

# THE AMERICAN ORGANIST

DECEMBER 2007

**A MYSTIC IN THE MAKING.** Gail Archer, organist. IV/94 Aeolian-Skinner organ (1938, 1962, console by Robert M. Turner, 1997) of St. Paul's Chapel, Columbia University, New York City. Meyer Media MM07007. Available at [www.meyer-media.com](http://www.meyer-media.com). New York-based Gail Archer enjoys a multifaceted career as performer, educator, and musical director. This, her second CD release, features two prominent organ works of Olivier Messiaen: *L'Ascension* (1933) and *Les Corps glorieux* (1939). Armed with abundant technical prowess, Dr. Archer plays these formidable works with authority, assertiveness, and rhythmic exactitude. Her registrations reflect the spirit of Messiaen's coloristic requirements, when the instrument is not able to meet them literally. The noted instrument suffers from some rather blatant tuning issues in this recording, especially the solo reeds in "Joie et Clarté" and the low pedal reed in "Combat de la mort." Messiaen's rhythmic subtleties and the resulting complexities of his notation are well known. While Dr. Archer's nearly technically faultless performances result in clarity of complex passagework and exciting moments of virtuosity, they often fall short of ushering the listener into the aura of mysticism that is uniquely Messiaen's. It is akin to shining too bright a light on an impressionistic painting, begging the question: does absolute precision distort the composer's desired effect, where flexibility might render it more successfully? Precise notation fails to capture the essence of the rhythm in French *notes inégales* or in jazz; such wisdom may be applicable here. Messiaen himself said, "Time should be the friend of all musicians." When compared with the timings of two other prominent interpreters of this repertoire, Dr. Archer's tempos are generally faster, especially in the slow movements, which must elicit a feeling of timelessness. These comments are necessarily subjective. Messiaen's music, like Bach's, is great enough to communicate effectively through a variety of interpretations, and Dr. Archer's are compelling. The recording is excellently produced by Andreas K. Meyer, capturing the instrument's subtleties of color and power, bathed in an amiable acoustic.

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