

pure boogie-woogie in the left hand. A new theme, the theme of joy, is developed. Despite the now familiar '*agrandissements asymétriques*' technique, the movement is more irrepressibly joyful and gaudy than the notorious number 6; perhaps more Blackpool Tower than Durham Cathedral! It ends with a flourish of birdsong, after which many pianists take the opportunity to lie down.

INTERVAL

11 *Première communion de la Vierge*

After the crazy rumbustiousness of 'Esprit de joie', the sublime 'Première communion de la Vierge' takes us back into an inner world of contemplation and tenderness. Of course, the opening chords in the left hand are the theme of God transposed into B flat major, but above are delicately effective swirls of hemi-demi-semiquavers that Messiaen charmingly calls stalactites. Although the music does find more forcefulness in a dance-like section, it winds down again with a pedal-point passage said to represent the beating of baby Jesus's heart. I find this movement infinitely moving and intense.

12 *La Parole toute-puissante*

13 *Noël*

What follows is designed to shatter the calm you may be feeling. 'La Parole toute-puissante' is an extraordinarily punchy little movement, with a tam-tam ostinato that accompanies a monody constructed around three ancient Greek rhythms. There is a simple and terrible aspect to the Word, which will be built upon later in the eighteenth movement. Next is 'Noël', which is surprisingly noisy too. A gorgeous, sensuous middle section, which represents the Holy Family being worshipped, is framed by a carillon, Christmas bells, a xylophone figure and a tam-tam. There is an effectively brutal end to this movement, where a reprise of the middle section is ruthlessly cut off by the tam-tam figure.

14 *Regard des Anges*

The third of these noisy movements, this is a powerfully repetitive piece of music, where a strophe (a rhythmical canon in three parts) is enlarged upon four times. We hear the fluttering of angels' wings, and a depiction of the athletic angels from Michaelangelo's *Last Judgement*, who blow brass instruments with the sonority of trombones or Tibetan trumpets. Messiaen regards angels in the same way as he reveres birds (who also make an appearance in this movement): higher, purer beings, nearer to God both metaphysically and literally. Throughout *Vingt regards* birds can be hilarious, gentle, sleepy, melodic and triumphant. The angels by contrast are definitely Old Testament. But the final page holds, for me, the best image of these rather fierce angels. When told of God's plan to unite himself with the human race, '*la stupeur des anges s'agrandit*': over twenty-three bars of an ever-augmenting octave sequence, their jaws quite literally hit the floor!

15 *Le baiser de l'enfant Jésus*

'The kiss of the child Jesus' is perhaps the best known of *Vingt regards*, and most often played as a substantial solo piece. It is stunningly beautiful and lyrical, treating the theme of God as a berceuse in slow motion, adding birds, dances, tone clusters and all the passion of a high romantic ballade. After a slow first section the music becomes playful in '*le jardin*'. Slowly the arms of the child Jesus extend in love, before the climactic kiss. The highly charged passion of this section

reflects Messiaen's involvement with the Tristan myth, the bringing together of spirituality and sensuality. As with much of his work, it is fascinating to appreciate such a mixture of Roman Catholic iconography and eroticism. The movement ends with distant cuckoo calls, and a cadence straight out of a jazzy love song.

16 *Regard des Prophètes, des Bergers et des Mages*

17 *Regard du Silence*

As at the end of 'Première communion de la Vierge', Messiaen decides to break the atmosphere with short and aggressive movements. 'Regard des Prophètes, des Bergers et des Mages' starts with a march-like figure, going into a nasal, Arabian monody – what a shame the piano can't play quarter-tones. The movement has great wit and vigour.

'Regard du Silence', on the other hand, returns us to the world of the first and fifth movements, in a more sophisticated and yearning way. As at the opening of the fifth movement, there is an intricate rhythmic canon marked *ppp* – *impalpable*. The delicate arpeggios in this

movement are directly linked to Debussy's *Préludes*, combined with Messiaen's modal harmonies. The movement drifts off into infinity.

18 *Regard de l'Onction terrible*

Apocryphal and angry, 'Regard de l'Onction terrible' is in some ways the hardest movement to pull off. As a piece of music it could only work in its context within the cycle; it brings together Balinese music (the technique of simultaneously accelerating and decelerating) and a scene from the Book of Revelation, depicted on an old tapestry in the cathedral at Angers. The Word of God is shown as Christ on horseback, brandishing a sword amongst thunderbolts, at war with the world. Musically the movement is based largely around a brass chorale. The 'awesome anointing'

referred to in the title is inspired by Psalm 45: 'Gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O most mighty, with thy glory and thy majesty. And in thy majesty ride prosperously because of truth and meekness and righteousness; and thy right hand shall teach thee terrible things...'

19 *Je dors, mais mon cœur veille*

Silence is used throughout this penultimate movement, and silence has the last word. Based on the theme of love, the music progresses to a very long F sharp major added-sixth chord in this piece, marked *ppp* – *extatique*; this, I always feel, is the very heart of *Vingt regards*. The movement needs very little explanation, except to quote Messiaen: "The Angel drew his bow across the viol, producing so sweet a sound that, if he had continued to play, all who heard him would have died of joy..."

