

Transports de joie

by Ian Carson

An introduction to the organ music of Messiaen, including a discussion with Gillian Weir, who has recently recorded all his organ works for Collins Classics.

'Say a prayer for the starlings' runs a Randy Stonehill song, putting the case for one of the lesser loved species of God's creation. It is a sentiment I find it hard to endorse as a pair which inhabit the roof space above our bedroom awaken us with their individual mimicry, one chorusing a car alarm and the other re-echoing Johnny Morris's wartime parrot whose imitation of a whistling bomb dropping out of the sky was convincing enough to send the military diving under the table. But nature's facility in imitating the sounds of man is scarcely matched by man's ability to turn the songs of the birds into art. To walk from our countryside home in the company of an experienced ornithologist is to have a whole new orchestra of musicians revealed. As he turns his head to differing points of the compass he catalogues the Flycatcher section, the Nuthatch, the Warbler, invisible but not inaudible. The sound of music is everywhere imminent in creation, but until the present century composers had drawn on little more than the bumble-bee, the cuckoo and the nightingale. Then Bartok's Fabreian obsession with the insect world brought their stridulations into music, and Messiaen set out to create a vision of the harmony of heaven amongst the wartime horror of Stalag VIIIA, when as a prisoner-of-war he mirrored the early morning birdsong of a chorus the Nazis could not silence in the *Liturgie de cristal* which opens his *Quatuor pour le fin du temps*.

Birdsong later came to be one of the pre-occupations of Messiaen's organ music, but there are other elements in the quartet, which (as in the case of the birdsong) had been absorbing interests from his youth, and which are central to his organ pieces. There is a cosmic Christ-centred vision, supported by the certainty of his Catholic faith. But the listener is also led into the realms of uncertainty as Messiaen tries to free from its enslavement to measured time by introducing Hindu rhythmic patterns and other devices which undermine the predictability of pulse. The extremes of privation Messiaen experienced in Stalag VIIIA seem to have been one of the stimuli for a heightened awareness of colours, which he translated into music, hearing a spectrum in sound.

If birdsong in Messiaen's organ music can be viewed as the gate which opens into the whole glorious and colourful garden of creation, the other aspects likewise expand into multi-dimensional images. His Catholic faith was pre-eminent from the beginning. 'The first idea that I wished to express,' he once said, 'the most important because it is placed above all else, is the existence of the truths of the Catholic faith. I have the good fortune to be a Catholic: I was born a believer, and it so happens that the sacred texts have struck me even from my earliest childhood. A certain number of my works are destined therefore to highlight the theological truths of the Catholic faith. This is the main aspect of my work, the noblest, undoubtedly the most useful, the most valid, and the sole aspect which I will not perhaps regret at the hour of my death.'

So, embossed into his music is the inevitable drama of the mass, resonating back through the centuries, the ecstatic worship of images from the Christ story, visions of Heaven and of the apocalypse, the rapturous focussing on stained glass windows, and the thread of plainsong giving a timeless continuity.

The origins of the unmeasured stream of plainsong's subtly undulating rhythms lie outside the traditions of Western music, and there was a turning to the East in Messiaen's thinking when his youthful studies embraced not only plainsong but the poetic metres of ancient Greece and Hindu rhythms. His vision grew from one which had already been perceived by Debussy, which envisaged rhythm liberated from its accepted function of supporting pulse and

harmony. Within the framework of the vision colour was applied in the form of modes engineered by the composer, and by adopting the concept of serialism for a while, which at its most extreme is applied to virtually every element in the music. The philosophical and religious elements intertwined with the oriental rhythms also exert their influence on the nature of the composition.

Despite the intellectual muscle behind these aspects of his compositions, Messiaen's music is often an overwhelming expression of love, of the same nature whether human (which can be as sumptuously erotic as Debussy's *Pelléas*), or divine. In addition there is one other influence on his musical ear which involves no great workings of the intellect to appreciate, and it is simply his love of the sound of the French organ as envisaged and realised by the great nineteenth century builder Cavaillé-Coll.

