

NEW MESSIAEN BOOK

Review Feature by Haig Mardirosian

MESSIAEN THE THEOLOGIAN, Andrew Shenton, ed. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2010. 290 pp. ISBN 9780754666400. £68.

In the nearly 20 years since his death, Olivier Messiaen has attracted increasing attention, not only from performers and audiences but from the scholarly community. With a crescendo of activity leading toward the 2008 Messiaen centennial, musicologists, performers, critics, and theologians have engaged a contextualization and itemization of the composer's music, attesting not only to his remarkable staying power and even growing popularity but to the deep and ever-unfolding complexity of his imagination, inspiration, and process. In short, Messiaen, two decades or more after his final works, still offers us unresolved and fascinating questions to ponder.

Messiaen's centennial inspired a wave of celebratory events. Among these was the conference organized by Andrew Shenton at Boston University from which these papers and essays amount to a sophisticated set of proceedings and with which this edited volume shares a title. From the outset, know that this is laudable and welcome work especially well organized by Professor Shenton. As with any similar proceedings, the worth of it owes to both the individual contributions as surely as to the range of topics and their particular arrangement. For the latter, Shenton deserves high praise.

In handing over this title for review, a fellow writer remarked, "I don't know much about religion since Vatican II." One could add, neither did Messiaen. In particular terms, to comprehend the work of the composer who is increasingly coming to epitomize the past century, one must grapple with the relationship of sound to belief as both broadly and narrowly understood. Such is the nub of insight into Messiaen's aesthetics. He contemplated religion, particularly Roman Catholicism, as both ageless and dynamic, which is to say, that he was devout and specifically a Roman Catholic in France during the 20th century, not an insubstantial com-

ment, as well as a profoundly thinking intellect who melded that belief to an even wider world of mysticism, nature, and human expression.

What is Catholic about Messiaen is also catholic. "Catholic" for him was a claim of legitimate universality as intensified and leavened through the natural relationship to an extensive global universe of mysticism, philosophy, poetics and music—hence "catholic." Messiaen's deity was both God and god.

My colleague's remark puts the dilemma succinctly. What may have changed most profoundly in the years after Vatican II has *not* been the cultural issues of expression, style, personal involvement of the believer and the belief, but rather the willingness of the Church (capital "C") to encourage, even demand, the fullness of belief through the life of the mind and the ultimate transcendence of mind beyond the limits of thought to the endless realm of sense and, ultimately, the infinite. What seals this argument is the setting of constant change against which Messiaen's creativity played for a lifetime, the majority of which preceded Vatican II. But he persisted for a full quarter of a century beyond as well. For those who blindly see Vatican II as the defining catalyst of change (should any such readers ever find their way to this book in the first place), the constant reminder of the Church's renewal and struggle for a century before is revelatory. France, in particular, one of the most iconic Roman Catholic countries, also manifested movement after movement calculated to diminish, or at least limit, the sway of the Church in society and state. The number of "isms" that flourished in Messiaen's lifetime, even in France alone, was stunning. But, in short, the debate between mid-19th and mid-20th century had to do with the influence and role of Catholicism in the country. And, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, the debate still lingers while the Church struggles with its relationship to "post Christian" Europe and laments the "loss" of Europe, a theme steadily developed by Pope John Paul II, especially following the defeat of Communism, and preserved by Benedict XVI.

Hupalo Repasky
Pipe Organ Craftsmen & Builders
(CRB)
1785 Timothy Drive, Unit 4
San Leandro, California, 94577
Tel: 510 483 8905
www.hupaloropasky.com

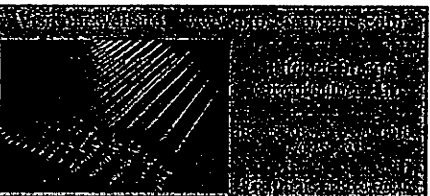
KEDNER & MERCHANT
Kerner & Merchant Pipe Organ Builders, Ltd.
Building, Rebuilding, Restoring, Tuning
and Repairing of Pipe Organs
104 Johnson Street • East Syracuse • New York 13057-2840
(315) 463-8023 • FAX (315) 431-4835

LEVSEN ORGAN COMPANY
Restorations and New Organs
221 Maple Street - PO Box 542
Buffalo, Iowa 52229
PHONE: (563) 261-1212 FAX: (563) 261-1257
E-mail: LevensOrg@AOL.com
http://www.levsenorg.com

