

LOUIS THIRY

VERSET POUR LA FÊTE DE LA DÉDICACE (1960)

After the mid 1930s Messiaen's organ works were all conceived on a grand scale, with just one exception, the *Verset*, which was commissioned in 1960 as a test piece for the students of the Paris Conservatoire; in spite of its mundane origin, it is vintage Messiaen, prefiguring the second of the *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* in its alternation of plainsong (the 'Alleluia de la Dédicace') and birdsong (the singing of the song thrush) – music of the church and music of the forest. Like the different panels of a stained-glass window, it falls into six well-defined sections: plainsong (subdivided into three short sections with different registrations) – birdsong – plainsong – crescendo, with some typical highly coloured chords – birdsong – coda. The chant, its melody strangely distorted, as if seen through a broken mirror, and the birdsong are both symbols of joy, and the music unfolds in an "atmosphere of gentle confidence" ending pianissimo "in a gentle vocalise of ecstasy and consolation".

LE BANQUET CÉLESTE (1926-8)

Originally composed for orchestra and then transcribed for organ, Messiaen's first published work dates from his student years, but already speaks with a unique personal voice. The very slow tempo, the hypnotic sense of timelessness, the individual harmonic mode, and the piquant garland of high-pitched pedal notes that decorates the second verse "like drops of water" are all fully characteristic of his later work. Intended for the Feast of Corpus Christi (*Le fête du Saint Sacrement*), *Le Banquet* became the model for a distinctive style of ecstatic Eucharistic music that ran like a golden thread throughout Messiaen's long career, from *O sacrum convivium!* to the *Messe de la Pentecôte* and the final *Livre du Saint Sacrement*.

LES CORPS GLORIEUX (1939)

This set of seven 'visions' was the last, and in the composer's opinion the best, of his three great organ works of the 1930s. In comparison with *L'Ascension* and *La Nativité* its relative neglect is perhaps largely due to the esoteric nature of the subject matter, which almost defies translation ('The Bodies in Glory' is perhaps more satisfactory than 'The Glorious Bodies'). But from a musical point of view, Messiaen's own judgment was certainly correct; his modal and rhythmic techniques are here more successfully integrated than ever before, and the whole work is far more consistent, and thus more powerful, than either of the earlier cycles.

Subtitled 'Seven short visions of the life of the resurrected', *Les corps glorieux* is inspired by St Paul's great essay on life after death in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15: 'How are the dead raised up, and with what body do they come?...' The whole work is symmetrically designed around a monumental central movement depicting the glorious victory of the risen Christ over the powers of darkness, with three shorter pieces on each side, illustrating aspects and qualities of eternal life, and connected by various symmetrical relationships (first and seventh pieces inspired by plainsong, third and fifth sharing a common Hindu theme, and so on).

1 Subtilité des corps glorieux

'Sown a natural body, they are raised a spiritual body... They are pure as the angels of God in heaven.' "The bodies in glory are ethereal; no longer constrained by physical necessities like sleep and hunger, they are spiritualised and perfectly pure." The music of this magical opening vision is "a monody without accompaniment, alternating luminous cornet registrations of different intensity". Plainchant and Greek rhythms inspire the structure of the singing melodic lines, with some phrases derived from the *Salve Regina*, "in homage to the Holy Virgin, Queen of Heaven".

2 Les eaux de la Grâce

'The Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters.'

The life after death is only made possible by "confirmation in grace", and this vision vividly describes the "endless flowing of the symbolic river of grace that runs through the heavenly city". Three of Messiaen's harmonic modes are superimposed in three independent strands – a chordal theme for the right hand and flowing ostinati for left hand and pedal; combined with the hollow registration of the left-hand ostinato, rich in bizarre harmonics, this "polymodality" gives the music "a strange liquid character".

3 L'Ange aux parfums

'And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand.' The life of the resurrected ones is above all a life of contemplation and prayer, which is symbolised by incense in this quotation from the Book of Revelation. Two musical ideas contribute to the strong atmosphere of this dreamlike vision; the first is an angular melodic theme derived from a Hindu *raga*, and the second is a complex chordal episode superimposing three different modes and three different Hindu rhythms. The *raga* is varied on the pedals beneath soft repeated string chords, and then developed into a murmur of rapid figuration evoking the curls and spirals of smoke rising from the angel's hand; after a reprise of the episode, the murmur returns to bring the vision to a close.

4 Combat de la Mort et de la Vie

'Death and Life have engaged in a stupefying combat; the Creator of Life, having died, now lives and reigns...' The monumental central vision is often played alone, for it is one of Messiaen's most dramatic and compelling pieces. The terrifying first section illustrates the battle, the sufferings and cries of the Passion of Christ, with a theme of Death snarling on the reeds and thundering out beneath a tumult of discords, and the second section illustrates the victory; the theme of Death is miraculously transformed into a theme of Eternal Life, singing out sweetly, endlessly, "in the radiant peace of divine love".

