

Insula Orch/Accentus/Equilbey review – Sky Burial’s reflections on life and death are beautiful and moving

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Great fervour ... tenor Amitai Pati, with the Insula Orchestra and Accentus chorus, conducted by Laurence Equilbey, with Mat Collishaw’s projections in the background. Photograph: Mark Allan

Review



Barbican, London

This striking collaboration between French conductor Laurence Equilbey and British artist Mat Collishaw contemplated mortality with the music of Faure and Gounod, exquisite and austere performed

Always prepared to do things differently, French conductor Laurence Equilbey, her Insula Orchestra and choir Accentus have collaborated with British artist Mat Collishaw on Sky Burial, a striking multimedia piece, first seen in Paris earlier this year, now given its first UK performance at the Barbican. Fauré’s familiar Requiem is prefaced by Gounod’s unfamiliar oratorio Saint François d’Assise, depicting the saint’s death; both works form a live

soundtrack to a film by Collishaw that contemplates our common mortality before reflecting on, and depicting, the eastern practice of sky burial, in which the dead body is returned to nature by being exposed in the open to be eaten by vultures and scavenging animals.

Musically, this was beautiful, with Equilbey's approach to both works at once reflective and austere. Insula's period instruments conferred starkness on music that in lesser hands might all too easily cloy. Accentus sang with admirable focus: the altos and tenors circling in close harmony sounded genuinely unearthly in the Requiem's Offertoire, while the sopranos were exquisite in both the In Paradisum and the angelic chorus that closes Saint François. Tenor Amitai Pati played the saint with great fervour. Oliver Barlow was the sweet-toned treble in the Requiem's Pie Jesu, John Brancy the excellent, warm-voiced baritone in both works.

Collishaw's film, meanwhile, hovers in unsettling, albeit spiritual territory. Black clouds scud across the moon as François lies dying, though an azure empyrean awaits him beyond the grave. A lone vulture hovers in the same blue during the Requiem's Introit, before Collishaw's camera begins gliding round a modern-day skyscraper, entering through windows as a dispassionate observer of death as a natural end, calmly accepted. Images of waterfalls and rivers suggest the final release of the soul. In the Libera Me, bodies are taken to the building's roof, where the vultures gather and strip bones clean. The final shot, of Earth seen from space – or maybe heaven – is reminiscent of 2001: A Space Odyssey, and strikes a slightly false note, though it dissolves into a star-scape that forms the backdrop to the evening's encore, Fauré's Cantique de Jean Racine, breathtakingly sung and almost unbearably moving after all that has preceded it.