

Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992)

100th Year Anniversary

David Palmer

“He connects with me in the same way that Bach does.” So said Jack Bruce, the British singer-composer and bassist with the rock group Cream, when asked about the effect of Messiaen’s music on him, after one of the concerts of the big Southbank Festival in London earlier this year. “I’m not religious, but the spirituality touches me,” he continued. “There is a spirituality about it that you recognize.”¹ So grows the impact of Messiaen in this centennial year of his birth, as his unique voice from the last century delivers a message that resonates more and more in the 21st century.

Musicians love to use anniversary observances to generate performances and study of composers’ works. Often, these commemorations serve to bring forward less familiar music: last year, we heard Buxtehude’s music far more than usual. On the other hand, Bach has received three major outpourings in my lifetime: 1950, 1985 and 2000, commemorating either his birth or his death. These festivals simply gave us Bach lovers an excuse to play his music more than we usually do (or did)—which was already a lot.

Messiaen in our time

Coming only 16 years after his death, Messiaen’s 100th anniversary celebrations embrace both outcomes. In one way, performances and studies of his output have never slackened since his death, unlike many composers who go into eclipse. Great Britain has led the way for some time, and now North America is beginning to take Messiaen into the mainstream. Festivals and performances are flourishing all this year, and already are continuing unabated beyond December 10, the day of his birth. The music world, in particular the young, is discovering Messiaen in a big way. Reporting a performance of the *Turangalila-Symphonie*, Anthony Tommasini in the *New York Times* wrote, “A large and noticeably young audience turned up at Carnegie Hall to hear this unorthodox and exhilarating 10-movement work.”² In another way, the centennial is stimulating performances of works not heard very often, from *Harawi* to *La Transfiguration de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ* to the opera *St. François d’Assise*.

Two elements in the music may be part of its growing appeal. Early in his cre-



Messiaen at Sainte Trinité in 1973 (from the private collection of Nigel Simeone)

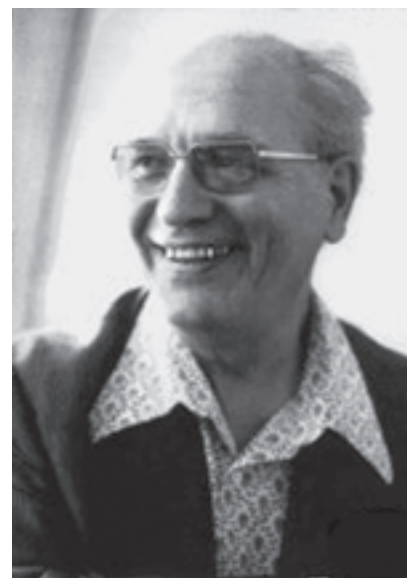
ative career, Messiaen was in tune with the scientific world of our day. Concepts in cosmology, such as time moving at different speeds, found expression in his music—indeed, such ideas are the foundation of his sense of rhythm. The tumultuous whirling palindrome of *Regard VI*: “Par lui tout a été fait” (*Vingt Regards sur L’Enfant-Jésus*) makes me think of those marvelous Hubble telescope images of the birth and death of stars, or of scien-

tists’ depictions of black holes, in which huge amounts of matter are sucked in and jets of energy are spewed out over thousands of light years.

Second, Messiaen’s profound respect for creation allies him with the green earth trends of our time. His abhorrence of the city is well documented, as is his admiration for Debussy and his contemplation of nature. Wherever Messiaen traveled, he made time to visit the coun-



Messiaen in the 1930s (photo © Malcolm Ball, www.oliviermessiaen.org)



Messiaen in the 1960s (photo © Malcolm Ball, www.oliviermessiaen.org)



Messiaen in the 1980s (photo © Malcolm Ball, www.oliviermessiaen.org)

tryside nearby, taking great pains to notate the songs of the indigenous natural musicians, i.e., the birds. The near-scientific accuracy with which he notated birdsong far surpassed any other composer’s depiction of ideas from nature. In *Catalogue d’oiseaux* for piano, he gives us the songs of birds of France and sets them musically in their environment. The cycle is an enthralling soundscape as music on its own, but he adds another layer of meaning by indicating in the score the specific birds and the details of the scenery. Birdsong appears in the organ music as early as *L’Ascension* (1933), but not until *Livre du Saint Sacrement* (1984) do we encounter both birds and their natural setting together. In VI: “la manne et le Pain de Vie,” Messiaen flings a few incantations of the mourning chat and the desert lark out over the vastness and heat of the Judean desert (represented by the high drone of the *Récit Cymbale* and the dry trillings of the *Positif Clarinette*).

