

STEPHEN CLEOBURY

As Director of Music at King's College, Cambridge, and chief conductor of the BBC Singers, Stephen Cleobury is associated with two of Britain's outstanding choirs. He retains a strong commitment to the organ, often giving recitals, and has made a number of recordings. He was for ten years honorary secretary of the Royal College of Organists, followed by two years as President. Stephen Cleobury is also conductor of the orchestra and chorus of the Cambridge University Musical Society.

ragas in its character, and the ornamented chorales of Bach in the arabesques that decorate the solemn melody..." 'From his bosom I was begotten, before the daystar. I am the image of the goodness of God, I am the Word of Life, which was from the beginning.'

5 *Les enfants de Dieu*

The short fifth meditation cannot really stand alone, but acts as a coda to the preceding movement, tying together the theological strands of 'Desseins éternels' and 'Le Verbe', emphasising the Word as the agent whereby the Christian becomes the adopted son of God. A joyful crescendo over long pedal points accelerates into a majestic phrase for the tutti ('Abba, Father!'), after which the music subsides to a peaceful, ecstatic close – the true peace that dwells in the hearts of the children of God... 'To those that have received him, the Word has given power to become the children of God. And God hath sent forth the spirit of his Son into their hearts, crying "Abba, Father!"'

6 *Les Anges*

With 'Les Anges' we return to the Christmas story. "The 'Gloria in excelsis' is the first of all Christmas songs: it was taught to us by the angels. It is a song of joy. This joy, this exultation, are expressed here. But by angels, pure, invisible, incorporeal spirits, endowed with complete liberty and transparency. The piece is written for just two voices and the music evolves entirely in the treble register. The rhythm is extremely free; no equal values... Greek and Hindu rhythms... all contributing to a vital expression of joy, free of all material constraints." Towards the end, the uneven rhythms are ironed out into a rapid staccato *moto perpetuo*, and the angels seem to be beating their wings directly overhead; but they soon retreat, and finally fly off the top of the keyboard in a haze of fluttering trills.

WEDNESDAY 2 DECEMBER

West Road Concert Hall 8pm

JOANNA MACGREGOR *piano*

VINGT REGARDS SUR L'ENFANT JÉSUS (1944)

Olivier Messiaen's *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus* was composed in Parish from March to September 1944 during the liberation of Paris. The symbolic significance of the date is hard to avoid: it marked his own liberation from prisoner-of-war camp (where he wrote the sublime *Quartet for the End of Time*) and the publication of his radical treatise on composition, which was to herald the most influential composition classes in Europe for the next forty years. An explosive work written for his pupil, Yvonne Loriod (who was to become his wife), *Vingt regards* is massive, almost unruly in its overflow of energy and colour, teeming with gorgeous sonorities and intellectually rigorous ideas. Each movement is quite literally a meditation of a theological aspect of his Roman Catholic beliefs, yet the contemplations are meticulously dramatically paced: they can be serene, fierce, languid, rigidly doctrinal or even humorous. The nearest equivalent I can think of to the contradictory forces held within some

7 *Jésus accepte la souffrance*

The seventh meditation withdraws to a distance once more, to ponder the mystery of the Incarnation, when Christ already accepted the burden of his future sufferings. "In this solemn moment, Jesus accepts the Cross and all the sufferings of his life and Passion. Behind the Angel of the Annunciation, behind the manger at Christmas, there already stands the Cross. This unique sacrifice, evoked by the first two chords, receives immediate consent in the reply of the Bassoon deep in the bass. The progressive augmentation and diminution of the intervals describe with realism the tension of the Crucifixion. At the end of the piece, the formula of acceptance, fortissimo for the tutti: 'Lo, I come!'."

8 *Les Mages*

This piece returns to the highly coloured, evocative atmosphere of the first two movements. As the Wise Men leave King Herod, the star returns, and guides them to the stable at Bethlehem. "And they follow with their camels, their servants, their gifts – a tranquil and majestic caravan." The hypnotic progress of this nocturnal procession is represented by an incessant ostinato of off-beat chords, while the melody in the pedals symbolises the star, sounding high and clear on soft mutation stops, with an accompaniment of coloured chords, "passing from green and gold to velvet blue, deep purple alternating with orange. Towards the end the registration becomes tender and mysterious: the Kings are on their knees before the infant Christ."

