

Reviews

Standing ovation for the two sides of Morricone

Classical

Ennio Morricone

Barbican Hall, London
★★★★★

So this dapper little man, who looks as though he has visited the same barber and eaten the same food at the same restaurant every day of his working life, this is the one whose music added the mythic dimension to the stories of Leone, Pontecorvo, Malick and Tornatore. His arrival on stage in London on Saturday night, giving his first concert in Britain at the age of 72, evoked applause suffused not just with admiration but with gratitude for all those evenings — decades of them — spent in the dark but illuminated by his extraordinary gift.

Many fine composers have made careers in the movies. Some, such as Bernard Herrmann and Nino Rota, have left their fingerprints on the history of the cinema. Only Ennio Morricone, however, has produced a body of work which entitles him to be considered as much of an auteur as those directors whose work he has so consistently enhanced in the 40 years since he sat down to write his first film score.

For this concert, at which he conducted the 90 musicians of the Rome Sinfonietta and the 100-strong Crouch End Festival Chorus and Folk Choir, the composer was clearly obliged to concentrate on the sort of work for which he has become famous. But first, and quite properly, he wanted to show us what Ennio Morricone does when he is writing music for his own satisfaction rather than for someone else's strip of celluloid.

The two pieces of chamber music which preceded the interval were the product of his commitment to the avant-garde of the mid-20th century, to the music of the serialists and their successors. Ombra di Lontana Presenza featured two violas — the first, that of Fausto Anzelmo, in person, and the second, that of the late Dino Asciola, the piece's dedicatee, on tape.

Quiet, ruminative, moving from a sustained intensification of simple materials to a narrative based on interlocking fragments, it formed a sharp contrast with Fragment of Eros, a setting of five poems by Sergio Miceli. Performed in Latin, Italian, German, French and English by the soprano Susanna Rigacci, the piece made use of an astringent chromaticism strongly contrasting with the pungent earthiness of some of the verse: "On n'a... on a... on n'a-niste, for example, or "I want my rapture like a snake / Between your bosom -- between your thighs."

After the interval, we were allowed to see what Morricone does with his day job, organised into three thematic medleys, the first dedicated to Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns, the second to films of political protest, and the third to films

characterised as "tragic, lyric, epic". Anyone still disconcerted by the first half was immediately reassured by the ghostly utulation introducing the theme from *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*, the first part of a triptych in which the glorious ballad theme from *Once Upon a Time in the West* provided a fine bridge to the galloping climax of *A Fistful of Dynamite*.

Many among the audience would probably have been happy for that sort of thing to go on all night, but Morricone is understandably sensitive about the closeness of his identification with Leone. The section dedicated to political cinema included an ominous passage from Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, the lovely adagio from Brian de Palma's *Casualties of War*, and Dulce Ponte's fine singing of the lush ballad from Giuliano Montaldo's *Sacco and Vanzetti* and the Bolero-based *A Brisa do Coracao* from Roberto Faenza's *Sostiene Pereira*.

For the final scheduled sequence the Crouch End singers split themselves into two groups, creating an antiphony exploited in the finale, *On Earth as it is in Heaven* from Roland Joffe's *The Mission*, in which the smaller of the two choirs sang along with the beat of conga drums while the remainder were paced by the full orchestra, graphically reflecting the film's examination of a collision between "primitive" and "civilised" societies.

A standing ovation was rewarded by five encores, the first of which — the exquisitely serene Dorothy's Theme from *Once Upon a Time in America* — was the shortest, the simplest and the most affecting of the evening's offerings. Who would have thought that a disciple of Berio and Nono would turn out to be one of the 20th century's greatest melodists?

It is, sadly, impossible to go and see *Once Upon a Time in America* again for the first time, or *The Battle of Algiers*, or *Cinema Paradiso*, which provided the final encore. But this remarkable evening was certainly the next best thing.

Richard Williams



Once upon a time in London... film score master Morricone gives his first ever British concert. Photograph: Steve Gillett