



# Messiaen at 100: Colours of Paradise

| by Robert Rival

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“Do you really want me to try to write a string quartet without piano?” asked Olivier Messiaen during a break from rehearsals at the 1985 Ojai Music Festival in California.

That was something the 30-year-old Peter Oundjian, at the time first violinist of the Tokyo String Quartet, hadn't considered. As a boy, he had played Messiaen's *Thème et variations* (1932) with his sister at the piano. At 18, as the concertmaster of the Royal College of Music Orchestra, he led Messiaen's monumental *Turangalla-symphonie* in the composer's presence. And now, as he stood before the septuagenarian, hoping to take the leap from performer to commissioner, all the works he knew by the French master raced through his mind – and not one without keyboard! No matter how big or small the instrumentation, the piano was omnipresent.

“A piano quintet would be fine!” offered a sheepish Oundjian. The commission didn't materialize.

But years later, as the TSO's Music Director, Oundjian recalled this memorable conversation and saw in it the germ for the 2008 New Creations Festival: on the one hand, a celebration of Messiaen's centenary, and on the other – to pay tribute to the composer's love affair with the piano – a showcase of new and recent keyboard concertos from Canada and abroad.

Born in Avignon in 1908, Messiaen was a precocious child. He taught himself to play the piano and was composing canons by the age of eight. For Christmas he asked for operatic vocal scores – Mozart, Gluck, and Wagner – and he played and sang them at the piano.

In 1931, soon after graduating from the Paris Conservatoire where he earned five first prizes, Messiaen was appointed organist at La Trinité in Paris, a position he held until his death in 1992. It was there, with one of the great Cavallé-Coll instruments at his disposal, that he wrote his organ cycles of improvisatory inspiration and worked out his instantly recognizable musical language.

At the outbreak of World War II, Messiaen joined the French army. He was captured by German troops in May 1940 and taken to a prisoner-of-war camp in Silesia. Under miserable conditions he wrote his celebrated *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* which he performed on a broken piano – along with three other prisoners on clarinet, violin, and cello – in freezing temperatures. The audience of some 5,000 was deeply moved.

After his release the following year he returned to Paris to teach harmony at the Conservatoire. At around this time his wife became seriously ill. Her health steadily declined, and after years in a mental health institution, she died in 1959. Meanwhile, talented students began to assemble around him, including the post-war leader of the avant-garde, Pierre Boulez, and the gifted pianist Yvonne Loriod, whose virtuosity and musicianship perhaps inspired Messiaen to claim that “it is possible to make sounds on a piano that are more orchestral than those of an orchestra.”

It was for Loriod that Messiaen conceived the piano part in *Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine* (1943-4), one of four works by Messiaen featured at this year's New Creations Festival. Scored for piano, female choir singing in unison, percussion,

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BIRDSONG ADDS A KIND OF SPIRITUALITY, A HEAVENLY QUALITY, WHICH CLEARLY EXISTS FOR ALL OF US ON SOME LEVEL, AND FOR MESSIAEN ON A VERY HIGH LEVEL.

~ Peter Oundjian

strings and *ondes Martenot* (an early electronic instrument with an exquisite vocal quality), its first performance nearly caused a riot. Some critics snubbed the music's luxuriant sound as not modern enough; they took issue with its melodiousness and the blazing A-major triads. Others were offended by what they considered poor taste: sensual music underscoring music of divine purpose. Many — except the audience, which loved it — seemed to have misunderstood Messiaen's stated objective: "to achieve a liturgical act; that is to transport a sort of office, a sort of organized praise into the concert hall".

His next major orchestral work was a commission for Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The *Turangalila-symphonie* (1946–8), in ten movements and 75 minutes long, is scored for large orchestra with lots of percussion, piano (again for Loriod), and *ondes Martenot*. Inspired by the Tristan myth, Messiaen explained the title's derivation from Sanskrit as follows: *turanga*, meaning "time that runs, like a galloping horse" and "that flows, like sand in an hourglass"; *lila*, meaning the "divine action on the cosmos, the play of creation and destruction, and also the spiritual-physical union of love".

Edmonton composer Malcolm Forsyth, whose *Accordance Concerto* will be featured at the Festival, first seriously encountered Messiaen's music in the early 1970s after getting hold of the 1967 TSO recording of *Turangalila* conducted by Seiji Ozawa.

"I was completely spellbound by everything the music represented," recalls Forsyth, "by its surface opulence, the intense richness of the orchestral colour and how this brings the orchestra together."

## IT IS POSSIBLE TO MAKE SOUNDS ON A PIANO THAT ARE MORE ORCHESTRAL THAN THOSE OF AN ORCHESTRA

~ Olivier Messiaen

"His harmonic language usually has embedded in it a common triad or a derivative thereof," Forsyth continues, referring to Messiaen's favourite chord, the major triad with an added sixth. "This naturally is going to lead to an acoustic effect which brings things together. If composers insist on evading and avoiding the perfect fifth and major third, then you're going to have sounds which seriously disintegrate in front of your very ears."

