

Visions of amen: Olivier Messiaen's transcendent music

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

“My faith is the grand drama of my life. I’m a believer, so I sing words of God to those who have no faith.”

—Olivier Messiaen

Vast as the heavens are that surround us, we seldom lift our gaze beyond the narrow boundaries of daily tasks. We know we were made only a little lower than the angels, yet we stumble along from hour to hour as if life’s highest purpose were punching a time clock and watching a favorite show. Like Prufrock, we measure out our lives in coffee spoons.

And yet from time to time the scales fall from our eyes and glimpses of transcendence steal upon us, unbidden and unexpected. We see through a painting to a deeper level of spiritual illumination; or an outstanding musical performer or stage actor carries us beyond the moment to reveal something of our true nature and destiny. Suddenly we find ourselves caught up in a higher mode of seeing and hearing, one that engages us completely and in ways we cannot articulate.

December 2008 marks the centenary of the birth of a composer who saw, perhaps more clearly than any of his contemporaries, how thin the veil is that separates us from the transcendent. In a rich body of work dating from the 1920s until his death in 1992, Olivier Messiaen followed a path that puzzled traditionalists as well as the avant-garde of his day. Influenced by Claude Debussy and by French organ masters such as Charles-Marie Widor and Louis Vierne, Messiaen would paint a musical scene with delicate tonal pastels, then pile on layer after layer of musical impasto. His music could be intensely intellectual, like that of his contemporaries in the serialist movement. But while others were replacing melodies with rigorously plotted tone rows, he was enlisting nonhuman collaborators. He filled 200 notebooks with meticulous transcriptions of birdsong and used these melodies to brighten nearly everything he wrote. In his compositions for piano, organ, voice and orchestra, he

sought to direct attention beyond the realm of what can be experienced with the senses to that which lies beyond, beneath and above. For Messiaen, a devout Roman Catholic, music was a window through which a higher realm becomes visible.

After studying music at the Paris Conservatory as a child, Messiaen was appointed organist at the Church of the Holy Trinity in Paris at the age of 22. He retained the post for six decades. On the 82-rank Cavaillé-Coll organ there, whether performing his own compositions or improvising on hymn tunes and musical motifs, he extended the organ's musical possibilities in ways that others had never attempted or even imagined.

Messiaen served as a medical auxiliary in the French army during World War II, and he was captured at Verdun and held in a prison camp on what is now the German-Polish border. There he wrote one of his best-known compositions, *Quartet for the End of Time*, early in 1941. After his release, he was appointed to the faculty of the conservatory where he had studied, and he continued to teach there for 35 years. His students included Pierre Boulez, Iannis Xenakis and Karlheinz Stockhausen.

The later works of these three musical pioneers bear little resemblance to their teacher's except in renouncing conventional tonality and structure. For the composers of the 20th-century avant-garde, music was about music itself, or about the inner workings of the human psyche. For Messiaen, however, music was a way of reaching beyond oneself. Even as he was attending to the sounds of nature, he was also attuned to the irruptions of what lies beyond, and much of his music is infused with a deeply mystical spirituality. Biographer Paul Griffiths shares Messiaen's summary of his vocation:

The first idea that I have wanted to express . . . is the existence of the truths of the Catholic faith. . . . That is the first aspect of my work, the most noble, doubtless the most useful, the most valuable, the only one, perhaps, that I will not regret at the hour of my death.

Messiaen believed that the realm of spirit, usually hidden from our sight, could be made manifest in musical form. Music was a means by which the dazzling light in which the Creator dwells can dispel the darkness of our souls.

Consider one of Messiaen's early works for organ, *La Nativité du Seigneur* (The Nativity of the Savior, 1935). The titles of the nine meditations for organ that comprise this hour-long suite refer alternately to the major figures in the Gospel

stories—virgin and child, shepherds, angels and magi—and to theological motifs. *Le Verbe* (The Word) evokes the explosive power of creation with its opening swirl of musical fireworks, while *Jésus accepte la souffrance* (Jesus Accepts His Suffering) conveys a sense of strength in affliction through gently changing harmonies, followed by a refrain of massed chords over a bass ostinato in the raspy voice of the pedal reeds.

Messiaen describes *Desseins éternels* (Eternal Designs) as a musical exploration of “our predestination realized through the incarnation of the Word.” (Yes, this is a Catholic, not a Calvinist, composer.) Here complex and repetitive harmonies unhinge ordinary time and suggest that the key to the mysteries of time lies somewhere between our linear experience of it and the eternity in which God dwells.