20 *Regard de l'Eglise d'amour*

The massive final movement brings together all the themes, angels, birds, bells, gongs and tam-tams that we have heard in the previous two hours. It really sums up the grandeur, solemnity and vast scope of Messiaen's ambition. Starting with three sections that repetitively exploit the 'agrandissement technique' with the marking '*confus et menaçant*', we cross a bridge passage of carillons and bells which sounds extraordinarily like a snatch of *Boris Godunov* (an opera that Messiaen always studied with his students) before reaching a tumultuous reworking of the theme of God at the end – unhurried, majestic and moving. ■

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LE LIVRE DU SAINT SACREMENT (1984)

This second *Livre* was the last and the longest of the series of substantial organ works that extended throughout Messiaen's career, a career that had begun over fifty-five years earlier with his first published piece (on the same Eucharistic theme), *Le Banquet céleste*. During his later years Messiaen was increasingly inclined to work on a larger and larger scale. After no less than eight years devoted to the composition of his monumental opera *St François d'Assise*, he must have found some relaxation in returning to the organ; there is a new simplicity and directness in much of this music, and the wisdom of old age. Nevertheless, the *Livre* still contains all the familiar elements of his style – plainsong, birdsong (in this work, exotic birds whose songs the composer noted down in the Holy Land), Greek and Indian rhythms, highly coloured harmonies, and words spelt out in his bizarre 'communicable language'.

After a lifetime of playing the organ for Mass, it is perhaps not surprising that Messiaen returned to the Holy Eucharist for his theme. It was fifty-three years earlier that he had written to Charles Tournemire: "I understand music best when I am alone, in the country and far from other musicians. The organist, also alone, with the Blessed Sacrament and his organ, must surely understand it even better..." Lasting in total around two hours, the work consists of eighteen separate pieces grouped around an extended central movement, which depicts – with extraordinary descriptive power and psychological insight – a cardinal moment of the Christian faith: the first meeting of Mary Magdalene with the risen Christ.

1 *Adoro Te*

'Thee we adore, O hidden Saviour, Thee.' (St Thomas Aquinas) Messiaen describes the four opening movements as "acts of adoration before Christ, invisible, but actually present in the Blessed Sacrament", and this prelude presents a ceremonial procession of dense, slowly moving, richly coloured harmonies.

2 *The Source of Life*

'May my heart always thirst for you, O fount of life, source of eternal light.' (St Bonaventure) Delicate arabesques of melody above soft sustained chords.

3 *The Hidden God*

'My eyes cannot endure the splendour of your glory. It is to spare my weakness that you hide beneath the veils of the Sacrament.' (St Thomas Aquinas)

A more extended meditation, including a theme of plainsong (the 'Alleluia' of Corpus Christi), two birdsongs (Tristram's grackle and the olivaceous warbler) and tender 'music of adoration' on an evocative combination of soft 16, 8 and 2-foot stops.

4 *Act of Faith*

'Firmly I believe and truly...' (Act of Faith)

The first section of the *Livre* ends with a brief but confident affirmation, bursting with rhythmic vitality. "All the graces that Christ earned for us at different moments of his life will retain their power, which is granted to us at every feast of the Liturgy... It is particularly through the Eucharist that the graces of the Mysteries of Christ are given to us. So the pieces that follow describe each Mystery of Christ in chronological order."

5 *Puer natus est nobis*

'Unto us a child us born, unto us a son is given.' (Isaiah).

In this meditation on the Incarnation, the plainsong Introit for Christmas Day, 'Puer natus est', provides most of the musical material, its distinctive opening three-note phrase acting as a kind of refrain amid murmuring cascades of semiquavers, and some birdsong is also heard (the song of the olive-tree warbler). The hushed final bars are typical of Messiaen's later music at its sweetest and most serene.

6 *Manna and the Bread of Life*

'Thou gavest thy people angel's food to eat, and bread ready for their use didst thou provide for them from heaven without their toil, bread having the virtue of every pleasant savour, and agreeing to every taste.' (Book of Wisdom)

'I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever.' (John 6)

"In his sermon on the Bread of Life, Jesus himself speaks of manna as a symbol of the Eucharist. So this piece represents the desert, where manna fell from heaven. High-pitched chords on the swell Cymbale evoke the silence and peace of the desert, and long trilled chords imitate the strong which sometimes blows there. Two birdsongs are used, the mourning chat and the desert lark, both noted down in the desert of Judaea."

7 *The Resurrected and the Light of Life*

'He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.' (John 8)

'Whoso eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.' (John 6)

The word *resurrection* is boldly declaimed in communicable language at the beginning and end of this forceful, visionary movement, which also takes its inspiration from Christ's sermon on the Bread of Life.

8 *Institution of the Eucharist*

'This is my body. This is my blood.' (Matthew 26)

"This piece represents the most solemn moment of all, when Christ pronounced these sacramental words for the first time. The basis of the piece is a Greek rhythm – short, long, long – slightly amplified. The miraculous words are confided to a piquant combination in chords of grey and mauve above a held pianissimo chord in A flat major on a soft Flute, violet blue, very calm. Through the open window we hear the song of the nightingale."

9 *The Darkness*

'Jesus said unto them: "This is your hour, and the power of darkness."' (Luke 22)

'And when they were come to the place which is called Golgotha, there they crucified him.' (Luke 23)

'Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour.' (Matthew 27)

These three kinds of darkness are portrayed in turn in this violent, eerie piece, first 'the power of darkness' in ferocious tone-clusters, then the Crucifixion, "with the tearing of distended limbs and the fortissimo of suffering", and finally the physical darkness that spread over the earth; the slowly dissolving final chord conjures up a bleak image of hopeless despair.

10 *The Resurrection of Christ*

'Why seek ye the living among the dead?' (Luke 24)

"Christ suddenly stands before us in the full power of his glory,



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