

Signals on High

May 9, 2009

Toru Takemitsu *Night Signal* (1987)

Arvo Part *Magnificat* (1989)

Olivier Messiaen *Et Expecto Resurrectionem Mortuorum* (And I expect the Resurrection of the dead, 1965)

Toru Takemitsu *Day Signal* (1987)

Olivier Messiaen "Demeurer dans L'Amour" from *Éclairs Sur L'au dela* (Flashes of the Beyond, 1992)
Un Sourire (A Smile, 1989)

La Ville d'en Haut (The City on High, 1987)

Chant des Déportés (Song of the Deported, 1945)

Today twelve avenues radiate from the Arc de Triomphe to form the Place de L'Étoile. Construction began in 1806 on a massive sixteen-story high arch, originally sitting on a five-pointed star, to commemorate the imperial victories of Napoleon I (1769-1821). Like the Statue of Liberty, that other French-initiated monument with a tortured path to completion (1871-86), the Triumphal Arch took many years to complete.

A Place Like No Other Place

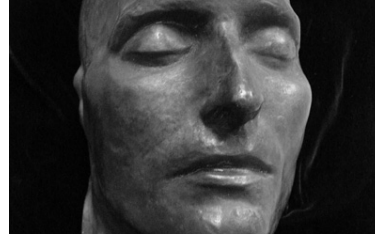
The arch project was halted after Napoleon's ignoble defeat and the rise in 1814 of the ultra-conservative Restoration, with its government-run press, extreme favoritism toward the wealthy and gradually accelerating economic instability. However, decades of repression fomented a liberal political culture. A populist press rapidly gained power and eventually toppled the Bourbon King Charles X during July of 1830. Four years after the project's completion in 1836, a rather drab Louis-Philippe, King of the French, obtained permission from the British for an important exhumation.



Unfinished portrait by Jacques Louis David

Drawn by sixteen horses, the remains of Napoleon Bonaparte passed under the Arc de Triomphe in 1840, just six months after the composer Hector

Berlioz (1803-69) commemorated the tenth anniversary of the July Revolution with a *Grande Symphonie* at the Bastille. As the charismatic Emperor returned to Paris through this soaring portal – looking mythically handsome in his open coffin, as the death mask still shows – the new arch was now lodged in the public conscience as the site for important matters of state and national mourning.



Napoleon's Death Mask

The Arc de Triomphe was a locus of world-shaping pageantry again at the end of WWI. On July 14, 1919, a procession of Allied troops marched in formation through the Arc to celebrate a hard-won victory after years of catastrophic destruction across Europe. Then on November 11, 1920, the second anniversary of the Armistice (signed at eleven o'clock on the eleventh day of the eleventh month) an unknown soldier was entombed under the Arc to represent all who had perished anonymously in the Great War. Three years later the eternal *Flame of Remembrance* was kindled there, the first such symbology in human history since the sacred fire of the Vestal Virgins of Rome was extinguished in 391.

At a Safe Distance

The young Messiaen (1908-92) was keenly aware of these occasions; he spent the war years in Grenoble with his aunts and mother's parents while his father was at the front. A year into the War, from age seven, Messiaen began reading the scores to Christoph Willibald Gluck's operas *Orpheus* and *Alceste*, followed by Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and *The Magic Flute*, Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust*, and Richard Wagner's *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried*. In 1919 he was given the score to Debussy's *Pelleas et Melisande* just before his eleventh birthday.

These years were spent with his brother immersed in Shakespeare, history and poetry guided by his mother, the well-regarded poet Cecile Sauvage. As idyllic as was his childhood war perspective, Messiaen's adult war was horrific and strangely blessed. (For the full story click on OM NOTES, "In Captivity" from www.jacarandamusic.org)

By the time desolated Parisians saw the German occupier's convoys pass under the Arc de Triomphe's vaulted canopy in 1940, Messiaen had been captured, taken as a prisoner of war and transported to Poland where he remained for the better part of

two-years in Stalag VIIIA. His repatriation in 1941 to a repressive German-controlled Paris was full of personal challenges and extraordinary productivity. Deeply mixed emotions clouded his acceptance of the Paris Conservatory professorship forcibly vacated by the anti-Semitic policies of Vichy France.