Lewis & Hitchcock, Inc.
Pipe Organ Builders Since 1915
10153 Bacon Drive, Beltsville, MD 20705
1-800-952-PIPE
www.lewisandhitchcock.com

NICHOLS & SIMPSON, INC.
ORGANBUILDERS
P. O. BOX 7375
LITTLE ROCK, AR 72217
501-661-0197
www.nicholsandsimpson.com
C. JOSEPH NICHOLS WALTER S. SIMPSON III

PARSONS
PIPE ORGAN BUILDERS
100 W. MAIN ST. NEW YORK
www.parsonsorgans.com 565-229-5888 fax 565-229-5850



Redman Organ Co.
816 E. VICKERY BLVD.
FORT WORTH, TX 76104
817 • 332 • 2953
MEMBER • INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY
OF ORGANBUILDERS • ASSOCIATED
PIPE ORGAN BUILDERS OF AMERICA

sound INSPIRATION
Acoustical Design & Testing • Organ Consultation & Inspection •
Organ Maintenance & Tuning • Sound & Video System Design,
Evaluation & Training
www.stedekassociates.com • (414) 771-8986
email: consult@stedekassociates.com
819 NORTH CASS STREET • MILWAUKEE, WI 53202
RIEDEL
hear the difference.

Wagner Pipe Organs
Organ Builders since 1948
You'll be proud to have us in your home!
Repairs • Tuning • Restoration • Installation
13702 NW 25th St. Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33312
Tel: 954-583-4911 Fax: 954-583-4900
www.stink.org

VERITAS
Organ Company, Inc.
The finest, most convincing
and most musical digital
alternative to pipes
available at any price.
Peter Davis, Buffalo, NY, (716) 602-8752, veritasorgans@aol.com
Wayne Warren, Apollo Beach, FL, (813) 645-8047, w78047@aol.com
Jerry Ahern, Loveland, CO, (970) 232-4631, veritas@jwakers.com
www.veritasorgans.com

Much evidence insinuates how and where Messiaen stood concerning this axial affair of the sacred and secular and, more fascinatingly, how that issue fed the constant and brilliant juxtaposition of his musical inspirations and depictions. In his introduction, Shenton maintains that Messiaen's quotations from theologians aggregated around "ressourcement" (those thinkers who advocated for a return of Roman Catholicism to its purest theological roots, often as informed by the social sciences) put him at odds with the more conventional path clinging to Thomistic orthodoxy, something about which Messiaen was also fluent and the topic of a chapter by Vincent Benitez.

But Messiaen's association with alternative theological options to Neo-Thomism (which was dominant in the early 20th century) is the heart of Douglas Schadle's skillful essay. Schadle traces the links of French musicians (and French-tinged musicians like Stravinsky) to Neo-Thomism as routed through the influence of the philosopher Jacques Maritain. The resulting musical structuralism confirms the Thomistic tenet that the evidence of God is the evidence of God's orderly creation. If such evidence is to be manifested in art, it would follow that such art would reflect systematic and structured if only human reason. The quest would be that of beauty as beauty (recalling the Classical Greek and Roman roots of Thomistic thought). "Maritain invests artistic creation with supernatural significance, believing that artistic creation is a continuation of God's creative acts. Such a view raises the importance of artists themselves, who have a 'peculiar dignity' in their co-creative acts." If the result, furthermore, was an affirmation of musical neoclassicism in the early decades of the century, then Messiaen neither embraced Thomistic thinking or the principles of neoclassicism, opting instead for a purer, perhaps more innocent view of theology.

More evidence of Messiaen's particular theological orientation (and for that matter, all realms of thought) comes from a fascinating chapter by Yves Balmer, professor at the Paris Conservatoire, who assisted in the inventory of papers of Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod. His chapter focuses on religious literature in Messiaen's personal library and especially works known to have had influence on specific Messiaen scores. It confirms Messiaen's eclectic interests and acknowledges a definite slant toward those philosophers, poets, and essayists who were part of the Catholic Literary Renaissance.

As further regards this question of Messiaen as a creature of pre- or post-Vatican II *sensibilité*, theologian Karin Heller's contribution on the relation-



Talent. Passion. Community.

Westminster Choir College's focused and collaborative approach to educating church musicians and organists is unique in its conception. Guided by a world-class faculty, our students work together to foster the varied choral and instrumental skills needed to thrive in a rewarding profession. Our enduring legacy grows, through the accomplishments of our skilled graduates.