The music for organ

The organ music represents every period of his creative output. Organists were among the earliest to program Messiaen

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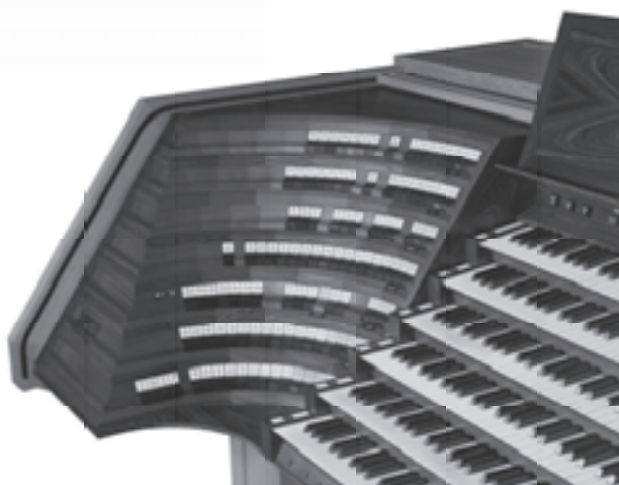
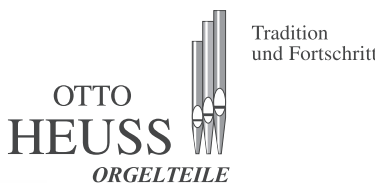
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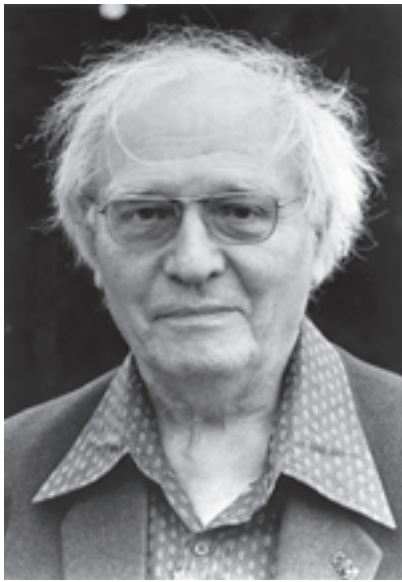
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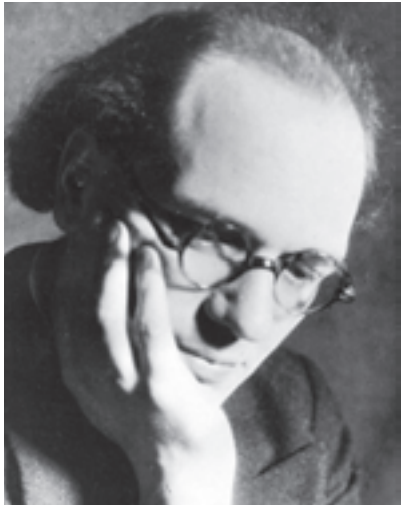
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Olivier Messiaen



Messiaen (photo credit Andrew Shenton, www.oliviermessiaen.net)



Messiaen in 1945 (from the private collection of Nigel Simeone)

in recital, and there are several tributes this year: Gail Archer (New York), Jon Gillock (Pittsburgh), Paul Jacobs (New York and New Haven), John Scott (New York), Patrick Wedd (complete works in Montreal), and Dame Gillian Weir (Chicago), to cite a few.

For organists who have dipped their foot into the Messiaen pond, or who are interested in doing so, this article offers thoughts about getting to know this extraordinary body of music, especially the organ cycles and pieces.

