



The Pope, Passover & Pious Music

By **FRED KIRSHNIT** | April 22, 2008

In marvelous confluence with the papal visit and the first day of Passover, the series of organ recitals commemorating the 100th anniversary of the death of Olivier Messiaen continued Sunday afternoon at the Church of St. Vincent Ferrer. On tap was perhaps the most cerebral of this master's pieces, "Meditations on the Mystery of the Holy Trinity."

The recitals are the brainchild of a professor at Columbia and the Manhattan School of Music, Gail Archer, who is presenting the major essays of Messiaen at different venues around the city. Going from one sacred space to another has highlighted the importance of acoustics and sonorities in these mighty efforts, so sophisticated in their usage of musical color. At St. Vincent Ferrer, the organ is especially reverberant, the loud chords incredibly thunderous. Unlike many other spots in town, here the organ is not located in a loft, but rather out front — stage center, if you will. But I located myself where I could see neither artist nor instrument. This afternoon was about mystery and meditation.

Who was Olivier Messiaen? An organist by trade, he did perform some at Notre Dame, but concentrated his 30-year career at the Church of the Holy Trinity in Paris. Compositionally, he adapted his fascination with medieval chant and its meaningful phrase lengths, combined these principles with those learned about Indian music, and developed his individual pieces not on Western tonic-dominant theories, but rather on polyrhythmic possibilities. An ardent Roman Catholic, he devoted his music to the glory of God.

Messiaen also had a special relationship with America, composing a work about Bryce Canyon in Utah for a premiere at the then brand-new Alice Tully Hall, and working with Tully herself on instrumentation. He spent the evening of his 80th birthday at Avery Fisher Hall, listening to Zubin Mehta lead the New York Philharmonic in a fabulous Turangalila Symphony. And he himself performed the world premiere of "Mediations on the Mystery of the Holy Trinity" at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., in 1972.



On Sunday, Ms. Archer gave a solid performance, emphasizing the dramatic to great effect. In the section titled “The Father Unbegotten,” she expertly struck the balance between the frightening and the gentle, the fortissimo tone clusters and the delicate fingerings of lyrically melodic snatches. There were many different voices afoot, reminiscent of the burning bush scene from Arnold Schoenberg’s opera “Moses and Aaron.” God’s voice is much more complex than man’s and it is perceived, however imperfectly, as a magnificent consort of spoken and sung material. The utter strangeness of this movement helps to express the innascibility of the Lord.

In “The Holiness of Jesus Christ,” Ms. Archer also seized upon the dramatic, creating not so much intersecting planes of sound as furiously colliding tectonic plates. This was very powerful music-making.

Apropos of ecumenicalism, Moses also makes an appearance in the two sections on the words “I am.” For Messiaen, this music is but a starting point. The true art is in the mind of the listener, whose meditations should move him in the direction of the summum bonum. There was not a large crowd of listeners in attendance, but if even one of them was moved, as I have no doubt that they were, then it was well worth the effort.

Contemporary secularist critics do not quite know what to do with Olivier Messiaen. They wish to praise him as an icon of modernism but, like blind men attempting to describe a sunset, have little sense of the inner drive, mission, and soul of this music. Messiaen’s Catholicism is often dismissed as an idiosyncrasy. They just don’t get it.