

# University of Michigan 48th Annual Conference on Organ Music

Gale Kramer, with Marijim Thoene, Alan Knight, and Linda Pound Coyne

The centenary of the birth of Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992) afforded the occasion at the University of Michigan's 48th Annual Conference on Organ Music last October to gather performers, scholars and friends of Messiaen for a consideration of one of the twentieth century's most original composers and to hear performed nearly all of his repertoire for organ. At the remove of nearly a quarter century from the premiere in 1986 of his last major work, *Le Livre du Saint Sacrement*, his legacy continues to influence today's composers, performers and improvisers.

The Messiaen content of the conference included a lecture called "Visions of Glory," by Professor **Andrew Mead**, reminiscences and a masterclass by **Almut Rössler**, a discography presented by **Michael Barone**, and performances including *L'Ascension* (**Carolyn Shuster Fournier**), *Méditations sur la Sainte Trinité* (**Almut Rössler**), *La Nativité* (students of **James Kibbie**), *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (University of Michigan students), and *Le livre du Saint Sacrement* (**Jörg Abbing**). In addition, various Messiaen compositions were included in a lecture-recital by **Wayne Wyrembelski**, and in recitals by students of Professors Mead and Mason, and by **Naji Hakim**.

## Four great dramas in Messiaen's musical life

Almut Rössler, daughter of a German Protestant pastor, knew and worked with the Roman Catholic mystic Olivier Messiaen for 50 years. Marijim Thoene reviewed two of Rössler's presentations:

## Almut Rössler lecture on performing Messiaen's music

It was a distinct privilege to hear one of the greatest interpreters of Messiaen's organ music, Almut Rössler, lecture on "Performing Messiaen's Music." This was her seventh visit from Düsseldorf, Germany to the University of Michigan to perform works of Messiaen and share her insights on the performance of Messiaen's music, which is filled with the outpouring of his intense and profound faith in a musical language that is rhythmically complex and drenched in the colors of all creation. Professor Rössler worked closely with Messiaen for many



Almut Rössler (photo credit: Marijim Thoene)

years, playing his music on all types of organs. Her official studies began with him in 1951. She played four recitals of his works at La Trinité in Paris, where he was organist for 60 years. She organized the first Düsseldorf Messiaen Festival in honor of his 60th birthday in 1968 and participated in many other conferences focusing on his music throughout Europe. She was not only his student, but also his friend and confidante. She is the one Messiaen chose first to look at his last organ work, *Livre du Saint Sacrement* (*Book of the Blessed Sacrament*), which she premiered in Detroit for the 1986 AGO convention.

Professor Rössler based her lecture on Messiaen's own description of four dramas in his life as a composer, as written in a parish letter for La Trinité. His description is especially poignant because each drama offers invaluable biographical information as well as insights into how he wished his music to be performed. These four dramas included (1) the religious musician (bringing faith to the atheist), (2) the ornithologist, (3) the synaesthete, and (4) the rhythmicist. For brevity's sake I will offer just a glimpse of Messiaen the composer as described by Almut Rössler, which is pertinent to the performance of his organ works.

(1) To play the music of Messiaen, whose devotion to the Roman Catholic Church permeated every fiber of



Almut Rössler teaching a masterclass on Messiaen's *La Nativité du Seigneur* (photo credit: Béla Fehér)

his being, one must have a knowledge of prayer, understand the symbolism of sound, e.g., the Incarnation; one must have a personal faith and a reverence for holy things.

(2) The underlying source of Messiaen's passion for notating birdsong is expressed by Messiaen himself in his preface to his *Quartet for the End of Time*: "The abyss is Time, with its sadnesses and weariness. The birds are the opposite of Time; they are our desire for light, for stars, for rainbows, and for jubilant song." His complicated rhythms are notated precisely, and one must subdivide major beats into 32nd notes and 16th notes, and be able to maintain the pulse of the larger beat and to switch fluently between larger and smaller note values.

(3) Messiaen was a "synaesthete." He saw colors when he heard certain sounds. He explains this phenomenon as "an inner vision, a case of the mind's eye. The colours are wonderful, inexpressible, extraordinarily varied. As the sounds stir, change, move about, these colours move with them through perpetual changes." (*Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, by Almut Rössler, Duisburg: Gilles and Francke, 1986, p. 43.) In playing Messiaen's works, one must always consider the sound that he specifies; the instrument must contain the colors and intensity of power that is required; dynamic power is of utmost importance.