First of all, there is much to read. All his life, Messiaen spoke at great length about his music—its ideas, its structure and the faith it sprang from. Others followed in biographies and studies during his lifetime. Organists will want to know Clyde Holloway's dissertation³ and Almut Rössler's conversations with Messiaen.⁴ Since then, more and more writers have jumped in enthusiastically, in books and articles on many different aspects of his output. Two engrossing biographies alone have appeared since 2005.⁵

Releases of recordings fill the cata-

logues, including reissues of earlier ones packaged for the anniversary year. In the organ repertoire, must-haves for me are the sets by Hans-Ola Ericsson, Olivier Latry, and Dame Gillian Weir, in addition to those recorded by Messiaen himself.

When all is said and done about recordings, hearing a live performance is the surest way to feel its impact. And there are many in the U.S. and Canada this year, as two websites show. Boston University's Messiaen Project,⁶ edited by Andrew Shenton, offers a calendar of performances and conferences going on around the world. The site is also a major source of scholarly articles, list of recordings, films, and Internet resources, among others. Percussionist Malcolm Ball has set up a similarly wide-ranging site.⁷ Admittedly most performances will have already occurred by the time this article appears, but they continue on into the 101st year, as Ball's and Shenton's calendars show. YouTube presents some treasures, as well. For example, a video clip from Messiaen's class in 1953 transmits his enthusiasm for discovery and for passing it on to the young.⁸

Messiaen and improvisation

Another shows him improvising at La Trinité,⁹ and proffers telling insights into the link between his own improvisations over more than 60 years at La Trinité and his compositions. The freedom and inspiration of the moment evident in these extemporizations can teach a great deal about performance of similar pieces in his output. In interviews, he spoke often of his improvisations: how he vowed never to waste so much energy again after summing them up in *Messe de la Pentecôte*,¹⁰ and how improvisations at La Trinité accompanying a sermon in 1967 on the Holy Trinity led to the *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité*.¹¹ The YouTube video gives an example of an improvisation that shows clearly the origin of some of his compositions. While choosing stops, he announces the liturgical theme on which he will improvise. Then comes a high pedal tone on the Cymbale of the Récit (representing the Star seen by the Magi), followed by triads in one of his modes of transposition, and the Gregorian chant for Christmas, "Puer natus est nobis." The piece reminds one of movement V (titled "Puer nobis est natus") from the *Livre du Saint Sacrement*. It also brings to mind other movements of the *Livre* as well, especially movement VI ("la manne et le Pain de Vie") characterized by sustained chords on Récit Cymbale, making us feel the intense heat of the desert of Judea.

In 1979, Messiaen recorded a reading of *L'âme en bourgeon* (The Soul in Bud) by Gisele Casadesus, with his own improvisations recorded at La Trinité as interludes and commentary.¹² This cycle of poems written by his mother, the poet Cécile Sauvage, when she was pregnant with him, had a lifelong influence on him.¹³ Messiaen improvises using at least two musical ideas from both earlier and future works. One of them is a favorite melody on the Cornet (first written for *Cantéyodjaya*, and later incorporated into the Offertoire of the *Messe de la Pentecôte*). The other idea, a chromatic, turbulently ascending passage on the *fonds d'orgue*, forecasts the opening of movement XI ("L'apparition du Christ ressuscité à Marie-Madeleine") of the *Livre du Saint Sacrement*. Music given genesis by his mother's poetry written exactly 100 years ago is particularly moving to hear in this centennial year.

The music for other instruments

For organists, getting to know Messiaen's music for other performing media can be exhilarating, if not at least informative. During my own odyssey in discovering it, hearing pianist Robert Sherlaw Johnson play *Catalogue d'oiseaux* in 1978 was a revelation. For one thing, this window on Messiaen's sound-world embodied successfully both music and instrument. The dry acoustics prevalent in North American churches veiled for me the sense of big space in the music. Another revealing approach to the organ pieces comes through acquaintance with companion works of the same period.

For example, if one is learning the *Méditations*, listening to *La Transfiguration de notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ*, the massive work for orchestra and chorus that immediately preceded it, will greatly deepen understanding. Many of the elements new to his language at that time are common to both: Gregorian chant quoted in its literal form (not channeled through the prism of his own modes), thick dissonant chords dissolving into pure triads, birdsong in profusion, and chorale-like movements—all of which take us into the sublime in a way at once more simply and yet powerfully than he had achieved previously. In another example, the *Livre du Saint Sacrement* (1984) becomes more understandable through familiarity with the opera *St. François*. In the latter, elements of narrative complement the central purpose of contemplation on the growth of grace in Francis. In the eleventh movement of the *Livre*, we experience the disbelief and then the overwhelming joy of Mary Magdalene as she sees the risen Christ. This passage of narrative is a first in the organ *oeuvre*, and calls for an appropriately dramatic interpretation.