Gillian Weir came to the public's attention as an interpreter of Messiaen when she won the Interpretation Competition at the St Albans International Organ Festival in 1964. On that occasion she played the *Combat de la mort et de la vie* from *Les corps glorieux*, in a performance which moved the jury profoundly. Shortly afterwards she recorded the complete organ works on LP for the Radnor label and later made another complete recording on the organ of the National Shrine in Washington DC for the BBC. In the course of her career she has earned worldwide applause as an interpreter of Messiaen's music, one who is motivated and inspired by a real love for these compositions, and by knowledge and respect for the intellect and vision that lie behind them. The climax of her association with his music came in 1988 when she and the composer were joint 'Artists-in-Residence' at a huge festival of his music arranged by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. She has now recorded his organ music again, to be issued as a CD set by Collins Classics this September.

She has written extensively about his music. Her paper about *Messiaen's Musical Language* was published by the University of Western Australia in 1979, and later this year Faber & Faber are due to publish *The Messiaen Companion*, which will include her 10,000 word essay on his organ music. With these two major forthcoming publishing events it seemed an appropriate time to discuss the Messiaen organ repertoire with her. But first what of the man, Olivier Messiaen?

Ian Carson (IC). Did he come over as someone set apart?

Gillian Weir (GW). Well there was the power of who he was, like the aura which surrounds a great conductor, but there was also a concentration of the faculties on things that matter... one feels the strength, the intellectual power. IC. You had come to have a real deep knowledge of his music before you ever met him. When you did finally come to meet him, did it add an extra dimension? GW. It always adds an extra dimension to meet a composer of music you admire, but my relationship was very much with the music itself rather than with the man. One of the things he indicated though was the clarity he wanted. We often feel that the music is meant to emerge from a bathroom acoustic overlaid with not only the aura of mysticism but also a physical mist, but in fact that was not his intention, the music is complex polyphonically most of the time, and that's how he wanted it to be heard, even though you need an acoustic to overlay the colours, the harmonic colours, that emerge from the music.

IC. Do you feel that he always knew all the answers about his music? GW. Not necessarily, no. I think it's a danger, particularly of our analytic and mechanistic age, to ask too many questions of any creative person. It can be illuminating, and when you first meet the music of Messiaen it's really necessary to have an idea of the images that inspired him. It can be an enormous help to an audience for example if I stand up and say a little about the music, not the

grammar of the music, but the images that it's meant to convey. But it's possible I think to so examine the way you have created something that in the end you can endanger your power to create in the future, and I view it like holding a bubble. You can look at the bubble and admire it, and learn something from it by the shimmer it makes, but if you grasp it and say 'Now I have the secret of the bubble,' it breaks, and you have it no more. I think it's true even of a performer. If you are aware too much of how that final ounce of inspiration works you can so confine it within the limitations of your own ability to understand, and also to convey not only by words but also by thoughts, that you compromise and you limit the otherwise *illimitable* power of the instinct. IC. So would your advice to a student be as much to research the images that Messiaen had in mind when writing as the precise intellectual content of the music? GW. Yes definitely both. I'm not saying 'Don't try to understand the techniques,' which in any case are fascinating, but 'do understand this other dimension.' This has to do with the broader question of interpretation which has been occupying my thoughts tremendously in the past few years. I think we are in danger of losing the idea of interpretation, not only of music, but of other things in life perhaps. The most important thing I have discovered in my life is that you can have all the correct facts and draw all the wrong conclusions from them. I have seen it both in organ building and in early music performance practice, where having the facts but not interpreting them has sometimes led us down a blind alley. It's impossible to provide rules for interpretation. You can have rules on how to make a computer work but you must be taught how to think in abstract terms before you can decide what is good and what is bad, what is useful and what is not. You have to take the facts of history and then *interpret* them. That is what is important. You also have to decide whose information is valuable. You have to know the context. Every so called fact has to be tested in context to check its validity. You have to train a person's instincts. You have to go around a subject, approach it from as many sides as you can, and from the back, saying 'Where did this so called fact come from?'

