

"Arts Talk"

RTHK Radio 4

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During the past week, a great French composer died: Olivier Messiaen, in his 84th year. He was not, perhaps, in the Anglo-Saxon world, all that well known ---- a couple of his organ pieces have been played here from time to time, and his most massive orchestral piece, the 'Turangalila Symphony' last year under the baton of Simon Rattle. My own introduction to his music was through his meditative and atmospheric contemplation on the 'Ascension of Christ', a 4-movement work originally written for orchestra in (I've just noticed in checking it) my own birth-year, and then re-written for organ the following year. I also have memories of attending a series of recitals of his music on the organ of Westminster Cathedral in London, and experiencing there the literally physical feel of low-frequency notes on the largest pipes in that cavernous building ---- thrilling, and not a little scary too, though I must admit I've forgotten which piece that was. But it was one that had a religious dedication or inspiration, like most of Messiaen's music. And that's why I found it curious that in the longish paragraph about him that appeared in the paper here following his death, no mention at all was made of his deep religious convictions and commitment ---- though when they then listed his most well-known works, 7 of the 9 titles mentioned have very specific Christian references. I wonder was that omission a local editor's one, or also a gap in the knowledge or appreciation of the international wire-service that carried the news. I have my suspicions of prejudice at play. True, Messiaen did much research on bird-song and acoustics, and used those sounds in his music: he also had a deep interest in Asian, especially Balinese, music ---- and that too is much more religiously-oriented than the average western agnostic is willing to recognise. His faith and his attachment to the worship-forms of the Catholic church were much more important to Messiaen than the press-account of his death might suggest. His religious mysticism, after all, was the inspiration for so much of his work, a mysticism that drew largely but not exclusively from Catholic theology.

So, if you discount the whole philosophical and religious environment in which he worked, how do you relate his music with the often mystical titles he gave his works? I remember once looking at the sleeve-notes of an LP of Messiaen's organ music, and finding translations of the titles that were so outrageous that the writer evidently couldn't have had much of a clue about the music he was writing about: "the gods are among us" (a small 'g', and in the plural) for "Dieu parmi nous": and "the wind of the ghost" for "Le vent de l'Esprit" (another record sleeve called it 'the wind of the mind'). Even the Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music doesn't correctly translate "Les corps glorieux", which is a 7-part work for organ: the writer wisely leaves the part-titles in their original French. But then, what does it mean that a piece of 'pure music' (so to speak) has a title like "Meditation on the mystery of the Holy Trinity"? And when such titles evidently meant much to the composer, what does this say about listening to or understanding his music? For it's not as if there was a verbal text, as in a choral piece: Messiaen indeed did write vocal and choral music also, and where his texts were clearly religious ones, I suppose they'd be characterised as "sacred music". But he does bring up the question of religion in music ---- and I mean "religion" here in its widest connotation of the ties and links between humanity and the spirit world, the relationship of the human to the 'superhuman' or the divine (or whatever other names try to express the powers beyond our world), and the proper connection between the human and the rest of creation around us, and of which we're part. Messiaen has reminded us of music's original close links with religion, and that there is still a religious dimension to the making of music, this human art that

at its best expresses something in us that's not merely bound by our own humanness.

There is an important sense, then, in which all music partakes of the sacred. But this gets largely obscured by our modern fashion of labelling certain music as "sacred music" ---- which turns out to be basically vocal or choral music which uses a text thought of or accepted as 'sacred', holy, religious: and unfortunately, not all musical settings of inspired words make good or inspired music, even if it is labelled 'sacred'. The term is a handy label, I suppose, for listing at least some music whose home is the concert hall rather than a place of worship. Personally I prefer to use the term "religious" music, or "spiritual" music, whether it's for church or theatre. By the way, the Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music I mentioned a minute ago has a little gem of a story about a 19th century English choral society which called itself the 'Sacred Harmonic Society'. It used to give concerts for many years at Exeter Hall, until the Hall was bought by the YMCA, who then evicted the Sacred Harmonic Society because they objected to, quote, "oratorios for amusement". Well, probably the most famous oratorio of them all is Handel's 'Messiah', first performed 250 years ago last month: and not surprisingly yet again presented here for the occasion. And 'Messiah' just happens to be the next entry after Messiaen in my dictionary. As elsewhere, probably many of the amateur singers who take part in such presentations of 'sacred music' are also regular church-goers or members of church choirs. There is quite a lot of talent around, though it's also very scattered. A singing friend remarked the other day that he'd like to be able to abolish and ban most of the choirs and choruses in Hong Kong, in order to make possible the forming of big enough choirs to be able adequately to tackle some of the really large-scale works for chorus and orchestra. It was quite a hassle trying to assemble sufficient forces to sing Mahler's 2nd Symphony with the Boston Symphony Orchestra for one of the inaugural concerts of the Cultural Centre in 1989. But what an experience that was! A fellow-singer commented to me that that was music you could sing your heart out with: and that was because of the religious nature of the text.