UNDERGRADUATE DEGREES IN ORGAN & SACRED MUSIC

Bachelor of Music in Organ Performance
Bachelor of Music in Sacred Music

GRADUATE DEGREES IN CONDUCTING, ORGAN & SACRED MUSIC

Master of Music in Choral Conducting
Master of Music in Organ Performance
Master of Music in Sacred Music

ORGAN FACULTY

Ken Cowan
Matthew Lewis
Alan Morrison

SACRED MUSIC FACULTY

J. Donald Dumpson
Kathleen Ebling Shaw
Steve Pilkington

CONDUCTING FACULTY

James Jordan
Andrew Megill
Joe Miller
Amanda Quist

WESTMINSTER
CHOIR COLLEGE



RIDER
UNIVERSITY

Princeton & Lawrenceville, NJ

To learn more, visit our Web site:
www.rider.edu/westminster

To purchase Westminster recordings:
www.westminsterchoircollege.org

MANDER ORGANS

London, UK
[t] (+44) [phone number]
[f] (+44) 207 [phone number]
ManderUK.com
www.manderuk.com

Imaginative Reconstructions

The Seventeenth Annual
L. Cameron Johnson Memorial Organ Competition
For High School Students

Saturday, May 21, 2011, 11 o'clock am
Storrs Congregational Church
on the campus of the University of Connecticut

Contestants will compete for cash prizes: 1st prize of \$1,500 offered by Storrs Congregational Church; 2nd prize of \$750 offered by the Greater Hartford and Northeastern Connecticut AGO Chapters; 3rd prize of \$300 offered by Johannus New England.

A CD recording (not to exceed 30 minutes) must be submitted by **March 28, 2011**, containing one composition from each of the following periods:

Baroque, Romantic, and 20th or 21st Century

To receive an application and rules, contact
Angela Salcedo, 219 Rte. 66, Columbia, CT 06237.
(860) 228-1842 angelasalcedo@glastonburyfirst.org

The L. Cameron Johnson Memorial Competition is sponsored jointly by the Northeastern Connecticut Chapter of the American Guild of Organists and Storrs Congregational Church.

ship of Messiaen to Jean-Marie Lustiger, Cardinal Archbishop of Paris, brings the key question into focus. Certainly, this would have been a simpler discussion were it, for instance, centered on other French musical opponents to the "reforms of the priests"—say, Duruflé or Langlais. And what is furthermore crucial, both to the global understanding of Vatican II and of the life and work of Messiaen, is that renewal and reform *were ongoing processes and not the sudden bolt of the Spirit's lightning rained upon Rome in 1964* (emphasis mine). The reality concerning the still-current debates on Christian ecclesiastical reform (of all sorts) is this: change is constant, even in a Church seemingly narrow-minded over ancient realities and mores. Thus, Heller (and Lustiger is the real focus of her work, not Messiaen) points at the fecund scholarship in and around the Catholic University of Louvain and the foundation of the *Centre de Pastorale Liturgique* back during the War years as perhaps the pivotal moment in the French advance toward the headlines of two decades later. A liturgy accessible to the people was old news in France by 1964. If Messiaen's "catholicity" left him somehow above specific "isms," so also was he *apart* from many of these. Heller notes (and perhaps this does come as revelation) that La Trinité, where Messiaen served for 60 years, never undertook any preconciliar liturgical experimentation. While Père Gelineau was bringing the ancient customs of the Psalter to the French tongue in his new formularies to other Parisian parishes, High Mass and the Office at La Trinité were still full of music by Haydn, Mozart, plainchant, and the numerous lesser names of the time that mimed polyphony in the quest of an authentic and sanctioned Catholic music. And all this was, naturally, framed in Messiaen's improvisations.

There is some reason to take issue with a few reviews of *Messiaen the Theologian* in other publications, which have concluded that the Church's mistake today is that it cannot reintroduce the splendid music of Messiaen as somehow a current and useful liturgical language. We should note that Messiaen, with rare exception, *did not compose music for liturgical purposes* (again, emphasis mine), which comprises another principle to extract from these papers. As Heller notes, just about all of Messiaen's music about Catholic themes is concert music, something of a brave assertion about religion according to Peter Bannister in his chapter on "Messiaen as Preacher and Evangelist in the Context of European Modernism."

