


The Insula Orchestra in the sky by Gounod and Fauré

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United Kingdom

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Insula Orchestra and Equilbey © 2023 by Barbican Center
London, Monday, November 20, 2023. Barbican Concert Hall. Charles Gounod: Saint François d'Assise. Gabriel Fauré: Requiem. Videos: Mat Collishaw. Amilai Pati (tenor), John Brancy (bariton), Oliver Barlow (soprano). Accentus Choir. Insula Orchestra under the direction of Laurence Equilbey.

Insula , the period instrument orchestra founded by Laurence Equilbey in 1962, has revisited London with one of its subjective stage concerts that integrate music, lighting and synchronized videos with high-quality musical performances with exemplary precision and a sense of context. “Stage concerts are a part of our DNA” reads the orchestra's self-

descriptive brochure, and for Equilbey this is a key notion: it is about visualizing its concept according to which the orchestra occupies a key place in the progress from the initial sensation that a musical work produces to a more intense emotion the more visual it is.

I am one of those who in principle reject this type of audiovisuals because in general they seem pompous and intended to impress Hollywood style, with bombast normally unrelated to the works in progress. But this does not happen with the Insula Orchestra experiments . In them the scores appear in view with perceptive psychological intuition.

This concert was no exception: in Gounod's little-known posthumous oratorio, *Saint François d'Assise* , a huge screen shows only skies and clouds of dimly graduated luminosity according to some of the most beautiful melodies written by the composer, always ultra Catholic and pietist, but equally effective in its ability to elevate and comfort the souls of the listeners, who on this occasion were captivated by skies and clouds.

The manuscript of the work (premiered at one of those concerts of the *Société des Concerts du Conservatoire* in 1891) was lost until it was rediscovered in the 1990s in the library of a convent. The first recording took place in 2016 with the excellent Accentus Choir, which also accompanied Insula on this occasion.

After a diffuse melody and suggestive chromaticism, Francisco (tenor) bursts in with a passionate declaration of love for Jesus, and he is not far behind: "Come, come lover of my cross! Come, my sweet victim, while you await the death that will fulfill your desires!" Death is not long in coming: a male choir representing the first Franciscan disciples despairs of losing this second Messiah of Christianity. But Francisco rebukes them, asking them not to cry, because "it is death that flees before eternal life." Here the heavens on the screen light up in tune with the final choir of angels.

But death returned with everything and without giving the public the respite of an interval, this time with the famous *Requiem* by Fauré. At the beginning, a huge vulture flies over the sky where Francisco left us. Other vultures begin to accompany them before the execution is visually commented on by what is happening in a dilapidated skyscraper building. The camera enters through windows where we see patients on the verge, exhausted but at peace, together with other family members who, similarly touched by the peace of acceptance, gently take the hands of the dying. The peace is interrupted by a terrifying contrast. During *Die iriae* , vultures swoop in to feed on the corpses, well in accordance with the Indo-Buddhist tradition prevailing in some mountainous regions of abandoning the dead to a macabre metamorphosis. But death always triumphs as peace. In a peaceful and splendid *In paradisum* choirs and orchestras seem to disappear in the myriad of stars, in the infinity of a night into which the video rushes us with a push that admits no resistance: death and the cosmos, whether we like it or not. With resurrection in the cosmos, for those who believe so. This is how filmmaker Matt Collishaw sees San Francisco, Gounod and Fauré.

Collishaw's footage achieved a quality similar to that of Bill Viola's experiments. Laurence Equilbey imposed at all times a deeply sensitive but very French execution in the good sense of this qualification, that is, with an intensity that was never excessive but rather a sensitivity of profound Cartesian rigor. No overflowing emotions, but a differentiated exposition of the different instrumental groups, and a clear story narrative, which with prudent distancing never sought the extreme emotions that German or Italian composers cultivate when they talk about life and death.

As they say in Argentina, here there is “no drama.” Rather, it is a very simple and pulsatingly contoured musical story. The tenor Amitai Pati sang his Francisco with a robust and even timbre. Similarly effective was baritone John Brancy as Jesus in Gounod's work and as an obsessive avenger in *Libera me...Die irae*. The boy Oliver Barlow, one of those local gems existing in England, in this case from the *Trinity Boys Choir*, sang his *Pie Jesu* with sure courage and good intonation.

On December 21, Laurence Equilbey and his *Insula orchestra*, always together with the Accentus choir, will perform at the Liceu in Barcelona with Handel's *Messiah*. They will be accompanied by a distinguished group of singers Sandrine Piau (soprano), Paul-Antoine Bénos-Djian (countertenor), Stuart Jackson (tenor), and Alex Rosen (bass). It will be a new great opportunity for the Iberian public to appreciate all of them as they deserve.

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