There is a risk of reading too much into what is, after all, only a succession of sounds made by air passing through pipes. Questions of musical meaning are always difficult to answer with confidence, and Messiaen’s compositions for organ employ a wholly original language, extending even to his specifications for registration, that makes interpretation especially challenging. But there are many clues that this is a language of transcendence, not just of melody and harmony.

The unusual musical vocabulary also pervades Messiaen’s many compositions for solo and duo piano. These began in his student days (he entered the conservatory as a pianist and only later took up the organ), and range from concise études to sprawling compendia. In the *Catalogue d’oiseaux* (Catalog of Birds), based on those 200 notebooks, 19 movements depicting robins, thrushes, owls and buzzards fill nearly three hours.

An earlier work for two pianos, *Visions de l’Amen* (Visions of Amen, 1943), interweaves the voices of birds with more conventionally structured melodies, and passages of great agitation and energy alternate with craggy outcroppings of jarring dissonance. Each movement bears a theological title: “Amen of the Creation,” “Amen of the Stars,” “Amen of the Agony of Jesus.” Some are brief and almost brutal, others lyrical and meditative. At the center is an extended meditation on the “Amen of Desire,” in which repeated musical phrases gain profound emotional resonance by suggesting human experiences of desire and fulfillment. A quiet chiming pattern of chords, just one step removed from utter silence, opens and closes this ten-minute movement, framing a passionate outburst in which one piano’s soaring lines are answered by the other’s insistent rhythmic patterns.

A similar musical vocabulary, for one rather than two pianos and on a more expansive scale, was employed a year later in Messiaen's best-known work for solo piano, *Vingt régards sur l'enfant Jésus* (Twenty Views of the Infant Jesus). Either of these piano works offers a good starting point for exploring Messiaen's music. Less accessible, and to my ear less successful, are his works for orchestra, such as the "Turangalîla Symphony" or *Des canyons aux étoiles* (From the Canyons to the Stars). Messiaen often augmented the orchestra with instruments such as his beloved "ondes Martenot," an electronic instrument in whose continuously variable pitch he heard an air of mystery. Unfortunately, what listeners are more likely to hear is "Here come the space aliens!"

The *Quartet for the End of Time* remains one of Messiaen's most prized and most enduring masterpieces. Indulgent guards in the German prison camp provided pens and manuscript paper, and fellow inmates played clarinet, violin and cello. The work was first performed for 400 prisoners and guards in a cold hall with inferior instruments, but Messiaen wrote later that he never enjoyed "such rapt attention and comprehension" from any other audience.

Many excellent recordings of the quartet are available, but the piece is immeasurably more effective in live performances, of which there have been many in this anniversary year. This is a quartet that departs in every way from conventional expectations, beginning with its unusual combination of instruments. Of its eight movements, only four employ the entire quartet. In the relentlessly driving *Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes* (Dance of Fury, for the Seven Trumpets), they play in unison throughout. One movement, the *Abîme des oiseaux* (Abyss of the Birds), is a soliloquy for clarinet that calls on the player to draw the most delicate tones out of utter silence and to span the depths and heights of the instrument's range in a collage of birdsongs and melodic fragments.

The inspiration for the quartet was drawn from a scriptural passage in which an angel whose face is like the sun and whose feet are like pillars of fire proclaims "that there will be no more time" (Rev. 10:6). The second movement evokes the grandeur of this apocalyptic messenger, and the seventh, titled *Fouilles d'arcs-en-ciel* (Jumble of Rainbows), fills the air with a wash of delicate chordal tints that evoke the angel's dazzling brightness.

Messiaen's mystical reading of the text suggests that music can somehow transcend time itself. Physically and logically this is impossible, and yet here it becomes a

possibility: an angel's trumpet announces not just the fullness of time, but its transfiguration into eternity. In two movements described as hymns of praise to eternity and to the immortality of Jesus, the cello and violin in turn reflect in expansive phrases on the Word that was present at the creation and came to dwell among us at a moment in human history. Melodies of intense tenderness stand out against the quietly meditative chords of the piano. The paradox of the incarnation—infinite power revealed in weakness, eternity made manifest in time—is given a transfixing musical expression.

Few composers have worked as systematically as Messiaen did in this and other works, or with such originality, to create a language of musical theology. For those not yet familiar with his music, there is no better time than this centennial occasion to undertake some elementary lessons in that language. Perhaps, as the composer hoped, it will create openings in the spiritual firmament through which we may catch glimpses of the larger world that enfolds us.