

Listening to Messiaen: Recommended recordings

by [David A. Hoekema](#) in the [December 30, 2008](#) issue

Where might a new listener begin? On several recordings still in the catalog the composer himself performs or supervises a performance, including a remarkable DVD combining his own organ improvisations with a performance of the *Quartet for the End of Time* (Image Entertainment 6305394776). A documentary titled *The Crystal Liturgy* (Juxtaposition B000WPJ6O4) gathers archival material and musical excerpts into a wide-ranging musical biography.

Several of Messiaen's own performances have been reissued on CD, but other interpreters sometimes bring more life and greater clarity to these works than did their creator. The Tashi ensemble was formed to play the *Quartet*, and its influential recording is available on an RCA budget reissue (B000003ERU). Jennifer Bate has recorded a fine six-disk set of the organ works (Regis Records B0000V86LE); her recording of *La Nativité du Seigneur*, available separately (Unicorn B000001PCF), was described by the composer as "perfect." Several of these discs are expensive imports, but the budget label Naxos has an extensive catalog of works by Messiaen, many of them first-rate in both performance and sonic quality (*Vingt regards*, B0000013Z2; *Turangalîla Symphony*, B00004WJVS; *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, B00000149Q).

Some Web sites offer MP3 downloads free or for a small charge. *La Nativité* can be purchased from www.mp3fiesta.com. (Search under composer name or work title, not by category, since this great organ work is classified as "jazz.") Other works can be found, some as free full-length samples, on the Messiaen pages at www.last.fm. A live recording of the *Quartet* is available free at the Bloomingdale School of Music's Internet Concert Project, www.bsmny.org/icp.