Bannister echoes the theme that Messiaen's purposes were not liturgical—while listing a small number of works that fall into liturgical use, like the motet *O sacrum convivium* and the



- Consoles
- Complete organs
- Restorations

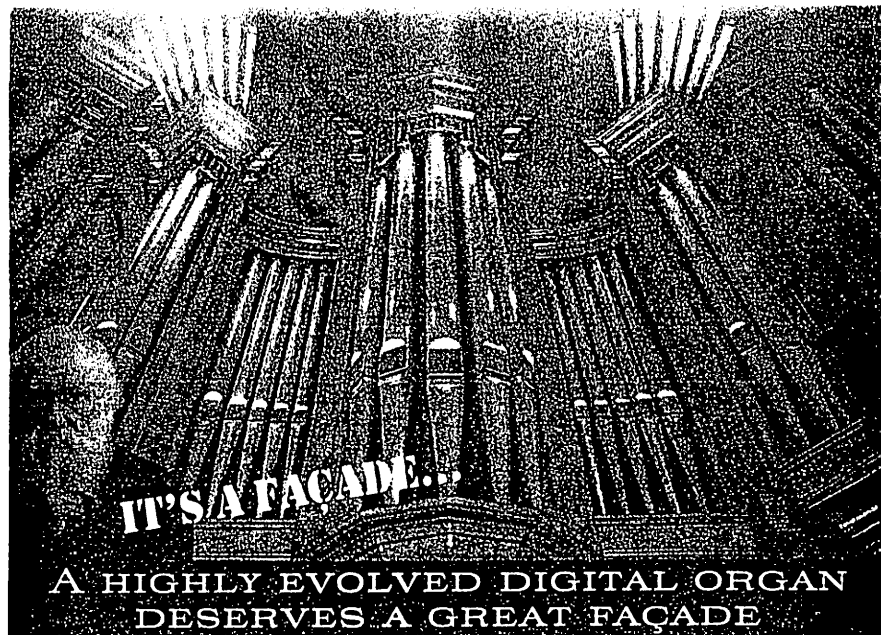
PO Box 4058
Johnson City, TN
423.282.4473

racolby.com

Messe de la Pentecôte. Yet, even during the noon Mass at La Trinité, the "Organ Mass," one could imagine a congregation having its difficulties with the dimensions and challenge to the ear of the latter suite. But Bannister has a more pertinent point: Messiaen "recontextualizes" liturgy. He mentions the *Trois petites Liturgies de la Présence Divine*, which indeed was a work that found its acclaim on concert stages and struck its zenith at the hands of Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic, programming it on their subscription series and recording it for Columbia in the early 1960s.

So, if Messiaen is the Catholic apologist in secular France between and immediately after the Wars, he also achieves a complete merger of the elements of sacred and secular through his own ideolect. But how is one to explain the postwar turn of Messiaen's music? Bannister attaches the growing "austerity and avant-garde experimentation of the works immediately subsequent to *Turangalila*" to the circumstances in Messiaen's private life. This was the period during which Messiaen's first wife, Claire Delbos, was enduring serious mental problems, and during which time Messiaen found increasing inspiration in his relationship with Yvonne Loriod, whom he finally married two years after Delbos's death. Was this a crisis of faith? It is a decade or more during which Messiaen produced very little music about religion, or more specifically, Roman Catholic religion. It was also the era during which Messiaen was being embraced more fully by the pundits of the avant-garde as their champion. Coincidentally, Messiaen increasingly assumed the role of public and secular apologist and teacher. As Bannister puts it, "Detractors of the avant-garde [in Messiaen's music] have sometimes viewed the 1950s as a crossing of the desert in which the broader crisis of musical language shackled Messiaen's creativity."

Crossing the desert, though, is just that. There is a destination to the trek. So it is that Messiaen subsequently returns to his own evangelical and Catholic framework. In such synthesis, *Messiaen the Theologian* sets the stage for a full and compelling exploration of Messiaen's reach outward past Roman Catholicism into the world of global mysticism—the fulfillment of his intellectual and spiritual framework. Shenton aggregates these chapters in Part III and entitles that partition, "Messiaen, Poets and Theological Themes." How apt as the authors outline Messiaen's influences from Thomas Aquinas, Dante, and a host of writers from the Catholic Revival. Shenton adds his own reflection on the relationship of Messiaen's *Quatuor pour le fin du temps*, a work now gaining real classic status in the



A HIGHLY EVOLVED DIGITAL ORGAN
DESERVES A GREAT FAÇADE

WWW.PIPEORGANFAÇADES.COM

500 N. JEFFERSON AV. 112, SALAROLA, FL 34237 ORG@PIPEZ@AOL.COM 941.993.3985

*A Precious Gift
from the Past
for the Present
and the Future*

Supremely beautiful and blendable tonal color – a Gift from the Venetian School of organbuilding, a monumental part of our great heritage. The result: a versatile and flexible palette to make possible your finest work.