May 7, 1945

The Nightmare Recedes

Four years later Allied jeeps swept through the Arc de Triomphe leading to the liberation of Paris when, pressing in from its twelve streams, a sea of ecstatic citizens reclaimed their national dignity. Over several months, little-by-little, the French Resistance restored radio broadcast capability. Among the newly official Radio France's first commissions was made to Messiaen, the now famous POW composer of the *Quartet for the End of Time* premiered in the Stalag. A work for large forces was needed for live broadcast to commemorate the liberation of the concentration camps. Yet, after this short but intensely stirring anthem premiered the tide of history pulled away and *Chant des Déportés* was lost.

Fifteen years later, coincident strands of history intersected at the Arc de Triomphe. In June of 1961, less than six months after the U.S. Inauguration, President Kennedy and the First Lady visited the Arc de Triomphe to pay their respects at the *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier*, accompanied by French President de Gaulle — the only politician that Messiaen held in high esteem. De Gaulle's Minister of Culture, André Malraux, who had overseen the Kennedys' visit, contacted Messiaen some two-and-a-half years later to commission a large sacred work with chorus and orchestra for a major national commemoration. Among the most respected and fascinating members of de Gaulle's inner circle, Malraux (1905-76) was a novelist, explorer of the Cambodian jungle and seasoned anti-fascist.

The official request from Malraux was sent to Messiaen November 15, 1963 exactly one week prior to the assassination of President Kennedy. Later, when the First Lady recovered enough to make

important decisions, she remembered the eternal flame from her visit to France and asked that John F. Kennedy — perhaps the best known person on the planet — be accorded the same honor in Arlington Cemetery as the Arc de Triomphe's Unknown Soldier. President de Gaulle attended her lighting of the eternal flame. Messiaen's commission to commemorate the fallen dead of the century's two World Wars, an imposing purely instrumental requiem of unconventional design, was fulfilled in 1965.

Venerable Lineage

To understand the tradition in which the first and last Messiaen works of this program belong, it is helpful to have some familiarity with Berlioz's fourth and final *Symphony Funèbre et Triomphale*, (Funereal and Triumphant), as well as his *Requiem*, employing over 350 musicians, which preceded it in 1837.

Revolutionary France required for her populace lofty ceremonial music that would connect with their sense of national dignity. The Berlioz *Symphonie Funèbre et Triomphale* was originally scored for 200 brass and wind instruments marching in a parade. The conditions of its premiere were so adverse, however, that a month later Berlioz scheduled a concert version with smaller forces including some strings and a chorus. His biographer David Cairns observes that like the symphony, the *Requiem* "is also influenced by the eternal French preoccupation with *la gloire*, to which Napoleon had lately given enormous impetus, and which Berlioz, for all his natural skepticism and his rejection of nationalism, shared with the men of his age." The sense of collective public ritual embodied in these musical works however transcends any specific religious formulations or political function.



Andre Malraux 1959

Expecting Resurrection

Et Expecto Resurrectionem Mortuorum (And I Expect the Resurrection of the Dead) was written to fulfill the terms of the commission and was publically premiered after Mass in Chartres Cathedral with the Archbishop and President de Gaulle present, June 20, 1965. The name of the work comes from the Nicene Creed, or Credo in Latin: "...and I expect the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen."

About the premiere Messiaen's diary records: "At the end of Mass, at 10:30 am precisely, the A flat of the contrabassoon and saxhorn, assisted by the third tam-tam, started to play. Suddenly the immense nave was filled by a vast and overwhelming presence." As it happens some twenty years earlier, in 1944, his diary proposed writing a "Requiem for brass instruments playing under the Arc de Triomphe..."



Chartres Cathedral

After the premiere, once the work was published, Messiaen played down the commissioner's intended homage to the dead in favor of a focus on the afterlife; and, although he imagined the work performed in vast open spaces, it was a pragmatic conception effectively written as a concert work that was published in 1967. Performances throughout major European cities followed immediately. An open air concert by the French National Orchestra was held in Persepolis, Iran in 1969, and Zubin Mehta gave *Et Expecto Resurrectionem Mortuorum* its Los Angeles premiere in 1972 at the Chandler Pavilion.

This 25-minute work is in five movements; the opening lasts less than three minutes and the closing about seven. Each movement bears an inscription from five different parts of the Bible – Psalms, Romans, John, Corinthians, and Revelation:

- I. Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O lord hear my voice.
- II. Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him.
- III. The hour is coming, and now is when the dead shall hear the voice of the son of God.
- IV. It is raised in glory – a new name written – when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.
- V. And I heard the voice of an immense multitude.

