



Featured Artist: Gail Archer
Performance: ★★★★★
Sound: ★★★★★
Release Date: 2007
Time: 69:10
Label: Meyer Media [07007]
Genre: Keyboard
AMG Album ID: W 154384

Review

by Stephen Eddins, October 2007

Gail Archer, director of the music program at Barnard College, Columbia University, plays two of Messiaen's earliest large-scale organ works on this CD. The CD's title implies that the composer's mysticism was an element of his music that developed over time, but it sounds like the mystical impulse is fully in place in his four-movement suite *L'Ascension* (1932-1933), and that only his means of expressing it became increasingly compositionally sophisticated and individual over time. The original version of *L'Ascension* was written for orchestra, but Messiaen premiered a transcription for organ in 1935, and that version has surpassed the popularity of the original. In a major departure from the orchestral version, Messiaen wrote an entirely new third movement, because he felt the original wasn't workable on a keyboard. *L'Ascension* is one of the composer's most accessible and engaging organ pieces, and one of the most important of his early works. The harmonic language is clearly Messiaen's own, even though it predates the systematic incorporation of isorhythms, Indian influences, modes of limited transposition and birdsong that inform much of his later work. Each of the movements carries an inscription describing an aspect of the Ascension, which the music graphically and powerfully illustrates. *Les Corps Glorieux* (1939) is in seven movements that could be liturgically incorporated into the Mass, but which Messiaen describes as his attempt "to transfer a kind of divine office, a kind of communal praise to the concert hall." Whether or not one shares the composer's religious vision, the music itself is clearly successful in evoking the scriptural and liturgical imagery of the texts that accompany each movement. *Les Corps Glorieux* is more abstract and cerebral than *L'Ascension*; several movements are monophonic, an unusual use of a keyboard instrument, but one that Messiaen put to use very effectively. Archer plays with just the right combination of precision and rhythmic fluidity that the music needs to dance and soar. The Aeolian-Skinner organ in St. Paul's Chapel at Columbia is capable of all the variety and grandeur the music requires, and the recording succeeds in capturing the scope of the music's broad dynamic and timbral range.