Gary Kulesha, TSO Composer-Advisor, situates Messiaen's style in the French tradition. "He is the heir to Ravel and Debussy and wants to inhabit that ravishingly beautiful sound-world. He's also a great melodist. His melodies, when he lets them loose, are really quite stunning. *Turangalila* is full of gorgeous melodies."

In the 1950s, Messiaen began to explore deeply his fascination with nature's own

store of melodies: birdsong. Taking his lead from Bartók — who criss-crossed Hungary collecting and cataloguing Hungarian folksongs that he later incorporated into his concert music — Messiaen zig-zagged around France meticulously notating the calls of birds. It became a lifelong obsession: wherever he travelled, he took dictation from his avian friends and gradually filled countless notebooks. A photograph of his 1972 visit to Bryce Canyon in Utah (a mountain in Utah was later named in his honour) is touching, almost endearing. Deep in a red canyon stands the bespeckled composer with a black beret poised neatly on his head. He is armed with a pencil and notepad ... intently listening to the birds.

One of the major fruits of this field work was *Oiseaux exotiques* (1955–6) for an *ad hoc* ensemble consisting of woodwinds, brass, percussion and, of course, piano — but no strings. Packed into this 16-minute piece are the birdsongs of 48 different species from India, China, Malaysia, and especially the Americas.

"Birdsong," says Oundjian, "adds a kind of spirituality, a heavenly quality, which clearly exists for all of us on some level, and for Messiaen on a very high level. He worshipped bird life in a way, and the world of nature."

Sometimes just one bird is present, but very often its melody is harmonized in a thick parallel texture that colours what otherwise would be a simple tune. At



other times, many birds sing together, thus creating, in the composer's words, "an enormous counterpoint of birdsong".

The counterpoint is often so dense, and the harmonization so stylized, however, that a listener might occasionally have difficulty recognizing any birds at all. An early biographer even wondered whether we hear Messiaen singing like a bird – or the birds singing like Messiaen.

"That's all right because the sound of birds, after all, is more complex than we realize. We sometimes forget that there has actually always been quite a lot of complexity in the sounds around us," observes Oundjian. "Today, there's the sound of traffic, of subways, of leaves and wind and thunder, the sound of many different birds, especially close to dusk.

The sound of birds can be incredibly chaotic: a flock suddenly leaving a tree. We hear chaotic sounds in nature and, in a way, we come to the concert hall expecting to hear organized sound. What's fascinating about Messiaen is that he incorporates that kind of natural chaos into a formal musical setting, but organizes it in such a way that it has a real context and deep meaning."

In 1962, three years after the death of his first wife, Messiaen married Liorod, with whom he had been cultivating a professional and personal relationship for nearly two decades. *Couleurs de la Cité Céleste* (1963) is another work for *ad hoc* ensemble: also without strings, it is scored for piano, clarinets, brass, and percussion. Although the piece brings together many elements of Messiaen's musical language

– including plainchant, Hindu rhythms, and even birdsong (listen for the Western Meadowlark, native to Canada) – *Couleurs*, as its title suggests, is about colour (especially harmonic and instrumental colour) and its relationship to the unfolding of time. "The work does not end, having never really begun," wrote Messiaen. "It turns on itself, interlacing its temporal blocks like the rose-window of a cathedral with its vivid invisible colours."

This preoccupation with the perception of time began with his first published work. *Le Banquet céleste* (1928) for organ is only 25 bars long but, at its very slow tempo, lasts six minutes. "He forces us to rethink our notion of time," writes the Messiaen scholar Roger Nichols, "so that we hear the logic of harmony and melody but without feeling ourselves tied to a

mundane beat." In a way, we are asked to revel in chords themselves, even if just one at a time. "It's like eight pages of the sunlight coming into the church," says Kulesha, likening the effect to passages from Proust.

But this sense of timelessness, of the "eternal within the temporal", as Messiaen scholar Paul Griffiths puts it, is often juxtaposed with violent outbursts, flurries of notes, and rhythmic activity. In faster passages, Messiaen's music is rarely predictable: the pulse is continually interrupted and renewed. For Messiaen, rhythmic music meant "music that eschews repetition, bar lines, and equal divisions, that ultimately takes its inspiration from the movements of nature, movements that are free and unequal in length."

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Because of these breakthroughs, Kulesha considers Messiaen "one of the great liberators of rhythm". He briefly toyed with serialist experimentation in Darmstadt in 1949 – so successfully, in fact, that he inadvertently set the likes of Boulez and Stockhausen down the path of total serialism, a movement that came to dominate new music with an iron fist for decades. Messiaen, however, remained steadfast to his own principles, refusing to give up consonance and beauty in music.

