

Rezension der Messiaen-Trilogie (in ihrer englischen Fassung)

Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation:

Musical Symbols of Faith in the Two Great Piano Cycles of the 1940s;

Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death:

Musical Signification in the 'Tristan Trilogy' and Three Related Song Cycles;

Messiaen's Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity:

Echoes of Medieval Theology in the Oratorio, Organ Meditations and Opera

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From: Music and Letters

Volume 91, Number 3, August 2010

pp. 457-462 |

Among the numerous concerts, events, articles, and books prompted by the centenary of Messiaen's birth, it is hard to think of any more ambitious than the project undertaken by Siglind Bruhn. Producing a trilogy of books, each devoted to a significant portion of the composer's oeuvre and containing reams of new analytical insight and commentary, is quite an undertaking. For all three books to appear in the course of little more than a year and, at the same time, produce parallel books in German and one in French, is a task befitting the monumental works of Bruhn's subject.

The titles of the books seem like essays in themselves, especially when put alongside the equivalent French and German offerings: *Les Visions d'Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 2008); *Messiaens musikalische Sprache des Glaubens* (Waldkirch, 2006); *Olivier Messiaen - Troubadour* (Waldkirch, 2007); *Messiaen - Theologien* (Waldkirch, 2008). The first of the trilogy, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation: Musical Symbols of Faith in the Two Great Piano Cycles of the 1940s* (henceforth *Contemplations*), is an examination of *Visions de l'Amen* (1943) and *Vingt regards sur l'enfant-Jésus* (1944); the second, *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death: Musical Signification in the 'Tristan Trilogy' and Three Related Song Cycles* (henceforth *Explorations*), looks at what might be regarded as the works devoted to love, namely the 'Tristan trilogy'—*Harawi* (1945), *Turangalîla-symphonie* (1946-8), and *Cinq rechants* (1948)—the song cycles *Poèmes pour Mi* (1936) and *Chants de terre et de ciel* (1938), and *Trois petites Liturgies* (1943-4), even if it is stretching matters to call the latter a song cycle. The final volume, *Messiaen's Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity: Echoes of Medieval Theology in the Oratorio, Organ Meditations and Opera* (henceforth *Interpretations*) examines three major late works, *La Transfiguration de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (1965-9), the organ cycle *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (1969) (though not, inexplicably, the equivalent cycle *Livre du Saint Sacrement* (1984)), and *Saint François d'Assise* (1975-83).

There is a similar pattern to each book, starting with background materials giving contextual information on some of Messiaen's sources, and outlining some general aspects of musical language and style, before undertaking a more detailed consideration of the music. *Contemplations*, for instance, outlines the musical information that might be regarded as a starter kit for anyone wishing to study Messiaen's music. This has been covered numerous times before, but rarely as well as here. Bruhn also provides perceptive comment on Messiaen's spiritual background and heritage, with a useful digest of the Catholic renewal in France that started in the late nineteenth century. The works are treated separately, though there are numerous cross-references. Bruhn provides useful background information to the specific

approach (usually theological) taken in each, before embarking on a hermeneutic traversal of the music.

An invaluable aspect of each volume is the information contained in the appendices. For *Contemplations*, there is succinct biographical information on Ernest Hello and Columba Marmion, the two theologians whose thought profoundly influenced *Visions de l'Amen* and *Vingt regards* respectively. For *Explorations*, there are summaries of the various myths, stories, and poems that feature in the 'Tristan Trilogy', notably the various incarnations of the Tristan myth itself, but also the stories behind figures such as Vivian, Perseus, and Piroutcha, stories by Poe, and poems by Breton, as well as the full texts for the various vocal works discussed. A list of birds used in the works discussed, as well as the opera's libretto, make up the appendices in *Interpretations*. If these seem a little more prosaic, this final volume begins with an impressive exposition of the manner of influence exerted by St Thomas Aquinas on Messiaen. Bruhn points out that it is to the thought and writings of Aquinas that Messiaen turned whenever he wished to explore the qualitative nature of the sacred, whether God, the resurrected, or the transfigured Jesus (*Interpretations*, 35). Similarly, the opening material in *Explorations* includes much perceptive material on possible sources of inspiration. One particular piece of detective work exemplifies numerous other finds. In the preface to *Vingt regards*, Messiaen mentioned an 'old tapestry' as being influential. Bruhn has identified this anonymous artwork as being part of the medieval 'Apocalypse of Angers' sequence of tapestries. Crucially, this clarifies both Messiaen's comments in the preface and helps with the understanding of 'Regard de l'Onction terrible'.

The generally excellent contextual information is merely a prelude for the discussion of the specific works. While including much analytical comment, this is harnessed to a hermeneutic approach primarily aimed at supplementing the theological and spiritual understanding of these works. Each cycle is explored on a movement-by-movement basis, though often grouped by issue and to reflect Bruhn's structural insights.

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Overall, Bruhn's traversal of numerous, diverse sources is impressive, going substantially beyond anything yet attempted in Messiaen studies.