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Meditations Conjure Incense, Stained Glass and Devotion

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The 100th anniversary of the French composer Olivier Messiaen's birth doesn't arrive until December, but centenary celebrations have already begun. Numerous prominent performances of this vastly influential avant-gardist's orchestral, chamber and instrumental works lie ahead. While it may seem rash to make the claim so soon, a survey of Messiaen's organ music performed by Gail Archer is sure to be among the year's highlights, to judge by the initial installment on Sunday afternoon.

Ms. Archer, who holds positions at Vassar College, the Manhattan School of Music, Barnard College and Central Synagogue, is presenting Messiaen's six major organ works, each in a different Manhattan church. Her concert at the Church of the Heavenly Rest on the Upper East Side on

Sunday was devoted to "La Nativité du Seigneur" (1935), Messiaen's first great cycle for the instrument to which he devoted more than six decades of his life's work.

Roman Catholic faith and mysticism had a fundamental influence on Messiaen, and his organ music reveals that in its most concentrated form. The devotional nature of "Nativité" is unusually direct and palpable: its hourlong span conveys the haze of incense smoke and radiates the play of light through stained glass.

The seemingly improvised melodies, unmoored tonalities, phrases of irregular length and layered rhythms of Messiaen's mature style are all nascent in these nine evocative meditations inspired by the mystery of Jesus' birth. Spontaneity, piety and exuberance convey an ecstatic response to confrontation with the ineffable.

The recurrence of certain voicings throughout the work provides a sense of coherence and familiarity. But again and again, seemingly climactic passages resist conventional resolution, increasing the music's tension right up to the majestic finale, "Dieu Parmi Nous" ("God Among Us"), which closes with a prismatic chord played at a thunderous quadruple-forte dynamic.

Ms. Archer's well-paced interpretation had a compelling authority. She played with a bracing physicality in the work's more driven passages and endowed humbler ruminations with a sense of vulnerability and awe.

Dispelling one mystery common to most organ recitals, Ms. Archer performed at a console positioned in the chancel before the altar, with her back turned to the audience. That decision seemed appropriate. If Messiaen's music describes humanity grappling with something larger than life, Ms. Archer's involved, intricate management of the organ's five manuals and pedal board offered a potent visual analog.

(photo: Gail Archer performing a work by Messiaen at the Church of the Heavenly Rest, by Jennifer Taylor for The New York Times).