But why all the 'Requiems' that we're hearing now? Faure's and Mozart's and Rutter's: and at least one of those by two entirely separate choirs? Somebody said to me the other day, why does sacred music have to be so gloomy, so many 'Requiems': isn't there anything more joyful, cheerful? Well of course there is, lots of it, old and new, and in all kinds of styles. But I did begin to wonder about Requiems: and on reflection, it is curious how many new ones there are: and how much they are mostly not in the mainstream of musical settings for the words of Christian ritual prayer and service for the dead, as would seem to be indicated by the very word "requiem", the first word in the liturgical text for the service for the dead. They're not really for church use at all, but for concert performance. Benjamin Britten's "War Requiem" uses the anti-war poems of Wilfred Owen interspersed with some of the traditional Latin text: Geoffrey Burgon and John Rutter use other poems, and psalms like the most familiar 'The Lord's my Shepherd', which is of course very appropriate. But then you also have the powerful 1962 'Requiem' of Dmitry Kabalevsky, a Russian composer and communist party member: it's not religious at all, in the sense of setting sacred texts: its text are patriotic poems glorifying the heroes of the revolution and mourning the children who lost their lives in the conflict. Certainly not liturgical music: but sacred? religious? spiritual? Then there's the Brahms Requiem which uses texts from Luther's German bible; and Delius' which is a setting of Nietzsche; Berlioz and Dvorak, among others, wrote Requiems which have their powerful moments too. More recently, Lloyd Webber's 'Requiem' does keep closer to the traditional texts, but elicited some horrified comments from at least one commentator on the TV premiere performance, complaining about forcing innocent young boys to sing about hell-fire and damnation, in the words of the 'Dies Irae'. Verdi's and Mozart's Requiems both make high drama of that medieval poem, 'Dies Irae', Day of Wrath, which found its way into the official texts of the Mass for the dead. It is dramatic, and quite lugubrious, very medieval, and presents a particular

theology, which isn't the only view. Interestingly, composers who wrote for liturgical use, like Faure, Durufle and Inghelbrecht, didn't set the 'Dies Irae' in their Requiems. It really is a pity when (as sometimes happens) the writers of CD booklets, record sleeves and concert programme notes don't seem to know what their composers would have understood or taken for granted in their writing of a Requiem, or indeed many other religious works as well. The scholarship, research and information is available but there are so many misconceptions and hang-ups about religion; and radio stations are no exception.

I wonder what kind of a funeral Messiaen will have had: the music, I guess, might most likely have been his own. But he didn't ever write a Requiem (as far as I know), and I'd be surprised to hear if he'd even ever tried ---- it was not his style, and more importantly not his spirituality. His religious vision was more mystical, and what he did write was music that he gave transcendent titles to: like "Et expecto resurrectionem" ('I look forward to the resurrection of the dead'), "The Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ", "Visions of the 'Amen'", "Colours of the Heavenly City", "Quartet for the end of time". I doubt if he'll ever make it into the repertoirs of the singers of oratorios, be they sung for amusement or more solemn purposes, but his music is arguably much more deeply religious than much of what gets labelled 'sacred music'. For it takes in play and joy and birdsong and chant, the wholeness of things, to make something beautiful which is itself and act of praise to the Creator of all.

A wise old Zen master once wrote: 'You must learn to understand the 'Ah!' of things' ---- the sense of wonder and awe and being moved, taken out of yourself in a kind of ecstasy by the recognition of transcendent beauty or goodness, or art, or skill, where "things" usually familiar suddenly open out to link you with other worlds, in an experience that is ultimately religious. To understand the 'Ah' of things (perhaps the Zen master actually used the Cantonese 'wa', or today would say 'wow'!) ---- recognitions that move you to shout, applaud, smile, laugh, cry. I remember an architect saying that the test of a successful church as a church building was how young children reacted on entering it, whether they spontaneously were quiet and looked wonderingly around. There must surely be parallel kinds of tests for all the best and most human of human arts and skills, whether visual arts or performing arts or plastic arts, or any of the categories we so like to divide things up into. And the best is what endures somehow, what can continue to move not just once or twice but as often as people glimpse the 'Ah' of it. Music of course is difficult, because it needs instruments and performers as well as composers ---- and ears to listen to it. Olivier Messiaen's music does not appeal to everyone, of course (which composer's does?): but if you're prepared to pay attention to him, he'll reveal some of the "ah" of things, and let you see a different vision of the sacred, the religious, the spiritual in music.