

Olivier Messiaen - Organ Works

MESSIAEN: Organ Works (1926-1951)--Le Banquet Céleste, Diptyque, Apparition de l'Eglise éternelle, L'Ascension, La Nativité du Seigneur, Les Corps Glorieux, Messe de la Pentecôte, Livre d'Orgue. Olivier Messiaen, organ of Ste-Trinité Church, Paris. Pathé EMI C 153-16291/6, 6 records. (Mono)

"Messiaen," Poulenc once wrote, "is beyond all doubt the most curious composer in France since 1940. One may either like or hate his music, but one cannot deny it. I am always tempted to compare him with the painter Georges Rouault. Both possess that prodigious divination of color, that same visionary tone."

Surveying this collection of Messiaen's organ music composed over a 25-year period, one is impressed by the fertility of invention and the breadth of the vision. The influences are conspicuous in varying degrees--Messiaen himself has listed them as "birds, Russian music, the great 'Pelléas and Mélisande' of Debussy, the mountains of the Dauphiné, and, finally, all that pertains to stained-glass windows and rainbows"--but the compelling individuality of the final product is beyond question. From the hypnotic impressionism of Le Banquet Céleste (1926) to the most abstract technical experiments of the Livre d'Orgue (1951) Messiaen is clearly one of the most original composers ever to have written for the organ.

Trained under the exacting tutelage of Marcel Dupré (among his classmates was the tragically short-lived Jehan Alain), Messiaen has been a practicing organist all his life. Along with such predecessors as Franck, Guilmant, Widor, Vierne, Tournemire, and Dupré, moreover, Messiaen has conceived his organ music for the distinctive sonorities of the great organs built in France during the second half of the nineteenth century by Aristide Cavallé-Coll, and in Messiaen's case the specific inspiration has been the Cavallé-Coll instrument of the Parisian Church of Ste-Trinité, of which he has been titulaire since 1931. The value of the composer's own performances on the organ for which his music was conceived (at least from L'Ascension on) is obvious.

The present interpretations, recorded during June and July of 1956, first made their appearance as a series of 10-inch discs on the Ducretet-Thomson label; a subsequent issue in 12-inch format (distributed here by Peters International) was then the immediate precursor of the present boxed set, presumably released in observance of the composer's 70th birthday, which fell in 1978. The sound of the recordings was never outstanding, but it was--and is--serviceable, and if memory serves me well the original version sounded pretty much like the remastered one. Full organ passages tend to be muddied by the echo and intermodulation distortion, but at mezzo-forte level and below the reproduction is sufficiently clear. The surfaces, similarly, are acceptable, if not ideally

silent. The most serious problem, in fact, is the hideous out-of-tuneness and uneven regulation of the Ste-Trinité organ, a problem which for many people will make listening a real trial. (The organ has since been rebuilt--and tuned--and it sounds quite fine indeed in Messiaen's more recent recording of his latest organ cycle, Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité, issued on Erato and released here by Musical Heritage Society. Messiaen has not, so far as I know, recorded his only other organ piece, the Verset pour la Fête de la Dédicace.)

Messiaen's performances provide no great revelations, but--if one can overlook the tuning problem--there are numerous interpretive insights of value. What we have here are not "definitive" interpretations--even Messiaen himself would be profoundly uncomfortable with such assumptions--but rather illustrations of the continuing process of artistic creation. Where there are departures from the printed score, two possible explanations present themselves. The first, of course, is the composer's familiar experience of the limitations of musical notation; there is, alas, no way to notate the marvelous sprung rhythms that are to be heard in Messiaen's own performance of "Joie et clarté des Corps Glorieux." The second explanation is simply the reality of "second thoughts," here primarily pertaining to minor details of manual changes and registration. (Rollin Smith has discussed divergences in the performance--and indeed in the two editions--of Le Banquet Céleste, in the December 1978 issue of Music magazine, and other variations are to be noted in L'Ascension and La Nativité.)

With music as complex as this it would be impossible to discuss these performances in any real detail, but certain generic impressions are worth recording. The most conspicuous feature of Messiaen's interpretations is the tempo of the slow movements, which tend to be played very slow indeed. The most extreme example is the last movement of L'Ascension, which in Messiaen's performance takes nearly twice as long as in any other recording I know--and the last chord is held for what seems an eternity. On the other hand, some of the fast sections are taken at hair-raising velocity, as for example the 16th-notes at the end of "Transports de joie." In general, moreover, Messiaen is sometimes fairly cavalier about exact values of notes and rests--surely a consolation to anyone who has wrestled with the perversities of this music.

The value of this release is much enhanced by the provision of the composer's very complete and enlightening comments on the pieces. (The notes are printed only in French, but those unable to negotiate the language can find translations by Jon Gillock in the issue of Music mentioned above.) The only serious omission is the inexcusable failure to provide the specification of the Ste-Trinité organ--an omission repeated in the subsequent recording of the Méditations--but this information, too, can be found in the Music issue.

Scott Cantrell