Intriguing? Let us build your dream.

Fratelli Ruffatti

Builders of Fine Pipe Organs to the World

www.ruffatti.com

Via Facciolati, 166 • Padova, Italy 35127 • organs@ruffatti.com • In the U.S. 330-867-4370

MULLER
PIPE ORGAN COMPANY
Builders & Conservators of Fine Instruments

P.O. Box 353
CROTON, OHIO 43013
800.543.0167
WWW.MULLERPIPEORGAN.COM

JUGET-SINCLAIR

MONTREAL

MECHANICAL ACTION ORGANS
T. 1 866 561-9898 / www.juget-sinclair.com



PATRICK J. MURPHY
& ASSOCIATES, INC.

ORGAN BUILDERS

300 Old Reading Pike, Suite 1D, Stowe, PA 19464 • Voice: (610) 970-9817 • Fax: (610) 970-9297

Email: PMurphy129@aol.com • Website: www.pjmorgans.com

chamber repertoire of the past 100 years, to T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. It is a difficult chapter to absorb and demands subsequent rereading. The comparison is clever, obvious in the sense of the realization that someone should have thought of it before, and perhaps a little unnatural. Shenton underscores the nonspecific nature of the theology underlying the *Quatuor*, "for Christian and the non-Christian alike" by borrowing Eliot's perception of the quest for the ineffable.

For any creative life, there comes a moment of closure and reminiscence. The thought that there is but one more recital left or one more score to create is as poignant as the champion athlete understanding that there is but one final pitch to throw or line to cross. That summative time of life best defines one's contributions and place. Many readers will therefore find the discussions on the last stage of Messiaen's creativity the most compelling. Messiaen so fully explained thinking and tech-

niques in his youth that these are comfortable and fitting, even through years of his avant-gardism. But as Luke Berryman outlines, from 1980 on, once Messiaen completes his opera *Saint François d'Assise*, and once his final organ composition, the *Livre du Saint Sacrament*, is performed (commissioned for and premiered at the 1986 AGO National Convention in Detroit), just what is left? Berryman adds that, where conventional thinking about this music and the hints of tonality or pan-modality in it (like *Saint François*) suggest to many the summation of a career and the bringing of creativity full circle, there is another and more important interpretation to consider. Through his close analysis of the *Livre*, Berryman asserts that Messiaen was setting off to explore new realms in the last few years of life. Exploration, too, entails more than new or different musical techniques. He offers an alternative revision to the perspective of late Messiaen as "epitaphs or repetitive regurgitations." He offers Messiaen's confrontation of imponderables as evidence of his continual artistic forward motion. He develops the notion that Messiaen's late style is a confrontation of the quality of "lateness" itself and the conundrum of "lateness" as something simply lacking hope. Instead, Messiaen was transcending vision in a new "ethereal plane." He quotes T.S. Eliot: "Old men ought to be explorers."

Intended or not, stated or not, implied or inferred, this overarching single theme best summarizes the myriad and always fascinating threads of *Messiaen the Theologian*. All that Messiaen said and studied, all that he read and wrote, all that he composed or improvised amounts to but a voyage of faith so profound and so sure as to jolt him (and us, his audience) into the moment of motion, as though stepping onto an escalator destined for a world without time, a world of light and lightness, a world of spirit, sound, sense, motion, and plasticity, and a world only partly visible in the present place and present awareness. With some small irony, the last word on that thought comes not from the West but the East. In Cheong Wai Ling's paper "Buddhist Temple, Shinto Shrine and the Invisible God of *Sept Haïkaï*," she outlines a musical depiction of temple gates in the score. With the melding of the musical elements, Eastern and Western, birds, Greek rhythms, a chorale theme, Messiaen steps toward a journey's end. Ling writes, "When we eventually leave *Sept Haïkaï*, we symbolically go through the same Buddhist gate, albeit from the opposite direction, and things can never be the same again."

The visions that Messiaen the theologian left behind with us saw to it that we too can never be the same again.