(4) Messiaen's business cards were printed with his name followed by "composer" plus the term "rhythmicist." For



Marilyn Mason and Almut Rössler (photo credit: Marijim Thoene)

Messiaen, rhythm is not strict like a marching band, but is the rush of wind and the shape of the seas. He used added time values to break up the regularity of notes. Rössler advised learning his music on the piano, and when all of the nuances are worked out and when it sounds beautiful, then play it on the organ and transfer the subtle treatment of time to the organ. Messiaen does not have metronome markings in his scores because every organ and room is different. There should be a dialogue between the room and the player. In a slow tempo one should not play more slowly in a resonant room. The performer has to produce resonance within himself.

## Almut Rössler masterclass on *La Nativité*

Students of Professor James Kibbie, including **Thomas Kean**, **John Woolsey**, **Laura Kempa**, **John Beresford**, **Andrew Herbruck**, **Richard Newman**, and **Diana Saum**, played *La Nativité du Seigneur*, and afterwards Professor Rössler offered comments and suggestions. She congratulated Prof. Kibbie and his students, saying, "the performance was eloquent to the spirit of the work."

These selected comments reflect Rössler's keen insights and power to communicate very complex ideas in simple terms: "Don't play squarely! Remember, if there are no staccato marks, the passage is to be played legato. The performer must have his own vision of eternity. Know the meaning of every word on the page. If staccato chords occur in a slow movement, you must feel like a sculptor who forms things when you release the chords." In *Méditation VII, Jésus accepte la souffrance*, she was especially graphic in her comments: "I would like to see your claws. You have to feel like a tiger. The attitude toward the piece must be felt in your body, you must play it with all your force. The cross must sound like a suffering instrument, not a nice cross around your neck."

Thank you, Almut Rössler, for bringing us the glorious music of Messiaen and sharing with us his vision of the universe.

—Marijim Thoene, DMA

## The mystic striving to be understood

Rössler suggested that, perhaps because his musical language was unconventional and because he wanted to be understood, Messiaen provided many references to biblical, liturgical and theological texts, and he published many explanations. She noted his preoccupation with rhythm. Her advice to students included the paradox that one must observe the durations of notes extremely precisely, yet in a stream of many notes of equal value one must create accents by the subtle management of time. In his music, she learned, birdcalls alone stand outside the strict requirements for durations. This is consistent with his notion that time is an abyss and the sounds of birds are beyond the limits of time.

Alan Knight corroborated Messiaen's desire to be understood in his review of Rössler's performance of *Le Banquet Céleste* and *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité*:



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Students of James Kibbie performing Messiaen's *La Nativité du Seigneur*, with Karl Schrock, narrator (photo credit: Béla Fehér)

In her words of introduction, Marilyn Mason recalled Rössler's six previous visits to Ann Arbor. Before she played, Rössler commented on the experience of first encountering the piece in Messiaen's presence. The then "new" composition turned out to be, in her words, "a beautiful piece!"

She described its theological and musical outline as follows. The odd-numbered movements—1, 3, 5, 7 and 9—take up the Trinitarian texts from Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, (as, the Essence of God—mvt. 3, the Attributes of God—mvt. 5, etc.), while the even-numbered movements—2, 4, 6 and 8—musically and theologically amplify and expand upon the preceding odd-numbered movements. The developmental process here, she explained, is comparable to that of Beethoven. The texts for the even-numbered movements were selected from the liturgy and the Scriptures. Movement 8, for instance, deals with both the three Persons and the Oneness of God. Romans is quoted: "O the depths of the richness of the wisdom and the knowledge of God!" *God is simple* is Messiaen's primary meditation in this movement, with the chant taken from the Alleluia of All Saints Day. Intermittently, three chords are repeated in varying rhythms to signify that the triune God is eternally One.

