are exposed on mountainsides where vultures pick them to the bone. It's good ecology. And for a Buddhist it implies surrender to the cycle of life, the ultimate gift of self – all of which gets taken up in Collishaw's film.

As the Requiem plays, the camera homes in on successive rooms in an apartment block where someone, amid family and friends, is at the point of death. Clearly this block has a worryingly high mortality rate, as one passing follows another with relentless repetition. But the death scenes have a gentle, heartfelt quality that contrasts with the starkness of what happens next, when they're taken up to the building's roof and the vultures swoop.

This isn't documentary, it's enacted fantasy; but it feels very real. And it's affecting. The warm aural blanket of the Requiem is not exactly cast aside but gets hung out to dry (among the corpses). And you're left with food not just for vultures but for thought.

What does it take to be a human being? Last month I saw two contrasting operatic explorations of that question, one of them Dvořák's *Rusalka* in a new Covent Garden staging, the other Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* at the Guildhall School. And while the Dvořák offered far more musically, the Heggie piece packed a dramatic punch of staggering force.

Rusalka is a fairy tale about a water sprite who falls in love with a human and sacrifices her essence as a sprite (you might say her soul) to be with him. But humanity proves no great prize, and she returns to the depths – which, in this production are now polluted with human waste, adding an ecological gloss to whatever message the myth delivers. It sort of works, though the show felt slow and under-energised on opening night: not fully functioning despite fine singing from Asmik Grigorian, the sprite, and distinguished conducting from Semyon Bychkov.

Dead Man Walking, though, came super-charged. One of the most successful American operas of recent times, its story is no myth but real life, adapted from the experience of an American nun, Sister Helen Prejean, who felt called to befriend inmates on Death Row in a Louisiana prison. Her efforts attracted hostility from the victims' families and scepticism from the authorities but made her a prominent critic of the death penalty, writing a book about her prison encounters. And the opera draws on one of them – with a brutal murderer who isn't saved from execution but is saved in other ways when Sister Helen eventually persuades him to admit his guilt and beg forgiveness. In the process, an apparent monster is revealed as human: broken, lonely, scared but able to face death as someone not unloved.

As music it isn't great, its easy, almost-Broadway lyricism rarely more than functional. But as a piece of theatre it builds slow-burn tension to explosive levels. And although this was a student show, its crushing power left me so devastated by the final execution scene I couldn't breathe.

From a small army of soloists, Alexandra Meier's Sister Helen necessarily stood out, not least for stamina in a relentless role. But the true stars for me were Michael Lafferty-Smith, whose strong, steady baritone was magnificent as the murderer, and Nancy Holt as his mother – her long, self-lacerating tribunal plea for mercy all but stealing the show. That students can deliver on this level is impressive. **CH**

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