

Messiaen's Work 'Like Incense Rising' Musical World Observes Birth Centenary of a Catholic Mystic

By John Burger
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Dec. 10 marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of French composer and organist Olivier Messiaen.

Messiaen, a Catholic and a mystic, composed musical works with titles such as "The Celestial Banquet," "Apparition of the Eternal Church" and "The Ascension."

Register news editor John Burger spoke with New York organist Gail Archer, who earlier this year played the complete Messiaen organ cycle on some of the Big Apple's finest pipe organs. Archer, herself a Catholic, considers Messiaen an "evangelist through sound."

Who was Olivier Messiaen?

He was a marvelous composer and organist who was born in 1908 and died in 1992. As an organist, he played principally in one church, the Church of the Trinité (Holy Trinity) in Paris, for virtually all his life.

But more than that, he was a great teacher and a mystic, as well. He was a profoundly faithful Roman Catholic.

Is it possible to describe his music in words?

For me, it was a very spiritual experience; it was very meaningful in every way, because the music is haunting in many ways. It's ethereal; it's very prayerful. There are long sections of it that are just wonderfully improvisatory, and yet, it's like incense. I would describe it that way; some sections are just like incense going up in prayer.

It's remarkably prayerful music, and yet, at the beginning of every single movement, [there is] a verse from the Bible or the Church Fathers. Messiaen was thinking very specifically about certain spiritual experiences human beings can have and tried to imbue every section of the piece with the actual text from the Bible.

He was trying to express that particular idea, that particular theology in each individual piece.

In what ways was he a mystic?

He observed the sacraments very, very steadily. He attended Mass constantly; he constantly talked about his own life of prayer and how the music came out of his improvisation. Some of the music he improvised himself was based upon Gregorian chant or great hymn melodies - "Veni, Creator [Spiritus]" or something of that sort.

I think in that way he's not so much a mystic, in that he's writing like St. Thomas Aquinas: writing a great treatise, but his treatises come out musically. He's thinking about these great texts and expressing that in tones rather than in text.

Would you say his music enhances your own faith?

Oh, there's no question there. The music is so inspiring by itself; other people have been deeply inspired by his work, and I must say I am, too. I found it very, very spiritual to sing this music in great spaces [during a recent series of concerts in New York churches].

In fact, during the papal visit this spring in April, His Holiness was preaching out at Yankee Stadium, and I was playing "The Mystery of the Holy Trinity" at St. Vincent Ferrer, the Dominican church, on the same afternoon, the 20th of April. And we had lots of people.

I was terribly afraid. I thought, "Oh, every Catholic in this city is going to be out at Yankee Stadium." But no; in fact, people came, and it really was wonderful. The reviews said ... what was it, "The Pope, Passover and Pious Music." It was all happening on the same day; Passover was that weekend, too.

I imagine you've encountered other fans of Messiaen and perhaps people who have been affected in a similar way by his music, in that, perhaps, the music has opened a window to the faith or enhanced their faith.

Oh, I'm sure that's true. I've met those in the clergy who are deeply moved by the music.

I wonder if people who are not of a faith background walked into your concert, what might their reaction be, if they would have something of a faith experience or a spiritual experience?

That's a fair question because the concerts I played were particularly aimed at drawing a wide range of people to come and listen. They were free, and that was part of my intention, because I wanted young people, older people, people who never had a reason to walk into St. Patrick's Cathedral, I deliberately wanted to bring them into the great spaces to listen to the music.

I am certain that some people did. ... I know that the music touched a wide range of the New York community, and I don't think you could walk away completely unmoved, whether you connected it directly with faith or not, any specific faith.

I think it would be very difficult to listen to this music and not be moved emotionally in some way, no matter what you might personally call it.

Interesting that we're celebrating the centenary of his birth during the Year of St. Paul, someone who was an evangelist in words, while Messiaen could be considered an evangelist through sound.

That's fascinating, isn't it? Absolutely, no question. I see him that way. He's definitely an evangelist through sound.

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