Since Messiaen's death, Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen, the composer's widow, has labored tirelessly in gathering manuscripts together and seeing them through to publication. Messiaen was never able to find time to make his lecture notes available in a treatise, as he spoke of often in interviews. Loriod has collected and edited these notes from over forty years of teaching, on everything from Gregorian chant to Wagner's *Tristan*, and published them over the years 1994–2002, in the seven-volume work, *Traité de rythme, de couleur and d'ornithologie*. Among Messiaen's other manuscripts, she discovered three organ pieces that offer worthy additions to the repertoire: *Offrande au Saint Sacrement* (probably written in 1928). As Olivier Latry points out in his editorial notes, it is an improvisation reminiscent of those of Tournemire. The *Monodie* dates from 1963, written for his assistant Jean Bonfils.¹⁴ The *Prélude*, probably written in 1929,

derives from Dupré's style, as Latry observes. All are published by Leduc.

"The only real music for the organ is by Bach and Messiaen," is a remark attributed to Alun Hoddinott, the Welsh composer who died earlier this year. Although Messiaen played Bach and taught analysis of the *B-minor Mass* and *St. Matthew Passion*, he didn't regard himself as an heir to Bach. Yet their music, in its expression of faith through highly structured and uncompromising musical languages, unites them. Bach never ceases to awe listeners, both experienced and new. In his centennial year, Messiaen is flourishing as a parallel and potent spiritual voice in a crowded, secular world. ■

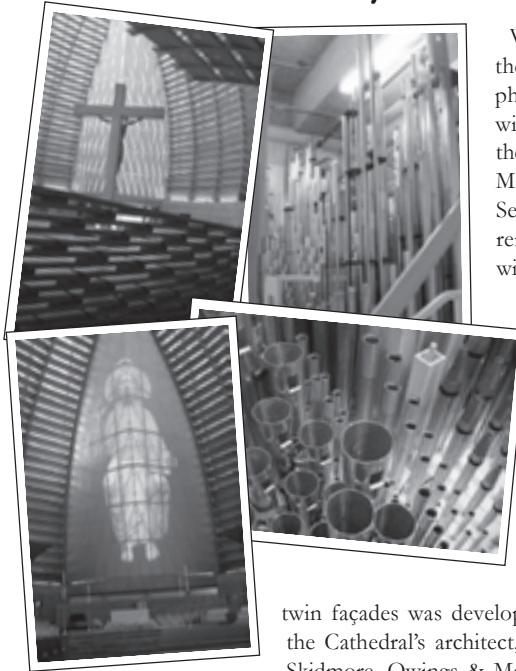
Notes

1. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=8MG2eLLPcJc> ("Messiaen—a life in color: part 2").
2. *New York Times*, April 6, 2008.
3. Clyde Holloway, *The Organ Works of Olivier Messiaen and Their Importance in His Total Oeuvre*. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1974.
4. Almut Rössler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*. Transl. from the German by Barbara Dagg and Nancy Poland. Duisburg: Gilles und Francke, 1986.
5. Christopher Dingle, *The Life of Messiaen*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005.
6. <www.oliviermessiaen.net>.
7. <www.oliviermessiaen.org>.
8. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSWatsiBErU> ("Messiaen on Debussy and Colour").
9. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSH9sVjpy8g> ("Messiaen organ improvisation").
10. Claude Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*. Transl. by E. Thomas Glasow. Portland: Amadeus Press, p. 25.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
12. Erato STU 71104 (vinyl).
13. Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen*, p. 13.
14. Olivier Latry, Notes for *Complete Organ Works*. CDs, Deutsche Grammophon.

David Palmer is a professor in the School of Music at the University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada. He has given many recitals and workshops on the music of Messiaen, including the Canadian premiere of the *Livre du Saint Sacrement* in Toronto in 1990.

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