IC. You mentioned one example when Messiaen did actually give you an interpretation of a detail in the Mass, which differed from the printed score. GW. That's right. He changed the timing of a little figure that comes several times in the *Offertoire*. He wanted it quite fast and it was marked at the same very slow tempo as the beginning and I said 'You haven't written that.' And he said 'I know, it's my fault, but I've changed my mind.' And there are other instances where he changed his mind about tempi in a general way at the end of his life, but I think if we are seasoned interpreters, and are looking at the whole body of music and what stands behind it, we should still make our own decisions as to whether his later wish to hear some of it slower is in fact valid for our performances or not. There are many cases where I think not, for example, *Les bergers* (*La nativité*), has a section marked *modéré et joyeux*. It makes total sense to me that he wanted it joyous at this point; but in later life he wanted it slower, possibly because it had been played too fast. IC. He had this problem with *Le banquet céleste*. GW. So he republished it all with quavers instead of semiquavers – that's right, but what is 'too fast' and 'too slow'? There is an instance of Mahler listening to a rehearsal and saying 'You're playing this too slowly' and they said 'But it's marked 'slowly',' and he said 'Yes but it's a different acoustic from where I marked it originally.' We have to use our common sense, our musicality, we have in other words to interpret, and one of the big problems of the moment in America with Messiaen, where he is hardly ever played (they keep telling me that organists are being fired from their church jobs for playing Messiaen) is that they often play it absolutely coldly, and they take the extreme precision of Messiaen's markings – particularly with the rhythmic groups – absolutely literally to the point where they destroy the sense of freedom which was his entire *raison d'être* and his entire philosophy. If I had to use one word for Messiaen I would say 'freedom.' He was a man of freedom. He used birdsong not only

because it was a wonderful source of technical material, but because the birds represented freedom, especially the lark which flies highest of all.

Les corps glorieux is above all about the *freedom* of the resurrected ones, freedom in every way. They're freed from the limitations of a body, they're free to see everything now, they have total perspicacity. Freedom was Messiaen's thing, so if you have five against three it doesn't mean that it would be a sterile five against three where every one of the five is equal and every one of three is equal. It means that it will have the quality, the life, the vitality of a quintuplet, and the freedom – from metrical straits – of a triplet. Then the music works; it leaps into life; and that's the whole reason that he used these groups, that the music would not be imprisoned in metre and a cold dead exactitude.

IC. When it comes to complex rhythms, especially these rhythms which add an extra semiquaver or take them away to upset what you expect, I wonder whether you actually count those out or whether you feel them? GW. They have to be counted in a certain sense, but then they must be felt at the time of performance. When you're learning them you count them, but still I would say never-ever-ever count from the smallest number. This is one of the instructions I see people giving and it's one of the sources of this sterile reproduction of the notes, because if you're sitting there counting five demi-semiquavers against seven or whatever it's going to sound like that. Also, your counting will change and not be even. I hear this continually in *Le banquet céleste* when students sit there trying to count very small units, and often the counting in their heads wavers. You have to have a living rhythm. IC. You have to feel it. GW. Absolutely. Perhaps the most complex example in the earlier works is the *Entrée* of the *Messe de la Pentecôte*. That is particularly difficult, and people take extraordinarily small values and try to count them upward. It won't work. You have to take a unit which is of reasonable size and which can be felt by you as a beat, the kind of beat a conductor will use with his hand, in other words a quaver or even a crotchet, and then you set against it his triplets and duplets and quadruplets, *as* triplets and quadruplets and so on. Then you will have both, you will have the precision because the main beat will fall exactly where it's meant to and will be precise, but against it will be these full-of-life figurations... quintuplets etc., heard in their right perspective and given a rhythmic – as opposed to metric – feel. Rhythm is never equal, it is always strong and weak, tension and release, ebb and flow, action and reaction, it creates the flow in music and in everything else in the universe. It is never exact in the sense of metre. Certainly the main beats must fall where they're meant to, but one gives rhythmic flexibility to the smaller notes by the subtlety of the accents.

