

ICA MUSIC SECTION
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WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL
and
THE ORGAN MUSIC SOCIETY
present

ORGAN WORKS
BY MESSIAEN

La Banquet Celeste
La Nativite du Seigneur

SIMON PRESTON, organ

WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL
Friday 16th December 1966 at 8.00

OLIVER MESSIAEN, a pupil of Paul Dukas and the teacher of Pierre Boulez, has proved to be the most original voice in French music since the death of Debussy. Born in Avignon in 1908, he is by origin half-Flemish and half-Provençal. He was only a child of eleven when he entered the Paris Conservatoire, where, for many years now, he himself has been a professor. He was appointed organist at the Sainte-Trinité in Paris in 1931, a post which he still holds. In technical writings expounding his music, Messiaen has admitted many influences; among the purely musical are plainsong, Greek and Hindu rhythms and birdsong. This last has been the almost exclusive source of his melodic material in recent years.

It was as a composer of organ music that Messiaen first became known, in this country as well as in France. The first Messiaen performances here were under the aegis of the Organ Music Society from as long as thirty years ago: *Le banquet céleste* (Noëlie Pierront, St. John's, Red Lion Square, 20 October, 1936), *Apparition de l'Eglise éternelle* (André Marchal, St. John's, Red Lion Square, 12 November, 1936, three meditations from *La Nativité du Seigneur* (André Fleury, West London Synagogue, 9 December, 1937).

In June, 1938, Messiaen himself came to London to play two meditations from *La Nativité du Seigneur* at the I.S.C.M. Festival which was held here that year. On the same visit he played the entire work at St. Alban's, Holborn, on June 25. After the War, Messiaen returned to London to repeat *La Nativité du Seigneur* at St. Mark's, North Audley Street on 20 December, 1945.

F.A.

LE BANQUET CELESTE

The Celestial Banquet, composed in 1928 and published in 1934, was Messiaen's first published organ piece. It is a eucharistic meditation on a verse from St. John's Gospel (vi, 56): *He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood dwelleth in me and I in him*, the vision of a true communicant. It contains the essence of three characteristics of Messiaen's general style: slow, sustained movement, rich chromatic harmony and unusual colouring. The piece is a bare two pages of music, twenty-five bars in all, but powerfully expressive. When the pedals enter in a counterpoint of staccato notes on high-pitched stops half-way through the piece, they wreath a chime-like garland of sinuous semiquavers around a repetition of the first half.

LA NATIVITE DU SEIGNEUR

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| i. La Vierge et l'Enfant | vi. Les Anges |
| ii. Les Bergers | vii. Jésus accepte la souffrance |
| iii. Desseins éternels | viii. Les Mages |
| iv. Le Verbe | ix. Dieu parmi nous. |
| v. Les Enfants de Dieu | |

Composed in 1935, and published in the following year, *La Nativité du Seigneur* is prefaced by an explanatory note by Messiaen himself. In this he outlines the theological aims of the cycle of nine meditations. They present five ideas: (1) Our predestination realised by the Incarnation of the Word (iii); (2) God dwelling among us (ix and vii), (3) The three births: the eternal birth of the World, the temporal birth of Christ, and the spiritual birth of Christians (iv and v), (4) the description of a few figures lending particular poetic colour to the Feast of Christmas: the Angels, the Wise Men, the Shepherds (vi, vii and ii); (5) nine pieces in all to honour the maternity of the Blessed Virgin. Messiaen then details some of the instrumental innovations of the cycle: its unconventional use of organ colours and the emancipation of the pedal part from its usual role as a bass line. Finally, Messiaen analyses the musical means by which he has attained his theological ends; the use of several modes derived from the twelve chromatic notes of the octave, but formed of symmetrical groupings of notes so that the mode's possible transpositions are limited. (Thus, for example, the first mode, dear to Debussy but not used by Messiaen, is the whole-tone scale, limited in effect to two possible transpositions: the series beginning on or containing a C, and that on or with a C sharp). Messiaen also exploits irregular rhythms formed by the addition of note-values equal to half the smallest unit, i.e. by increasing the duration of, say, a semiquaver by dotting it. These are the first of those rhythmic experiments justifying Messiaen's view of himself as "compositeur de musique et rythmicien", for he has long insisted that the element separating his style from that of all his precursors is its rhythmic novelty.