Forty wind, brass and percussion players create a powerful set of contrasting moods in a form that

is compact, yet huge. The composer shows himself willing to face the terrifying fact of existence while affirming joy with a generosity that is ultimately astounding. The daring aspects of the work – the intense stacked dissonances of the brief opening movement – a prayer from the depths of the abyss, and the hypnotic finale's chorale, a slow insistent harmonic pendulum accented by pulsing strokes of the tam-tam and the constant gamelan-like clangor of three sets of cencerros – gained it immediate celebrity among the avant-garde. What some distance and familiarity now affords is the more evident relationships *Et Expecto* has to earlier works, and to historical models and diverse musical materials.

The mostly quiet second movement, where death has no dominion, recalls the "Garden of the Sleep of Love" from Messiaen's *Turangalila Symphony* of 1949, inspired by the myth of Tristan and Isolde, where the oblivion of love yearns for and transcends death. Not surprisingly echoes of the English horn solo of the self-absorbed lovers from Act III of Wagner's opera can be heard passed among the other solo winds. The medieval Easter introit and plainchant alleluias move easily from bells to winds throughout movements three and four.

The song of the Spanish Calandra lark is given prominence. The legendary Uirapurú (the subject of an early ballet by Heitor Villa-Lobos), was heard on Messiaen's 1963 trip to South America. It also appears as a soloist. The lark provides a theme of joy, while, in true Messiaen fashion, the song of the Uirapurú is offered as the voice of Christ. Messiaen also appropriated patterns from the Indian deci-talas, as he had done since first encountering an extensive guide to Hindu rhythms in the late 1930s.

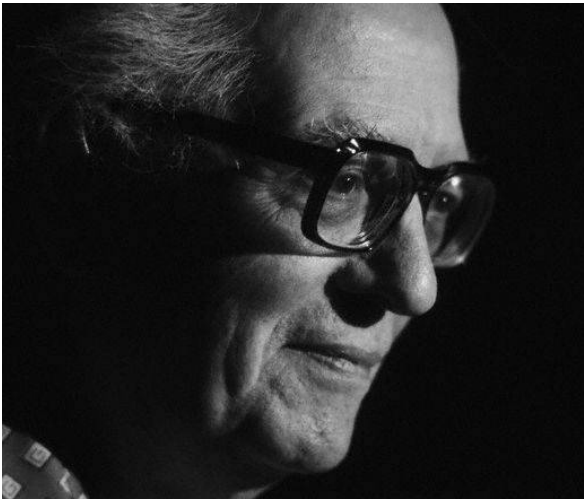


General Charles de Gaulle

Messiaen's catholic post-nationalist approach to making a "requiem" that affirms the afterlife em-

braces all his sources of inspiration. This uniquely non liturgical but no less Catholic work affirms the unquenchability of life through a multitude of means.

Et Expecto followed Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* (May 30, 1962, London) and György Ligeti's *Requiem* (March 14, 1965, Stockholm). These three works are among the most daring and distinctly different expressions of the genre and of the period. They are worthy of comparison if only briefly. Messiaen eliminated the text and chorus altogether and pared down to Berliozian winds, brass and percussion. Like Britten's pacifism, and Ligeti's holocaust memories, Messiaen drew from his experiences as a prisoner of war, and citizen of the world. Unlike Britten's and Ligeti's memorial sojourns this epic journey of contrasts, with its passages of austerity and its joyous ornithological bouts, ends with an affirmation of tremendous intensity.



Messiaen

After Saint Francis

The music of Takemitsu and Pärt, as well as the remaining music of Messiaen on this program come from the years following the premiere in 1983 of his monumental opera *Saint Francis of Assisi*. From the first approach made by the Paris Opera in 1971, the work took eight years to compose and over five years to orchestrate. The saga of its creation is one of almost impossible difficulty and triumph. In 1976 he became ill with viral hepatitis and a gallstone. Barely recovered from that, he tripped in the underground Métro and shattered his glasses deeply lacerating his eyebrows, nose and lips. The gash on his ankle, overlooked in the haste to stitch up his face, eventually led to necrosis, painful chronic ulcers and the need for sleeping pills. Acute bronchitis in 1982 landed him in the hospital for tests and treatment; severe back pain was a recurrent problem.

Messiaen was convinced that he would not survive even the rehearsals of the opera, but a year later

he composed a surprising and relatively accessible organ work made up of 18 short movements.