"He carried on defiantly, ignoring where everybody seemed to be taking music at the time," observes Forsyth. "He stood apart, apparently swimming against the current. And one has to admire him for it."

A metaphor that cropped up again and again when Messiaen discussed his own music was the beauty of stained glass, which, like "real music", one doesn't need to understand intellectually to appreciate – it is enough to "feel" it.

"Stained glass is one of the most wonderful creations of man," explained Messiaen. "You are overwhelmed. And I think this is the beginning of Paradise, because in Paradise we are overwhelmed. We don't understand God, but we will begin to see Him a little."

For the TSO's New Creations Festival, additional soloists include Peter Serkin and Marc-André Hamelin (piano) and Jean Laurendeau (*ondes Martenot*). Oundjian will conduct *Turangalila*, while the Dutch conductor Reinbert de Leeuw will lead three other works by Messiaen.

The Festival's second theme is the contemporary keyboard concerto – the "keyboard", here, to be understood broadly.

In addition to a piano concerto by Esa-Pekka Salonen and a concerto for piano trio and orchestra by Vancouver's Jeffrey Ryan, under this rubric will also appear concertos for an unusual bunch: the accordion (Forsyth), the organ (Québec's Jacques Hétu), the harpsichord (Philip Glass), and a rare appearance of the *ondes Martenot* in two Messiaen works.

"We try to open the door to the entire world for Toronto," explains Kulesha, describing the Festival's mandate. "We cover a broad spectrum of international content and, aesthetically cover a lot of bases."

Although there is no intended connection between Messiaen and the roster of keyboard concertos (apart from the centrality of the keyboard to Messiaen's work), some of the new works, to a greater or lesser degree, bear his influence.

Forsyth, for instance, proudly identifies with aspects of Messiaen's harmonic language. "Chords, chords, absolutely chords!" exclaims Forsyth. "Those compound dominants and bitonal constructions shot through with consonance have influenced me very strongly. His chords could be complicated but always beautiful sounding."

This approach to harmony appears in the slow second movement of Forsyth's Accordion Concerto. "It's a piece about harmony. A piece about the dominant-seventh chord." Straddling this meditation on a single chord are two contrasting movements: a fiery, virtuosic opener; and a closing dance inspired by the rumba.

Jacques Hétu, who studied with Messiaen in Paris in 1962-3, is likewise attracted to certain elements of Messiaen's harmony, particularly the symmetrical octatonic

where *inspiration* begins



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Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

scale that Messiaen used so abundantly. For Hétu, who considers himself a tonal composer, the attraction of this scale is simple: from it he can derive some of his favourite chords. These chords root his music in tonality even when he sometimes strays off course" by writing atonal melodies. Hétu's form, however, is decidedly classical, evident by some of the movement titles in his Concerto for Organ: the second is a Scherzo; the fifth, a Rondo.

"I treat the organ as a 'second orchestra' that engages the orchestra in a dialogue," he explains. "The two are very powerful and I feature both: in confrontation, simultaneously and in conversation." The concerto is Hétu's special domain: he has written 17.

Thanks to the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the TSO's New Creations Festival is able to attract some of the world's best performers, including Alexander Sevastian (who plays accordion

with Quartetto Gelato) and Olivier Latry (Titular Organist of the Cathédral de Notre-Dame de Paris). The eminent Gryphon Trio will première Ryan's concerto, *Equilateral*, a co-commission of the TSO and the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra.

Two other recent keyboard concertos round off the programme; both will be Canadian premières. The first is the new piano concerto by Esa-Pekka Salonen, Los Angeles Philharmonic Music Director and an equally distinguished composer. One critic has gushed that the concerto "scarcely ever stops for breath as jazz riffs, neoclassical techniques, synthetic folklore, bird calls *à la* Messiaen, and at least one big Rachmaninoff tune ... eagerly clamour for attention." Yefim Bronfman, who premiered the work with the New York Philharmonic last year, will join the TSO as soloist. The other work is by superstar American minimalist Philip Glass: a concerto for harpsichord with Anthony Newman – dubbed "the high priest of Bach" by Wynton Marsalis – as soloist.

The New Creations Festival (April 9-17, 2008) offers a rare opportunity not only to get acquainted with a diversity of new music but also to explore the wide palette of colour available to the family of keyboard instruments. Hammers will *strike* strings and quills will *pluck* them; wind will cause metal reeds and air columns in pipes to *vibrate*. And do not miss the ethereal electronic sound of the *ondes Martenot*, a radio-like beat-frequency oscillator that, in Messiaen's *Turangalila*, has been likened to the voice of a Goddess. ■

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