The passages in inverted commas which follow the biblical texts are translated from the composer's own notes.

i. The Virgin and the Child: *Conceived of a Virgin, unto us a child is born, for unto us a son is given. Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; behold thy king cometh unto thee; he is just and lowly.* (Isaiah, Zachariah).

System of added notes

"This piece is based on the harmonic use of some chromatic modes, the strange colour of which derives from the limited number of possible transpositions: 2, 3, 4 and 6, according to the mode."

This "strange colour" is considerably heightened by the unusual registration. In the middle section of the piece, for example, the manual parts twine round the bell-like *ostinato* of the pedal part which sounds in the treble. The highest part is an adaptation of the plainsong *Puer natus*.

ii. The Shepherds: *Having seen the child lying in the manger, the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God.* (St. Luke).

"First, the holy light about the manger. After a few notes on the flute, the shepherds withdraw, piping a kind of carol with a curious rhythm."

iii. Eternal purposes: *God, in his love, has predestinated us into the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself, to the praise of the glory of His grace.* (Ephesians).

"The same modes as in the first piece. A simple phrase, full of mystery and tenderness."

The hovering melody, sustained conjunct harmonies and extremely slow tempo are highly characteristic of Messiaen's style.

iv. The Word: *The Lord hath said unto me, Thou art my Son. In His bosom, before the dawn existed, He begat me. I am the image of the goodness of God, I am the Word of life, that which was from the beginning.* (Psalms 2 and 109, Book of Wisdom, I John).

"The first part of the piece concerns the eternal generation of the Word. The *fortissimo* pedal expresses this terrible travail. In the second section, the divine utterance is heard, the Word speaks. This is a long solo for *cornet*, the form of which is allied to the Hindu *ragas*, the sequences and graduals of plainsong, and to the Bach chorale-preludes with melodic figuration."

v. God's Children: *But as many as received Him (the Word), to them gave He power to become the sons of God. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying Abba, Father.* (St. John, Galatians).

"A joyous fanfare representing spiritual birth is followed by a sad but confident lull evoking the tender call of children to their Heavenly Father."

The piece is in two sections. The "fanfare" consists of a surging *crescendo* over the gradual ascent of an octave in the pedals. Its climax subsides into a kind of epilogue—eleven characteristically slow bars, in striking contrast to the first section, with a cadence that is one of Messiaen's finest inspirations.

vi. The Angels: *A multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest.* (St. Luke).

"A kind of paradisiac dance. The exultation of disembodied spirits. The piece is based on rhythms immediately preceded or followed by their augmentation and increased by the value of a dot."

With a fascinating rhythmic twist, these angels ascend, descend and finally spin off the shrill end of the keyboard to dance their heavenly joy in more distant spheres.

vii. Jesus accepts sorrow: *Wherefore when He cometh into the world, He saith unto His Father, Sacrifice and offering Thou wouldst not, but a body hast Thou prepared me. Lo, I come.* (Hebrews).

"Three ideas are expressed: the first represents divine justice falling both on the sin and the Son, the second represents the lowly reply of the Son in His mother's womb, the third represents the sufferings of the Passion. In the last bars the acceptance of the divine victim rises to the skies."

viii. The Wise Men: *The Wise Men departed, and the star went before them.* (St. Matthew).

"A night piece. The swaying procession of a caravan. The Wise Men peacefully approach, illumined by grace. The rhythmic complexity and modal charm of the first and sixth pieces are again in evidence. The melodic line is entrusted to the pedals on stops of four foot pitch and mixtures."

ix. God among us: (Words of the Communicant, the Virgin, and the entire Church): *He that made me rested in my tabernacle. And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.* (Ecclesiasticus, St. John, St. Luke).

"Three themes are briefly presented in the opening bars. The first, a formidable descent from heaven to earth. The second, a gentle expression of spiritual union with Christ. The third, the soul's exultation. Development of the second and third themes ensues. The first theme, now representing the Incarnation, bursts like a clap of thunder. Treated as a *basso ostinato* it engenders a kind of joyful and vigorous toccata."