A City Even Higher

In 1987, after a short respite, Messiaen produced the terse and charming piano book *Petites Esquisses d'oiseaux* (Little Bird Sketches), widely admired for its sophisticated wit. That same year he completed the last of his five one-movement concertos in which the piano's primary material is, not surprisingly, bird song. *La Ville d'en Haut* (The City on High, or The City Above) returns to an orchestra of forty configured very much like that for *Et Expecto Resurrectionem Mortuorum*. But unlike the requiem it shares the exuberance of the third of the "bird" concertos *Colors of the Celestial City*, *Et Expecto's* 1963 predecessor for an orchestra half the size.

The piano writing has a liquid fluency in its ornate weaving of specific birds, many from recent trips to Japan and the United States. The speed with which he composed it, taking little more than a month, strongly contrasts with the fourth piano concerto *Un Vitrail et des oiseaux* (A Stained Glass Window and Birds, 1986), an arduous commission from Pierre Boulez that coincided with a complete crisis of confidence.



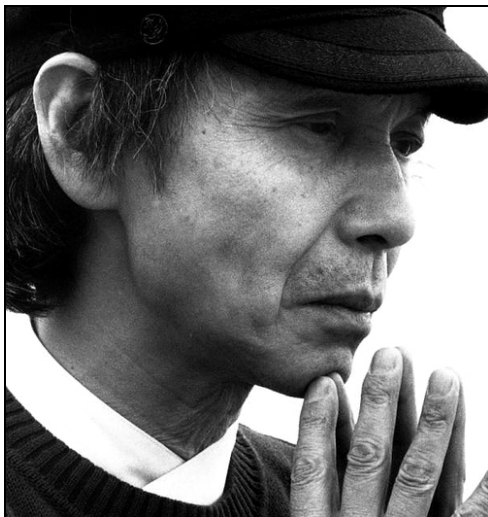
Japanese Torii Gate

La Ville d'en Haut ends with ritualized repetitions that recall Messiaen's *Sept Haikai* (Seven Haiku, Japanese Sketches for piano and small orchestra, 1962). With the last concerto he summarizes the previous four, beginning with *Réveil des oiseaux* (Birds Awakening, 1953), and *Oiseaux exotiques* (Exotic Birds, 1956) while appropriating aspects of the three key works of the early 1960s. *La Ville d'en Haut* was premiered alongside the first hearing of Pierre Boulez' completely reworked cantata *Le visage nuptial* (1946/51/88-89). The program was very well received and toured to Italy and Britain. There John Cage met Messiaen for the first time since 1949 when he sat in on Messiaen's Paris Conservatory class and befriended Pierre Boulez.

Meanwhile Takemitsu

In the meantime, the Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu (1930-94), was writing the music that would define the last decade of his life. Composer/conductor Oliver Knussen, comparing *Signals from Heaven* to previous works, states, "...his lifelong affinities with Debussy, Messiaen and with big-band scoring and jazz harmony are much more to the fore." The melodic and rhythmic material for the two antiphonal fanfares is very close, but how that material is scored and treated reflects the first festival audiences for which each of the two were commissioned. The languorous *Night Signal* premiered at Tokyo's Select Live under the Sky Jazz Festival to celebrate its tenth anniversary; Scotland's Glasgow Musica Nova Festival was the destination for *Day Signal*, which wears a brighter neo-classical attitude.

Perhaps *Night Signal* is a look back to his WWII days when Takemitsu secretly learned forbidden American and French popular music as a conscripted soldier aged fourteen. Very soon after the war ended the modern French aesthetic took hold when Messiaen's Debussy-indebted piano *Preludes* were given to him by the seventeen year old composer Toshi Ichiyanagi. Subsequently, Takemitsu studied Messiaen's 1944 book *Technique of my musical language*, which made a profound impression.



Toru Takemitsu

Mozart Looms Large

In 1987 Messiaen published his extensive analysis of the 22 piano concertos of Mozart (all of which his wife the pianist Yvonne Loriod played from memory and in complete cycles). The impending 1991 Mozart Bicentennial Celebration had renewed his passion for this composer. In 1989 the conductor Marek Janowski would commission an orchestra piece in the spirit of Mozart to be performed on the actual 200th anniversary of the composer's death, December 5, 1991. One can easily imagine

Un Sourire (A Smile) on a program with the *Jupiter Symphony*. The resulting work is a curious collage of styles, not well understood at the time of its debut, but clearly an important step toward Messiaen's final masterpiece the 11-movement *Éclairs sur l'au delà* (Flashes from the Beyond, 1992).