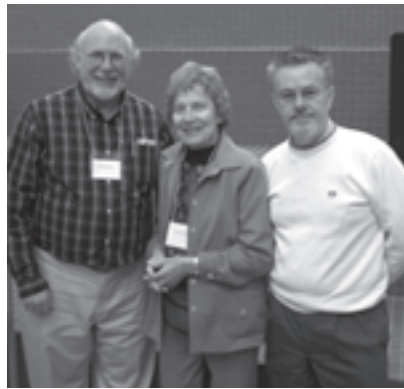
With this short explanation and a page of notes on the themes, Rössler's performance was easy to take in. She played *Le Banquet Céleste* as a prelude to the cycle. (This was not applauded, creating an ambiance for meditation—a good idea.) From the quiet opening to the end of the recital, one had the pleasing conviction that Messiaen had heard all of this and had commented on it in detail. Ms. Rössler played with marvelous ease, movement, freedom, and sureness.

—Alan Knight, DMA

In other Messiaen presentations, **Michael Barone**, a frequent presenter at the U-M conferences, played selected recordings from a discography that he compiled of Messiaen's recorded organ works up to 1955. The earliest commercial Messiaen recording anywhere was made by the late University of Michigan Professor Robert Noehren, playing *La Nativité* at Grace Episcopal Church, Sandusky, Ohio, on a historic Johnson organ rebuilt by Schlicker and Noehren. The two earliest recordings of *L'Apparition de l'Église éternelle* were by Jean Langlais and by the American Richard Ellsasser playing at the Hammond Museum in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Barone played portions of Leopold Stokowski's recording of Messiaen's original version of *L'Ascension*, which Messiaen scored for orchestra. Barone's summary comment was, "Our experience of Messiaen continues. He helps us look at things in ways we had not imagined."

Besides bringing a brilliant reading of *L'Ascension*, **Carolyn Shuster Fournier** presented *Ubi caritas* by Jacques Charpentier, written for organ and unison women's and children's voices.

The culminating recital, *Le Livre du Saint Sacrement*, was played by German organist **Jörg Abbing**, who had studied it with Rössler. Fierce concentration allowed him to play the two-hour program with only two hours of preparation time on the organ. His playing projected conviction, accuracy and stamina. A day earlier he played an entire Bach program on the Wilhelm organ at the Congregational



Andrew Mead, Marilyn Mason, and Huw Lewis (photo credit: Linda Pound Coyne)

Church, filling in at the last minute, and a day or two later he played a "post-conference" program of Italian music at the Methodist Church—clearly a young performer with depth and energy.

There were excellent presentations that did not feature Messiaen or his music exclusively. **Craig Scott Symons**, with **Sonia Lee**, violin, and **Elizabeth Wright**, soprano, spoke about and put a spotlight on lesser known but deserving works of Sigfrid Karg-Elert. The Ann Arbor AGO chapter sponsored a youth choir festival organized and directed by Dr. **Thomas Strode** and AGO Dean **James Wagner**, which attracted an audience of 250 to the opening event of the conference. Accompanist **Scott Elsholz** delighted his audience with a demonstration of the Hill Auditorium pipe organ using *Star Wars* themes. Faculty member **Michele Johns** premiered a new work for organ by Geoffrey Stanton.

**Naji Hakim**, full of vitality and virtuosity, dedicated the rebuilt organ at Ann Arbor's Church of St. Thomas the Apostle. In addition to Bach's E-minor Prelude and Fugue and Franck's *Prière* he played *Le Vent de l'Esprit* from Messiaen's Pentecost Mass, but he surpassed everything else on the program with the performance of his own compositions, *Glenalmond Suite* and the *Sakskøbing Præludier*. Himself a pupil of Langlais, Hakim's comments earlier to students on improvisation covered an astonishing range of ideas beyond those that simply describe techniques, and they included some thoughts on time. An improvisation exists in real time; therefore it can express what the performer feels instinctively at that moment. A composition, on the other hand, may have been written over the course of three weeks and performed in three minutes. Reasoning plays a larger role in this process. Memory, and by extension time, is an essential ingredient of love, he asserted, because you can't love something or someone that you don't recognize or remember. Therefore, to improvise on a theme can be an act of love. When all is said and done, an improvisation should sound like a composed work, and a performance of a composed work should sound improvised. Contrast Hakim's preference for improvisation, by his own description a spontaneous reaction in the moment, albeit one that has required years of mental and technical preparation, to Messiaen's preference for written composition, a more enduring construction that relies on the mental processes of reason and reflection, albeit in the service of expressing what is immeasurable.