IC. It seems to me what you're saying really is get the technique, the precision right first, then let it flow, and then let the vision be realised. GW. I just would say that I am very much against the principle of teaching which said 'Just learn the notes, then come back and we'll put the expression in.' If you are not alert to what the music is telling you, from the very first note, you will deaden your response to it so that it will never be alive. I have a vision of the music sitting there ready and willing, anxious and eager to welcome you and to talk to you – the player – and so often that player won't listen until he's ready, and then it's too late because he has killed his response to it. You really must have this feeling from the beginning but the point is to take a big enough unit as the beat and then use one's musicality to set these rhythmic groups against it as living entities.

IC. Do you listen to Messiaen's own recordings? GW. Yes, I listened recently to *Diptyque* which can be such a sterile kind of piece, and so much admired the way he brought out the subtleties of the rubato in the first section which can otherwise sound merely

metrical; and the way that he managed to convey to the listener the changes, the mutations of the theme, leading the listener's ear on. It was fascinating. IC. I'm interested in the instruments he had in mind when writing for the organ. Obviously Sainte Trinité was a very great inspiration for him, but do you think he always longed for that French Romantic sound. GW. He wanted two things, power and colour. Power was extremely important. I said to him once, "What about tracker action, don't you like the subtlety of the touch?" and he said "Well of course that's obviously an asset, but they're not powerful enough." (At that time they were being built in a strict neo-classical style thought to be authentically North-German). He wanted the overwhelming quality of a big Romantic organ; he wanted always to overwhelm, both emotionally and literally. And the other thing of course is colour – in every sense, tonal, harmonic... he claims always to have seen the exact parallel colour of his harmonies, and why not, after all colour and sound are both made of frequencies.

IC. So he did literally hear sounds in terms of colours we can see? GW. Yes, he sees the colours at the same time, so he would describe a particular chord as being blue and gold with a silver band round the edges or with red flashing through it, and so on. IC. So he would look at the stops and see a palette? GW. Yes. But although he marked his registrations very clearly in the music, he often changed them; when working with Almut Rössler for example, who mounted festivals of his music several times on her Beckerath organ, which is nothing like the Cavaillé-Coll in La Trinité. And that, by the way, is nothing like the average Cavaillé-Coll. His registrations, especially in the later works, are not for a typical Cavaillé-Coll organ at all. IC. He made it his own instrument. GW. Yes he did, by all sorts of additions, and he was considering even more when he died. They were going to put a Septième in for example. He liked these mutations to play with. But in many ways the modern American organ comes closer to it, with many many stops, especially mutations of different strengths and colours, although their reeds are not nearly so pungent. But yes, he continually made new colours, by piling up harmonies, or by working with the tonal colours.

IC. What sort of acoustic surround did he like around his organ music? Did he want a huge wash of sound? GW. It depended a little on the piece. In something like *L'ascension* one needs the warmth of a big acoustic around the note, and also, in order to have the play of one tonal colour on another, you need to have reverberation. It's just awful in *Transports de joie* if the chord cuts off immediately, because you don't then get the mixing of the colours. A student once played *Les anges* to me on one 8' diapason, and when I picked myself up off the floor I said "Why?", and he said "well it's clearer that way." It's one kind of clarity, but it's not what Messiaen wanted. It's rather like taking a famous impressionistic painting and putting it right into focus and repainting it so that it's perfectly clear – like an architect's drawing instead of the vision of the painter.