Zubin Mehta, conductor

A much earlier work binds *Un Sourire* with the fifth movement of *Éclairs* through the person of Zubin Mehta. In the summer of 1987 the music director and conductor of the New York Philharmonic had written to Messiaen proposing an evening-length work for the 150th anniversary of the orchestra in 1992-93. Several months later Mehta's arrived in Paris to conduct Messiaen's first orchestral work, the 1930 *Les Offrandes Oubliées* (Forgotten Offerings). His visit had an enormously stimulating effect on Messiaen's creativity. They discussed the commission and Mehta's intention to perform the *Turangalila Symphony* in New York on the occasion of Messiaen's 80th birthday with Loriod playing the all-important piano part.

A Nearly Forgotten First Offering

In the concert hall *Les Offrandes Oubliées* has been overshadowed by *The Ascension*, a four movement suite written three years later and transcribed as an organ work. The younger work, when it gets played, is easily accepted by audiences while showing off the 22-year-old composer's already distinctive voice. A slow-moving introduction quivers with the promise of salvation; suddenly the middle sections is turbulent and wildly colorful with echoes of César Franck's *Le Chasseur maudit* (The Accursed Huntsman, 1883), Rimsky Korsakov's version of Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain*, 1886, Paul Dukas' *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, 1897, Florent Schmitt's *Le Tragédie de Salomé*, 1907, and Stravinsky's *Firebird* ballet of 1910.

These distinctive sources have in common sacrilege, magic and transgression, as well as thrilling orchestral effects. In the final section the young Messiaen follows his ardent stampede of sin and abandonment with a cleansing light-filled adagio sweetly attenuated to depict the momentarily forgotten but eternal Eucharist.

Sections of his Mozart tribute recall this serene music of 60-years past alternating with Messiaen's more contemporary preoccupations, the joys of weaving together chattering birdcalls – this time without a piano. In somewhat self-revealing ways he described his feelings for Mozart: "I didn't try ...to imitate his style, which would have been idiotic... Mozart always had many enemies...all his children died, his wife was ill, he knew only tragedy. And he al-ways smiled. In his music and in his life. So I too tried to smile..."

The Past Goes Forward

Un Sourire was swiftly dispatched while Messiaen was in the midst of composing *Éclairs*. The fifth movement *Demeurer dans l'Amour* (Abide in Love, or Dwell in Love) is the emotional center of this sprawling work. Here Messiaen slowly spins exquisitely refined harmonies across a radiant plane of string sound glimpsed in 1930, again with *Un Sourire*, but now developed into a slowly undulating melody that insinuates itself into the sensorium to simulate the experience of paradise. Three times it is interrupted by prescribed silence.



Arvo Pärt

During the four-year period of *Éclair's* composition and orchestration (1987-91) Messiaen spent six weeks in Australia on a fairly comprehensive 80th birthday tour of his music in May and June of 1988. A powerful enticement was the birding expeditions to Sherbrook Forest near Melbourne, Tidbinbilla near Canberra, and the forest at Tamborine Mountain near Brisbane. On each trip he observed the elusive but purposeful Lyrebird preparing bridal bowers among the ferns and towering eucalyptus. The third movement of *Éclairs* is entitled *The Lyrebird and the Bridal City* in which the Superb Lyrebird is the only singer. Elsewhere there are the

songs of birds experienced directly from excursions in Europe, Africa, Venezuela, India, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea. The work premiered six months after his death.

Meanwhile Pärt

The Estonian Arvo Pärt (b. 1935) is of the same generation as the Americans Terry Riley, Philip Glass and Steve Reich, and shares their taste for the use of minimal materials earning him the label of holy minimalist, alongside Henryk Górecki and John Tavener. His early anxious use of serialism radically changed after a self-imposed compositional moratorium was spent studying medieval and renaissance religious choral music. Both Pärt and Messiaen immersed themselves in the music before Bach. Messiaen often remarked that he was born in the wrong century owing to his sympathy for the early religious music of Leonin, Perotin, Guillaume Machaut, Johannes Ockeghem, Josquin de Prez, and Palestrina as well as the secular music of Clement Jannequin and Claude LeJeune.

