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| Messiaen, Olivier (1908-1992) |
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| Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) was one of the foremost composers of the twentieth century, with a distinctive compositional style of great emotional intensity. His style drew on a diverse array of rhythmic, harmonic, timbral, and formal influences that included the songs of birds, and expressed a deeply held Catholic faith. Messiaen was influential as a teacher, and foresaw the concept of total serialism taken up by his pupils Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Major works throughout his sixty-year career include *La Nativité du Seigneur* (1935) the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* [*Quartet for the End of Time*] (1941), *Catalogue d’oiseaux* (1958), *Couleurs de la Cité céleste* (1963), *Des Canyons aux étoiles* (1974), and *St François d’Assise* (1983). |
| File: image9eea1e.jpg@43ef5548.1c54406c  Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) was one of the foremost composers of the twentieth century, with a distinctive compositional style of great emotional intensity. His style drew on a diverse array of rhythmic, harmonic, timbral, and formal influences that included the songs of birds, and expressed a deeply held Catholic faith. Messiaen was influential as a teacher, and foresaw the concept of total serialism that was taken up by his pupils Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Major works throughout his sixty-year career include *La Nativité du Seigneur* (1935) the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* [*Quartet for the End of Time*] (1941), *Catalogue d’oiseaux* (1958), *Couleurs de la Cité céleste* (1963), *Des Canyons aux étoiles* (1974), and *St François d’Assise* (1983). In his treatises, *Technique de mon langage musical* (1944) and *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d’ornithologie* (1994-2002), he set out his musical inspirations and processes in considerable detail.  Messiaen was born in Avignon, France, in 1908. His earliest extant compositions, dating from the late 1920s and early 1930s, are marked by a seriousness of approach and emotional sincerity that contrasts with the bright levity of music of that time and, to a lesser extent, with the perceived intellectualism of the Second Viennese School. When Messiaen co-founded a ‘friendly group’ of young composers in 1936, it was to underline a ‘common desire to be satisfied with nothing less than sincerity, generosity and artistic good faith’ (Simeone 15).  File: image9f4611.gif@e769dccb.8be44c8b  Early in his compositional life, Messiaen identified a number of diverse musical sources that he fused into a distinctive compositional style. These included an approach to pitch organisation that drew on the practices of Rimsky-Korsakov, early Stravinsky and, above all, Debussy, to create an allusive harmonic world in which straightforward added-sixth chords could co-exist with subtle shifts in tonality; and an approach to rhythm that embraced ancient Greek meters and the rhythms of the Indian sub-continent that evolved into a highly sophisticated rhythmic language.Messiaen was, then, an eclectic who saw no tension between gathering a wide range of resources and his deeply held sincerity of expression.  Shortly after completing his studies at the Paris Conservatoire, Messiaen became organist at the Church of the Holy Trinity in Paris, a post he held until his death in 1992. The organ, which he had been encouraged to take up in his later years at the Conservatoire on account of a great skill in improvisation, became an important source of inspiration, especially in timbral terms. The organ’s ability to create unusual groups of timbres, often deployed in alternation, may be seen reflected in Messiaen’s wider music, in its capacity to generate an implacable tone.  File: image809718.jpg@a13fa45e.f5034969  The notion of éblouissement (dazzlement) is an example of how Messiaen’s aesthetic is intimately connected with his distinctive view of the Catholic faith, which has mystical and surreal elements. In dazzling the listener with extremes of volume, duration, and timbre, Messiaen sought to represent the truths of his faith; the result for the listener is often overwhelming — a transcendent experience that goes beyond specific belief systems. This power helps to explain the considerable popularity of his music among a wide listening audience.  In 1939, Messiaen joined the French army as a medical orderly and was captured and imprisoned. During his captivity in Stalag VIIIA in Görlitz, Silesia, he completed the *Quartet for the End of Time*, which was performed in the camp on 15 January 1941, before an audience of fellow prisoners. Although there are a number of myths associated with this performance, it rightly stands as one of the most famous premières of the twentieth century.  File: imageb49844.gif@ee21015f.f35d4709  Upon repatriation, Messiaen began teaching analysis at the Paris Conservatoire. Although this was not his first experience teaching, it was significant in bringing him into contact with the young Pierre Boulez, and Yvonne Loriod, a young pianist who would later become his second wife, and whose pianistic brilliance would inspire him throughout his life. Around this time, he published his first treatise: *The Technique of My Musical Language*.  After a series of high profile works in the 1940s came a phase of experimentation, culminating in the *Quatre Études de rythme* (completed 1950), which is the first known attempt to serialise all elements of music. It is now known from Messiaen’s diaries that he had been considering expanding the serial principle from pitch to other elements of music as early as 1945. Although this experimental phase was important historically, because it pointed the way to the total serialism of the 1950s, it was, for Messiaen, only of passing interest. From 1952 onwards, he became increasingly interested in the songs of birds, writing firstly *Réveil des oiseaux* (completed 1953) then *Catalogue of the Birds*. Although Messiaen’s birds sing according to his aesthetic parameters, many are quite accurately drawn from life, whether directly (as Messiaen liked initially to claim), or from his own or commercial field recordings.  In the final phase of his compositional career, Messiaen synthesized the various elements of his style in a series of enormous landmark works — *La Transfiguration de Nôtre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (1969), *Des Canyons aux Etoiles* and *St François d’Assise*. Messiaen’s legacy extends to the many significant musicians he taught in his long teaching career, who have become important composers — such as Tristan Murail, Gilles Tremblay, and François-Bernard Mâche. Among composers of later generations, Messiaen is revered for his unerring sincerity of expression and the concealed subtlety of his musical structures. Perhaps most significant, however, is his on going popularity with audiences, especially in Europe, America, and Japan, who are moved by the intense experience of his music. Selected List of Works:Opera *Saint François d’Assise: Scènes franciscaines* (1983) Orchestral *L’Ascension: Quatre Méditations symphoniques pour orchestra* (1932)  *Turangalîla-symphonie* (1948)  *Réveil des oiseaux* (1953)  *Chronochromie* (1960)  *Couleurs de la Cité celeste* (1963)  *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* (1964)  *Des Canyons aux étoiles* (1974)  *Eclairs sur l’Au-Delà* (1992) Chamber Music *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (1941) Organ *Le Banquet céleste* (1928)  *La Nativité du Seigneur: Neuf médiations pour orgue* (1935)  *Les Corps glorieux: Sept Visions brèves de la Vie des Russicités pour orgue* (1939)  *Messe de la Pentecôte* (1950)  *Livre d’orgue* (1951)  *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (1969)  *Livre du Saint Sacrement* (1984) **Piano** (solo and duo) *Préludes* (1929)  *Visions de l’Amen*; two pianos(1943)  *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus* (1944)  *Quatre Etudes de rythme* (1950)  *Catalogue d’oiseaux* (1958) Vocal *Poemes pour Mi*, soprano and piano or orchestra.(1937)  *Chants de Terre et de Ciel*, soprano and piano.(1938)  *Trois Petites Liturgies de la Présence Divine*, piano solo, ondes martenot solo, celesta, vibraphone, percussion and strings.(1944)  *Harawi: Chant d’Amour et de Mort*, soprano and piano.(1945)  *La Transfiguration de Nôtre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ*, choir, instrumental soloists and orchestra. (1969) Writings and interviews *Technique de mon langage musical* (1944)  *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d’ornithologie* (1994-2002) |
| Further reading:  (Benitez)  (Broad)  (Hill)  (Hill and Simeone, Messiaen)  (Boivin)  (Dingle)  (Johnson)  (Messiaen)  (Rischin)  (Simeone) |