However, it's absolutely mistaken to think that he wanted a vague and mystically vast acoustic and I can't say that often enough. He wanted the notes to be heard. I played *L'ascension* once when he was there and he changed the registration in *Alleluia sereins* at the end where there's just an 8' gedackt, and added a large larigot to the right-hand part in order to make it clearer, so it seems he did want the music to be heard. He said to people that he liked a concert hall acoustic provided it wasn't totally dead because you *could* hear the music.

IC. Do you think he saw the performance of his organ works as an act of worship, an act of homage in itself? GW. I would say that it's clear from his faith, and from what he says in the music, that they are meant to be that way. The *Messe de la Pentecôte* example, was for liturgical use, and very much to be part of the service. However, he also says that everything in the world, everything in nature is filled

with the spirit of God, and therefore I imagine that he would take the view that one's *every* act would be an act of worship. Ideally, that's what anyone really steeped in the Christian faith wants to happen.

IC. It seems to me there is a sense of ecstasy in a lot of his organ music – you get it in Alain as well – do you think a student should aim to be in that spiritual place before performance? GW. Well here we're getting onto very dangerous ground, because we'd in effect be favouring one kind of religious interpretation as against another. If I can digress for a moment, Bach's chorale preludes can be ruined when tailored to trends in worship, if for example a prelude is played slowly because its text fits a certain posture of intercession, when it is clear from the music itself that it should be played faster. So with Messiaen: the words he uses to introduce his pieces or even to explain his ideas may raise *responses* in us that are quite different from his intentions. We are all at different stages along our journey in the spiritual life, or indeed may not have embarked upon it. There are I'm sure many people who love Messiaen's music for its own sake, and on the other hand there are certainly many who reject it either in spite of its religious connotations or in some cases because of them. Messiaen's explanations were always in terms of French Catholic dogma and theology, which he insisted were the genesis of all his writings, but that doesn't necessarily mean that the music conveys only that, or indeed that it always conveys it at all. It's interesting that when his music was criticised for its means of expressing stated religious truth his reply was not to say "I have an ecstatic and comprehensive true view of God." He quoted instead Liszt and his mistress the Comtesse d'Agoult, where he was asked what he thought of her and replied "What do I think of her? Why I'd throw myself out of the window for her." For Messiaen there was only one kind of love in the end, whether earthly or divine. For all reasons I would never presume to suggest to a student that they adopt any single religious viewpoint towards the music. In a performance, you can give to people only what you yourself have experienced in the learning process, which includes not only sitting and practising but your whole life.

IC. It seems to me that Messiaen has a persona which is different from what you might imagine from the intellectual workings which went on before he sat down and wrote music. It comes back to love, and the fact that in that sense he could be absolutely overwhelming and uncontrolled musically almost to the point of vulgarity. GW. Yes, it is vulgar sometimes. You know Pierre Boulez said "This is music for a bordello" of the *Turangalla-Symphony*. One aspect of vulgarity is excess and Messiaen's emotion is sometimes felt to be excessive, but I'm happy with that; I think it's better to overdo the emotion than to be without it. Emotion is Messiaen's message, indeed I'm fascinated by the way in which he uses his modes, his harmonies, to create *structure*, by creating emotional tensions then releasing them, so as to produce an *emotional* rhythm and finally *shape*. This is very much a quality of the *Méditations*. We are very aware of rhythms as pulse, a series of intricate groupings, as used by Messiaen to free music from its metrical prison, but this emotional rhythm to create form has largely been overlooked. For me it is every bit as interesting. IC. So someone playing Messiaen has to be in touch with their emotions, to sense them in the music, and be able to express them? GW. Absolutely, but the key word is 'express.' The player must communicate, and that means one must not only experience the emotion but express, convey, communicate the message that is its meaning.

[Part 2 of this article will appear in the November edition of *OR*, and will discuss the individual organ works, and the organ in Denmark on which Gillian Weir made her recordings].