The University of Michigan Historic Organ Tour, now in its 30th year, is another Marilyn Mason innovation that has fruitfully endured over time. Four organists from the most recent trip to Budapest, Vienna, Salzburg, and Prague performed music from their recitals in Prague and Vienna. They were **Joanne Vollendorf Clark**, **Stephen Hoffman**, **Janice Fehér**, **Charles Raines** and **Gale Kramer**. In memory of the late Robert Glasgow, Clark and Raines played from *A Triptych of Fugues* by Gerald Near, which the composer had dedicated to Prof. Glasgow in 1965. Adding a visual component to the organ conference, photographic artist **Béla Fehér** presented a slide show documenting the sumptuous organs and churches visited on the tour.



Janice Fehér congratulating Naji Hakim following his opening guest recital at St. Thomas Catholic Church in Ann Arbor (photo credit: Béla Fehér)

"The Triumph of Time" is the subtitle of a forgotten novel that Shakespeare recast as *The Winter's Tale*. Considering the special significance of time, both mensural and emotional, in Messiaen's works, as well as the perspective of time brought by the 48th annual occurrence of the event, the subtext of this conference may aptly have been *The Triumph of Time*.

Time, the ever-rolling stream, had recently borne away **Robert Glasgow**, whose performing career and 44 years on the University of Michigan faculty from 1962 to 2006 were remembered by **Marilyn Mason**. Her own creations have endured through time. Performer, networker, fundraiser, teacher, she presides over the annual Organ Conference, the summer Organ Institute, and the Historic Organ Tour, which continue to educate us and enrich our lives.

Rössler commented that Messiaen lived in his own interior world, and that he was a very calm person. Listening to so much of his music in a few days I realized that it has a few fast outbursts (*Transports de joie*, *Dieu parmi nous*) surrounded by long stretches of tempos marked, extremely slow, or very slow or slowly and tenderly. This week of recitals included, probably inevitably, three performances of *Le banquet céleste* and

three of *L'Apparition de l'Église éternelle*. At first I began to anticipate yet another very slow performance, secretly wishing that someone had excised the repetitions in the programs. But by the end I had accepted Messiaen's perspective on time and I began to appreciate what goes on in the duration of a sound, not just where it is going next.

—Gale Kramer, DMA

### Summing up

For the past 47 years, the University of Michigan has presented a conference on organ music of outstanding quality under the able leadership of Marilyn Mason, chairman of the department.

The emphasis of the 48th conference, which began October 5 and continued for three days, was on the music of Olivier Messiaen. Numerous recitals and lectures explored the many complex aspects of his musical language. Headliners Naji Hakim and Carolyn Shuster Fournier from Paris and Almut Rössler from Düsseldorf all knew Messiaen and could interpret his music with enormous insight. Additional lecturers were Michael Barone of *Pipedreams* fame and Andrew Mead, Professor of Theory at the University of Michigan.

Germany was also given admirable attention. Craig Scott Symons presented a lecture recital on Karg-Elert, and Jörg Abbing of Saarbrücken played an all-Bach program that included chorale settings, three counterpoints from the *Art of Fugue*, and the *Passacaglia and Fugue*. It was a stellar performance in technical prowess and aesthetic understanding. The very next evening he played an all-Messiaen program, the *Livre du Saint Sacrement*!

The organ conference is always a "total immersion" experience, in which participants listen and think about the music being studied with intensity and dedication; several organists remarked that they cherish these days in October each year, since it is an opportunity to come to Ann Arbor and learn from the "best of the best."

—Linda Pound Coyne

## An Evening of Music Celebrating the Life and Work of Robert Glasgow

Friday  
May 29, 2009  
8:00 p.m.  
Hill Auditorium  
Ann Arbor, Michigan



Robert Glasgow 1925-2008

Spoken Tributes by:

William Aylesworth  
Marilyn Mason  
Louis Nagel  
Orpha Ochse  
David Palmer

Performances by:

Susan DeKam  
Alexander Frey  
Martin Jean  
Charles Kennedy  
Peter Stoltzfus Berton  
Jeremy David Tarrant