Not surprisingly then, Pärt's 1989 *Magnificat* sounds in the tradition of Messiaen's a' capella *O Sacrum Convivium* (1937) and its unaccompanied successor *Cantique des Cantique* (Song of Songs, 1953) by Messiaen's close friend Jean-Yves Daniel Lesur. Traditionally performed as part of Vespers evening prayer, *Magnificat* is Mary's exultant response to the Annunciation by the Angel Gabriel of her imminent magnification as the mother of God, and the miraculous revitalization of her aged cousin Elizabeth's womb wherein was growing John the Baptist. For more than a thousand years each night the *Magnificat* has been repeated in churches, convents and monasteries.

The *Magnificat* proved to be something of a sketch for Pärt's ambitious 100-minute *Kanon Pokajanen* composed in 1989-97 and considered by many a masterpiece of the unaccompanied choral tradition.

Pärt's "tintinnabuli" style is a simpler and more traditionally humanistic version of spectralism where the focus is on the acoustical properties of selected chords, often with the use of advanced technology. Spectralism is a term that arose in the mid-1970s and is used to understand the common sonic and compositional interests among a group of Messiaen students and their followers.

Pärt's samples of the spectrum, if you will, relate to the pealing of bells owing to their dynamic richness of sonority and the gradually patterned contours of their sound structures often slowed to a hypnotic unfolding. To borrow from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Bells", Pärt's writing, especially for strings and voices, sounds pure yet emotionally complex and resonates...

While the stars that oversprinkle
All the heavens, seem to twinkle
With a crystalline delight;
Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme,
To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells
From the bells, bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells...

A Fateful Interview

Messiaen gave an interview to a young journalist in 1990 in which the subject of his wartime experience came up. He recalled that in 1945, the newly established Radio France commissioned him to compose a brief but formidable work commemorating the liberation the Nazi concentration camps for very large orchestra and chorus of sopranos, altos and tenors and performed only once for live broadcast. Owing to the circumstances, the vocal line had to be simple and powerful, an anthem sung in unison.

It is worth pointing out that the two prevailing anthems of the time, the revolutionary *La Marseillaise* and the socialist *L' Internationale*, were tainted — in the first case due to its cooption by Vichy government of collaborators, and the second by the grim effects of Stalinist Communism. Messiaen remembered that he wrote the poem with little time to fulfill the overall task and that the orchestral accompaniment was highly colored and glittering — reminiscent of Hector Berlioz. He thought the score had been lost. Tantalized, after many months of persistent digging, the journalist found the manuscript in the Radio France archives and showed it to the composer shortly before his death in 1992.

A Forgotten Piece of Holocaust History

Messiaen was pleased and moved by *Chants des Déportés* (Song of the Deported) and approved its eventual publication. Not much else is currently known about the circumstances of the first performance and public reception. Critic Jean Wiéner (1896-1982), the renowned Jewish film composer of some 300 films made over 60 years by such directors as Renoir and Bresson, wrote of the premiere, "It was an emotional experience for me to listen to the performance... heroic and tender... this short blast of music, imploring yet glorious, is at once pitying and joyful... genius, like everything which comes from Messiaen."

Today, with the prevailing sensitivities of political correctness, one might have expected raised eyebrows over the personal spirituality expressed on public airwaves by Messiaen's poem. However, one must remember that Catholicism was the state religion. Furthermore, the nation as a whole was implicated to some degree in the persecution of the Jews, so it would be unseemly to question the sincerity of a famous POW, at least on this occasion.

For French musicians the presence of Jews in the cultural elite had long been a given: Jacques Offenbach, Camille Saint-Saens, Darius Milhaud, and Messiaen's teacher Paul Dukas each had Jewish ancestry. So it must have been emotional indeed for the artists and intellectuals, and for the many fighters in the Résistance movement who worked to counter the systematic transportation of Jews from Paris and its outlying way stations, to hear "this short blast... at once pitying and joyful."



The only known performance since the 1945 premiere was given during a 50th anniversary commemoration in 1995, owing undoubtedly to the enormous demands required to perform such a short work and its intended purpose. Andrew Davis conducted the BBC Orchestra and chorus in London's Royal Festival Hall. The performance was recorded and released on the French Jade label in 1999 and recently rereleased for a wider market including internet downloading.

Tonight's is the first performance in the United States. There seemed no better way to conclude The OM Century than with Messiaen's last posthumously published work, *Chants des Déportés*.

© PATRICK SCOTT 2009

The author wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to the extraordinary research and writing of Peter Hill & Nigel Simeone, (Messiaen, Yale University Press. 2005)