

Sky Burial | REVIEW | a fusion of Faure's requiem and video projection

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Sky Burial | PHOTO: Julien Benhamou

La Seine Musicale, Paris

By Darius Riahly

The acclaimed French conductor Laurence Equilbey, the founder and musical director of both the Insula period instrument orchestra and the Accentus chamber choir, has a solid reputation for her work in the choral repertoire, and a penchant for contemporary visual arts. For this project, she collaborated with Mat Collishaw of 'Young British Artists' fame, who has created *Sky Burial*, a video installation projected onto a large screen during a performance of Fauré's Requiem and Gounod's *Saint François d'Assise*.

It is a promising collaboration in an aptly modern setting. Insula is in residence at La Seine Musicale, an imposing concrete music and performing arts complex that occupies Seguin Island on the Seine in a suburb west of Paris. The island was formerly home to the Renault factory. It now features a futuristic round glass building wrapped in a wooden exoskeleton. Much of the electricity is generated by a colossal solar panel shaped like a sail which rotates around the building to follow the sun. Even more impressive are the acoustics in the classical music auditorium, which are truly immersive and transparent.

In comparison to similar works, Fauré's hugely popular requiem, which has been described as a 'lullaby of death', is a relatively serene and intimate affair. Although this is not an entirely peaceful experience, with suspense and darker themes subtly woven into the music, it nevertheless contrasts with the sheer scale of Berlioz's Requiem or the terror unleashed during Verdi's Dies Irae. Perhaps the soothing nature of the requiem, which omits the full Dies Irae, reflects Fauré's view of death 'as a happy deliverance, an aspiration towards happiness above, rather than as a painful experience'. Executed properly this is one of the most beautiful choral pieces anywhere and this performance at La Seine Musicale certainly does deliver.

The programme begins with Gounod's simple and blissful Saint François d'Assise. It is a cleverly chosen piece to precede and later blend into the requiem and the tenor Amitai Matimore, along with Equilbey's balanced approach and Insula's timbral palette, more than make up for the oratorio's slightly staid quality, rendering it highly enjoyable.

For the calibre of musicians here, including the Accentus choir, who are intimately familiar with the piece, Fauré's requiem is not technically difficult. What is remarkable is the degree of care taken with the delivery. Equilbey's direction is meticulous, painstakingly accentuating the emotional charge in each phrase and giving an edge to some of the darker undertones. The tempo here feels just right, moving forward without ever dragging or feeling rushed. Insula executes everything with precision and the period instruments add an appropriately subtle clarity. Fauré had apparently asked for bright and vibrant sopranos, not 'old goats who have never known love' – he wouldn't have been disappointed. The Accentus choir is superb, both clear and balanced. Using a boy treble in Pie Jesu is an inspired decision.


Collishaw's video accompanies Gounod's piece mostly with images of clouds moving past the sun. Then, coinciding exactly with the first chilling notes in Fauré's Kyrie, a vulture appears in the sky gliding majestically, a sight both awesome and ominous. This sudden change in mood is highly effective and made possible by synchronising the video with the live music, a difficult task that Collishaw implements successfully throughout.

As the Requiem progresses we are, from our point of view, or maybe that of a vulture, circling around an inner city tower block in a dystopian setting as we ascend to the top. We are given glimpses into some of the rooms where elderly individuals are dying peacefully in beds surrounded by loved ones. Subsequently their bodies are taken to the roof of the tower block and left to the vultures' feast. This is a 'sky burial'. It is common practice in Tibet, where the dead are left in mountains and is part of a similar ancient Zoroastrian ritual, where human cadavers are placed in towers of silence for vultures. There is another theme woven into the narrative: images of streams, rivers, rivers flowing into the sea and clouds are apparently an attempt to draw parallels between the water cycle and the cycle of life.

The hybrid of actors and CGI, along with the grim colour palette, lends an eerie and at times disturbing feeling to the scenes. The feasting of vultures on human flesh is uncomfortable to watch, although it never becomes gratuitously gory by today's

standards. Nor is it any more upsetting than vivid scenes of people dying.

The overall thesis here is that Fauré's Requiem has, over time, lost some of its edge and become a bit too sweet for its own good. Collishaw hopes to restore its original impact by adding some 'gristle' to highlight the darker moments in the music, which will in turn enhance the sweetness of the sublime parts. He has certainly highlighted those themes very effectively.

Sitting in the swanky Soho House members' club in Paris the day after the concert, Mat Collishaw is affable, articulate and thoughtful and comes across as endearingly modest. He is aware that the audience may perceive his guidance on what to think when listening to classical music as arrogant but hopes they remain open to his perspective. Introducing the concept of 'sky burial' into a requiem is novel and interesting and one hopes that this engaging video installation will attract a broader audience to classical performances and, perhaps more importantly, retain their interest in the future. 

Sky Burial premieres at the Barbican Centre in London in November 2023.