5 Force et agilité des corps glorieux

'Sown in weakness, they are raised in power.' "Vehement and solid, agile and strong: such are the resurrected ones," writes Messiaen. The basic theme, with its persistent repeated notes, is the same *raga* that inspired 'L'Ange aux parfums', and it is developed as a powerful monody, with both hands playing together

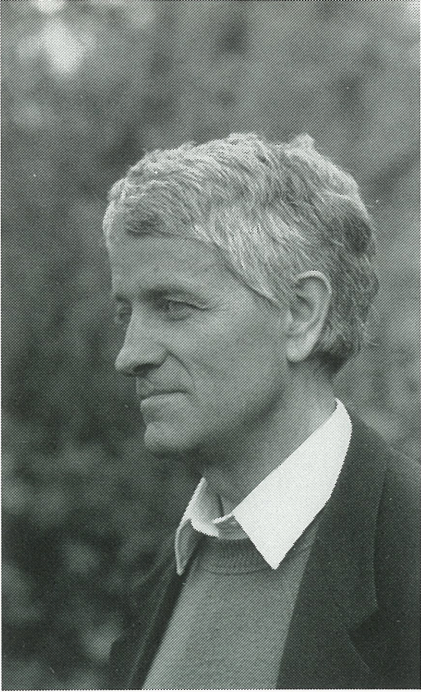
LOUIS THIRY

Louis Thiry was born at Fléville, near Nancy, France, in 1935. He was a student at the Nancy Conservatory and won first prize for organ in 1952; this was followed by a period of study under André Marchal in Paris. In 1972 he became a professor at the Conservatoire National de Région in Rouen. Louis Thiry divides his time between teaching, radio broadcasts and recitals all over the world. He has made many CDs, including much of Messiaen's organ music recorded with the Calliope record company. "Louis Thiry is an extraordinary organist. Accomplished virtuoso, total musician... All those who hear and all those who understand Louis Thiry won't be able to help but admire him." Olivier Messiaen

in octaves. The music bounds, leaps and flies, with darting semiquavers expressing "impetuosity and rapidity of movement", and repeated quaver figures expressing "the simple and joyous strength that carries all before it". As in the following piece, Greek rhythmic figures play a vital part in the liberating effect of the whole.

6 Joie et clarté des corps glorieux

'Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their father.' "Clarity, or glory, is the main quality of the bodies of the resurrected; they each have their own special kind of illumination, as St Paul expresses symbolically when he says 'One star differeth from another



in glory'." Vibrant rhythmic ostinati and the flights of an improvisatory, jazzy Trumpet solo dominate this wild, joyful vision; its heady progress is interrupted by two soft, tender interludes, before the music flies off the top of the keyboard in an impetuous final flourish. The bizarre registrations, rich in colourful harmonics, evoke the brilliant lights of the disembodied spirits, "shot through with glints of gold and flame".

7 Le mystère de la Sainte Trinité

"The bodies in glory contemplate and finally understand the greatest mystery of our faith, the God in Three Persons..." Number symbolism was as important to Messiaen as it was to Bach; limitations of space have prohibited any reference to it elsewhere in these notes, but here it cannot be avoided, for every element of this elusive, other-worldly final vision – melodic structure, rhythmic structure, texture – is built around the figure three. It is of course a trio, and the lower and upper voices, which are atonal, represent the Father and the Holy Spirit. The middle voice, on an 8-foot Flute, represents the Son; it is modal and its melody is derived from a Gregorian 'Kyrie'. "The whole piece is a distant and confused pianissimo, from which only the middle voice emerges – for only the Son has ever become visible to mankind, through his Incarnation..." ■ David Gammie

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APPARITION DE L'ÉGLISE ÉTERNELLE (1932)

Rather like Debussy's *Sunken Cathedral*, which was inspired by the legend of the Cathedral of Ys rising from the seabed, Messiaen's *Vision of the Eternal Church* is conceived as an immense crescendo, gradually amassing all the resources of the organ into an incandescent wall of sound, and then receding into the distance. The music itself is far less complex than most of his later work, consisting of short phrases of slow, grinding discords resolving onto bare open fifths, above pulsating repeated pedal notes, which represent the hammer blows of the builders of the eternal edifice. In the composer's own words: "The vision is very simple, almost brutal at the climax. It takes a long time to appear, and recedes just as slowly."

DIPTYQUE (1930)

Subtitled *Essay on Life on Earth and the Blessedness of Eternity*, the *Diptyque* (meaning a piece in two parts) develops an idea that was to come to full fruition some years later in 'Combat de la Mort et de la Vie', whereby a single theme is treated in two contrasting ways; here the restless opening section depicts "life on earth, with its futile agitation", while the timeless meditation of the final page evokes the endless bliss of eternal life and "the calm of the heavenly city... an unchanging light of joy and repose". Despite its many beauties this early work is seldom heard, perhaps because – although the message behind the music is already typical of Messiaen – there is a certain inconsistency of style between the first part, which mostly sounds more like Marcel Dupré (its dedicatee) than Messiaen, and the second, which is now better known in its later arrangement for violin and piano in the *Quartet for the End of Time*.

WEDNESDAY 25 NOVEMBER
St John's College Chapel 8.15pm
KEVIN BOWYER

LIVRE D'ORGUE (1951)

Following on from the *Messe de la Pentecôte* of the previous year, the *Livre d'orgue* was the last product of Messiaen's 'experimental period'. In this extraordinary work new techniques of melodic and rhythmic organisation are developed in every movement with fastidious, mathematical precision. The device that Messiaen calls *personnages rythmiques* is a typical example. "Let us imagine", he wrote, "a scene in the theatre: three people are on the stage – the first takes some positive action, he is in charge of the scene – the second is affected in some way by the actions of the first – the third is present, but takes no part, he just looks on." This is the model for the *personnages rythmiques*, a combination of three rhythmic figures of which one is lengthened at each repetition (the dominant character), one is shortened (the passive character), and one never changes (the bystander). Five of the pieces in the *Livre* make use of twelve-tone note-rows (though much more flexibly than Schönberg or Webern would have allowed), and techniques of melodic and rhythmic 'permutation' also play a vital part – for instance, a sequence of twelve pitches or durations might be reorganised by working from the extremes to the centre (12-1-11-2-10-3 and so on – Messiaen calls this a 'closed fan'), or vice versa (6-7-5-8-4-9 and so on – an 'open fan').

But even at his most abstruse Messiaen remained a poet at heart, and these intellectual games are only half the story. Although the first and last pieces are unique in his output in having no quotation