**Review: Stephen Hawking remembered by Cambridge Philharmonic Orchestra**

Published: 14:16, 19 March 2018

In a short pre-concert talk for Cambridge Philharmonic’s French Connections on Saturday (March 17) evening, their conductor Timothy Redmond reminded the audience that France has always been a musical nation.

The wealth of material included in this 20-minute survey was amazing. Tim pointed out transatlantic configurations and cross-fertilisations among French composers in the inter-war years, highlighting, as well, other key players in the story, such as Nadia Boulanger and Winnaretta Singer, patron and heiress to the sewing machine fortune.

Just how avant-garde some of the compositions could be was demonstrated in the first piece we heard, Ionisation, written for 13 percussionists by Varèse. The Guildhall Percussion Ensemble performed this intriguing work, but not before one of its members, Finan Jones, had introduced us, helpfully, to some of the less likely ‘instruments’ involved in it. These included, among other more recognisable ones, a hand-revved siren and a contraption called ‘the lion’s roar’.

To Varèse all this was perfectly legitimate of course, as music, he believed, was merely another form of organised noise. The percussionists were impressive, and it was hard to believe that the sound they were making belonged to 1931, and not to some product of a modern recording studio.

The orchestra and chorus then assembled to perform Stravinsky’s Symphony of Psalms which reflects its composer’s return to his Russian Orthodox roots, but where he somehow manages triumphantly to convey the spirit of earlier musical ages through the sounds of the present.

A deep instinct for religious faith in Stravinsky, who took up residence in France, was similarly represented by Poulenc’s composition, Stabat Mater, a legacy of his return to Roman Catholicism and later performed in the concert.

And here came an astounding circumstance. Tim said that he’d learned from a BBC Radio 3 tribute that the favourite composers of Stephen Hawking, the Cambridge physicist, cosmologist and music enthusiast who had died in the current week, were Stravinsky and Poulenc. In fact, BBC Radio 3 had played the Stravinsky work in memory of him, this being apparently the first recording Hawking had ever bought.

The concert, therefore, could almost have been tailored to this sad occasion, and Tim said that their own performance of the Symphony of Psalms would be dedicated to Hawking.

The orchestra and chorus admirably conveyed the power of this work, whose dark inter-galactic expansiveness, especially in the first Psalm, one could well see might have had profound significance for a cosmologist.

Next, pianists, Romanian Nicolae Mihaila and French-born Thibault Charrin came together for a performance of Poulenc’s Concerto for two pianos, whose execution calls for extreme virtuosity. Both had it in abundance, and then some.

The concerto reflects the exuberance of the jazz age as well as the jokey and frolicsome ‘other side’ of Poulenc, one that this time appealed perhaps to the ‘playful’ element in Hawking, and remembered by everyone as another pronounced part of his personality.

The two pianists acknowledged the audience’s rapturous reception with an encore, Thibault Charrin’s own fun arrangement of a well-known piece from Debussy’s Children’s Corner suite, with the pianists deftly throwing passages back and forth one to the other.

The orchestra and chorus, under leader Paula Muldoon, then performed Ravel’s Daphnis and Chloé Suite No. 2, a veritable ‘encyclopedia of orchestration’ to borrow Tim’s phrase. This was a splendid rendition of a famous work originally written for ballet. The powerful conclusion with its rhythmic thrusts, as the once innocent Daphnis and Chloe celebrate their reunion, left little to the imagination, recalling something of the heterodoxies of taste that were of such concern to music traditionalists of the era.

This ambitious and absorbing concert drew to its conclusion with the Stabat Mater. In three of its 12 movements the Cambridge Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus were joined by French mezzo-soprano, Margo Arsane, whose moving contributions, especially in Poulenc’s ‘Vidit Suum,’ surely one of the bleakest pieces of music ever written, were delivered with poise, grace and delicacy.

A full and appreciative audience, emerging into the blizzard outside, had been treated to a truly imaginative programme, a cornucopia of information and some wonderful music-making to keep their spirits warm homeward bound, while eagerly anticipating CPO’s next concert on Sunday, May 20.