9 *Dieu parmi nous*

The final meditation, 'God among us', provides a fitting climax to the whole work; it is more complex than any of the preceding pieces, being based on three symbolic themes: "First, a massive descending pedal theme [*recalling the equally impressive descent of 'Le Verbe'*] representing the glorious and ineffable fall of the second person of the Holy Trinity into our human nature – this is the Incarnation. Second, a gentle theme of love, representing Communion with Christ. Third a theme of joy: this is Mary's Magnificat, treated in birdsong style." Development of these themes follows, eventually erupting into a wild toccata, with the Incarnation theme thundering out in the pedals below a barrage of staccato chords – "This toccata is the essence of the piece, the long development that precedes it being nothing more than a preparation." At the end the music gradually slows down through a succession of five enormous, brightly coloured harmonies, finally coming to rest on a luminous chord of E major. ■ **David Gammie**

movements is the work of the metaphysical poet John Donne, whose *Holy Sonnets* contain surprisingly forceful imagery: 'Batter my heart, three person'd God; for you/As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and

seek to mend.' The other truly remarkable feature is there because, like the American composer Lou Harrison, Messiaen had a knowledge and love for Eastern music and philosophy that challenges our Western notions of time and structure; the whole work of *Vingt regards* may well represent the austere and magnificent edifice of a Gothic cathedral, but the detail and pacing of each movement owe much to Hindu rhythms and the sonority of the Balinese gamelan.

Every time I return to the score of *Vingt regards* I am amazed that a work so ambitious and diverse can be built upon unifying building blocks that are in themselves so simple and repetitive. In that sense this work has much in common with Bach's *The Art of Fugue*, which is equally intellectually rigorous, built on one unadorned fugue subject in D minor. The unifying key in *Vingt regards* is F sharp major, heard in hushed tones at the opening and thunderously at the end. F sharp major, both as a straight tonic chord and with its more luxuriant added sixth, stands almost as an icon throughout the work. There are four main themes that Messiaen identifies in his introductory note:

The theme of God – heard in all the main movements once it has been played in full in the opening movement; pitched against birdsong in number 5, transformed into a lullaby in number 15, and reiterated majestically at the climax of number 20.

The theme of the Star and the Cross – more snakey and sinister. Introduced in number 2, it comes back in various disguises, most notably in the heavy 'Regard de la Croix'.

The theme of chords – a sequence of four four-part chords that ring out throughout.

The theme of love – based around F sharp major and displayed passionately in number 6, heart-stoppingly in number 19.

There is no one English word that could adequately translate *regard*. Certainly in these pieces we really see Messiaen's view of God, his Son, the Virgin Mary, angels and birds – but we see far beyond the material world and begin to contemplate abstract ideas, as well as feeling the passion of Messiaen's beliefs, rooted in sensuality as well as theology. Sometimes *regard* is translated as 'adoration', but even Messiaen added often quite impressionistic subtitles in an effort to explain the title; he sometimes expanded on the structure of the music and the implied iconography. There are many ways to appreciate *Vingt regards*: as a technical achievement, an act of faith, an emotional rollercoaster. It is a tribute to the depth of this masterwork that its meanings are as infinite as all the global references Messiaen draws upon.

1 *Regard du Père*

This opening movement may have the lush harmonies of the French salon, in Messiaen's favourite key of F sharp major, but it's played at such a mesmerically slow pulse that the effect is hypnotic and timeless. Presented here is the theme of God, which Messiaen will go on to develop with astonishing complexity. Here also is the first of many seemingly contradictory styles: the warmth and depth of the repeated chords suggest an almost Lisztian soundworld, while gently reiterated C sharps in the right hand give the first glimpse of the gamelan.

