

# RISING ACTION

OLIVIER MESSIAEN'S *FROM THE CANYONS TO THE STARS...* TAKES AUDIENCES FROM THE DEPTHS OF THE EARTH TO CELESTIAL HEIGHTS.

BY RAPHAEL MAURICE



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Olivier Messiaen

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) was not just one of the major composers of the 20th century. To delve into his life through biographies (and music) is to make the acquaintance of a modern century Renaissance man, a figure deeply versed in theology, ornithology, Japanese culture, anthropology, and world music from the ancient Greeks to the current modes of the Far East. Indeed, Messiaen was a veritable well of knowledge, enriched by deep personal explorations into culture and his inquisitive world-crossing travels. He drew on those experiences in order to compose his musical works. For Messiaen, being fully alive meant not only openness to existential engagement with his fellow sojourners on the planet, but immersion in literature and texts as well. Messiaen left few topics untouched, few intellectual rocks unturned. It was Messiaen's attentiveness to nearly everything around him that made him one of the most idiosyncratic masters of the last century.

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Bryce Canyon photo by Deborah O'Grady, whose images will accompany the performances.

The St. Louis Symphony's January 16 performance of *Des canyons aux étoiles...* (*From the Canyons to the Stars...*), Messiaen's dedicatory piece to the U.S. bicentennial inspired by his awe-struck exploration of Bryce Canyon in southwest Utah, will be counterpointed with visual images by the artist Deborah O'Grady. (The work will also be performed on the Symphony's California Tour at Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall on January 31, and Los Angeles's Walt Disney Concert Hall on February 2.) Symphony Music Director David Robinson invited O'Grady to employ these images to compliment the wonderful and strange sounds of Messiaen's piece. The composer sought to evoke the ravines and chasms he climbed in the canyons, and the celestial regions

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the devout Catholic imagined they led to. O'Grady sought a unity of themes between image and music. "I was intrigued by the possibility of exploring the language of landscape-imagery in conjunction with the emotional power of music," O'Grady says. Her images, which are precise, sure, and beautiful, do indeed create, in her words, "a visual symphony."

Messiaen, in a 1978 interview, discussed two perspectives of his trip to Utah, a visitation that sounds akin to Dante's descent into the infernal region and ascent to the celestial vault in *The Divine Comedy*: "I'd seen the canyons from two different perspectives. I'd seen them from on high, with the vertigo of the abyss, that's important; one sees vast black holes against the red of the cliffs. Afterwards, my wife and I went down the trails...we made our way to the very depths of the abyss, we could see the path circling very high above us, and that

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is what inspired the title of the work, *Des canyons aux étoiles*; one progresses from the deepest bowels of the earth and ascends toward the stars.”

Instead of Virgil leading Messiaen from the abyss toward the stars, the composer was accompanied by his wife, the remarkable pianist Yvonne Loriod, through the vertiginous highs and lows of the canyons. Messiaen continued: “I had to raise myself from the depth of the canyons to the beauty of the stars.... Having left the canyons to climb to the stars, I had only to keep going in the same direction to raise myself up to God. So my work is at once geological, ornithological, astronomical, and theological. Despite the importance of color and birds, it’s above all a religious work of praise and contemplation.” Messiaen had an idiosyncratic relationship with colors and birds. The composer was synesthetic, meaning that he could see colors when he heard music, and vice versa. And birds were his muses. For much of his life he carried a notebook so he could transcribe birdsong wherever he went. *From the Canyons to the Stars...* is filled with the sounds of birds he heard in the American Southwest, each individual song recognizable. For birders’, the music is an ecstatic dream.

But whatever one’s physical or metaphysical sensibilities, *From the Canyons to the Stars...* produces an emotional resonance in response to the work of a man who possessed such a commitment to praise and contemplation. In the same way that metaphysical poets George Herbert and John Donne wrote works nearly inseparable from a Christian conception of God, Messiaen put that devotion into his music. The result are

feats of wonder and contemplation, which do not rely upon a shared religious devotion. Music, great music, can be understood as a kind of prayer, ascending the voids and lifting the hearts of those who come in contact with it. This was certainly true of Messiaen. Early in his career a friend observed, “With Messiaen, all is prayer.”

*From the Canyons to the Stars...* achieves a feeling of ascent, as if from the beginning of creation—a spiritual desert—from the first movement to the final movement, wherein the New City of God is found and cherished. Within *From the Canyons to the Stars...*, we move from the aridity of man’s nearly bankrupt soul at creation—think of the Fall—to the crystalline heights of a palace built by God for men and women. It’s all there. Within this symphony there exists great spaces of doubt, akin to St. John of the Cross and Pascal’s darker moments looking out into the void of space, as well as a redemptive finale wherein man is rescued from the darkness and brought into the light.

This one-night-only performance may be thought of as another New Year celebration, centered around Messiaen’s brilliant symphony and O’Grady’s striking images. The two artists as fused, inseparable, bridging time and artistic vocation—at least for this spectacular night of music, contemplation, and visual sensation. You may rise.

*The St. Louis Symphony performs Messiaen’s Des canyons aux étoiles... (From the Canyons to the Stars...) at Powell Hall on Saturday, January 16 at 8 p.m.*

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