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ARTS & LETTERS

Art Around Town:

Playing Messiaen On New York's Organs

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By Kate Taylor

The composer Olivier Messiaen lived all his life in Paris, but a local musician and teacher is about to celebrate his centennial in high New York style.

Starting this weekend, Gail Archer, who is the director of the music program at Barnard College, as well as an instructor at the Manhattan School of Music and the college organist at Vassar, will play all of Messiaen's complete organ cycles on six of Manhattan's best organs. The first concert will be this Sunday at the Church of the Heavenly Rest on Fifth Avenue and 90th Street; the last will be on May 29 at St. Patrick's Cathedral. All are free.

Ms. Archer, who wrote her dissertation on a 17th-century composer, Barbara Strozzi, said in an interview that she is drawn to Messiaen partly because he was influenced by ancient, medieval, and Renaissance music, as well as the Hindu musical tradition. "His music is full of Gregorian chant," Ms. Archer said. "He studied Western mysticism — he was deeply Roman Catholic — and he also studied the rhythms and melodic formulas of the East."

Messiaen, who was born in 1908, was the organist at the Église de la Sainte-Trinité in Paris from 1931 until his death in 1992, and he composed organ music throughout his life.

In 2002, Ms. Archer did a concert in New York of two of Messiaen's early organ cycles, "L'Ascension" and "Les Corps Glorieux." (She



also released these pieces as an album, "A Mystic in the Making," last year.) Since that time, she has been studying his other works with the goal of a centennial celebration in mind. "I knew it was the right moment," she said. "This is the perfect time to sum up his life."

Messiaen was thoroughly 20th-century in the eclecticism of the sources he drew on. An ornithologist, he would record birds in the field, then come home and transcribe their songs to insert into his compositions. He also invented his own musical modes, based on the 12-note (chromatic) scale.

New Yorkers will have the opportunity to hear a lot of Messiaen in the next few years, since the incoming general manager of New York City Opera, Gérard Mortier, has announced plans to mount a production of Messiaen's opera "St. Francis of Assisi" at the Park Avenue Armory as part of City Opera's 2009–10 season.

For her concert series, Ms. Archer chose organs that are similar to the instrument Messiaen played at La Trinité, which was built



by the great French 19th-century organ builder, Aristide Cavallé-Coll. Cavallé-Coll designed organs to imitate the sound and richness of the symphony orchestra; sets of pipes mimic different members of the string section, as well as the reeds and brass.

Up through the late 19th century, someone had to physically pump the bellows of an organ — using a mechanism called a treadle, similar to a very large Stairmaster — to send the air through the pipes to produce the sound. ("Bach would bring his sons to pump the organ while he played," Ms. Archer said.) As 19th-century organs grew in size, they required more people to pump. Ms. Archer said that when she visited the Cavallé-Coll organ at Saint-Sulpice in Paris, she saw 10 or more treadles. They are no longer being pumped, however, as today the Saint-Sulpice organ, like all contemporary organs, has an electric blower.

The organ at the Church of the Heavenly Rest is among the largest in the city, with a four-manual console and 8,000 pipes. The architects who designed the church in the late 1920s, Bertram Goodhue Associates, designed it so that the pipes would be hidden from view behind the stone tracery of the chancel. A tour of the organ's largest chamber, buried in the wall behind the choir stalls, showed it to be as large as a three-story townhouse. The church's music director, Molly Nichols, said that the church once held a cocktail party in it.

The organ had to be restored in the 1990s, after an old wire (unrelated to the organ) sparked a fire that destroyed the console and the choir stalls and filled the church with soot. To raise money, and since the pews had already been removed to erect scaffolding to clean the walls, the church threw a party called the "Restoration Ball." In addition to the church's many well-

heeled parishioners, a good number of the city's organists turned out in support. "It felt like a giant extended family," Ms. Archer said. She also recalled that "when we came out, there were ambulances and police cars up to the block." It turned out that Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, who lived at 1040 Fifth Ave., had died that night.

Ms. Archer, who is Catholic, grew up playing the piano and turning pages for the organist at her parish church. "I started playing piano when I was 7 and went over to the organ when my legs were long enough to push the pedals, when I was 13 or so."

Messiaen's music, she suggested, is just what New Yorkers need to refresh their minds and spirits in the new year. "It's very peaceful and meditative," she said. "It allows you space to think and breathe and just be at peace with your own thoughts."