2 *Regard de l'étoile*

3 *L'Echange*

These two pieces are shorter and sharper in contrast. After the sensuality of the opening movement, they are more cerebral, and certainly more fierce. The first sets out the theme of the Star and the Cross, starkly played four octaves apart and in a strict Greek metrical rhythm. The 'Exchange' is even more unyielding, with a technique Messiaen calls asymmetric enlargement. From a small riff of descending thirds and ascending octaves, the music develops over a long crescendo, the intervals expanding in each direction as humankind grows. There is a bar of silence towards the end, which I always hear as a silent echo of the thunderous octaves.

4 *Regard de la Vierge*

5 *Regard du Fils sur le Fils*

'Regard de la Vierge' is the first of many tender lullabies in the whole work, and inevitably such tenderness is linked to the Virgin Mary. This contemplation has a charming, off-kilter rhythm which makes it sound almost like a calypso. The preceding movements have all represented the Divine, and here's a very simple and beautiful human element being introduced; Messiaen marks in the music '*tendre et naïf*' and '*la pureté*'. The scherzo-like middle section brings a sharp spikiness, evoking dance rhythms, xylophones and birdsong.

'Regard du Fils sur le Fils' develops that birdsong considerably, with the delicate and spirited singing of a blackbird and a garden warbler. But the piece starts, and finishes, with a remarkable rhythmical canon, placed over the theme of God. The canon subject is based on three Hindu rhythms, and is staggered between the hands by altering the metrical relationship. This produces the effect of stasis, yet the harmonic language of the original F sharp major theme somehow irresistibly pulls the music forward. It is at this point in a complete performance of *Vingt regards* that I feel the music is beginning to deepen and broaden out; already themes are re-emerging, transformed, but the textures, despite the multi-layering, are still transparent.

6 *Par Lui tout a été fait*

If you ask any pianist what are the truly nightmare movements to play in *Vingt regards*, they will probably tell you numbers 6 and 10. This isn't just because they are long movements, which they are, or because they make unreasonable virtuosic demands on the player, which they do, but because they cram in such a lot of information at high voltage. 'By Him all things were made' touches in some detail on Messiaen's interest in numerology, being the sixth movement and describing the six days of creation. Put simply, in this movement Messiaen has written an enormous fugue, with countersubjects and triple canons; in his notes on the piece he mentions Bach's *Art of Fugue* and the fugue from Beethoven's *Hammerklavier Sonata*. Nothing can prepare one for the audacity of constructing a dense fugue that after nine pages begins to unravel backwards, like a colossal piece of engineering. A stretto on the fugue subject leads to the theme of God, '*victorieux et agité*', alongside the theme of love.

The mammoth coda section is an ecstatic shout on the theme of God, so repetitive with the odd kink it seems to foreshadow the work of Steve Reich (pretty surprising). Every single note of this movement is derived from either the fugue subject or one of the four themes – the final flourish is a splashed theme of chords. As a piece of compositional technique this movement, rarely played out of the context of a complete performance of *Vingt regards*, repays serious study; to play, it represents one of the Everests of the cycle.

7 *Regards de la Croix*

8 *Regard des Hauteurs*

9 *Regard du Temps*

A trio of shorter, more direct movements follows to vary the dramatic pacing. 'Regard de la Croix' quotes the theme heard in the second movement, but treats it almost as a slow blues, with heavy, grief-stricken chords. In wonderful contrast come the cheeky birds in 'Regard des Hauteurs', who dance around each other, sing, play, quarrel and fly off. 'Regard du Temps', which expresses mysticism and timelessness, has a wonderfully relaxed chorus woven into a triple canon, beautifully voiced and spread wide over the piano.

10 *Regard de l'Esprit de joie*

'Regard de l'Esprit de joie' is the equivalent movement to the fifth movement of the *Turangalila-Symphonie*: loud, bright and maddeningly difficult to play, a clash of Western jazziness with Hindu dance rhythms. It opens with a passage Messiaen calls '*thème de danse orientale et plain-chantesque*' which gives you a good idea of what to expect. The middle section attracted me many years ago because it seemed to slip into



Photo: Nick White