

3 December 2007

## MAJOR SOUTHBANK CENTRE FESTIVAL IN CELEBRATION OF MESSIAEN'S CENTENARY

*From the Canyons to the Stars: The Music of Olivier Messiaen*

2 February – 10 December 2008

Festival Artistic Director: Pierre-Laurent Aimard

Venues include: Southbank Centre, Royal Academy of Music, Westminster Abbey, Westminster Cathedral, London Oratory, St Paul's Cathedral, St Marylebone Parish Church

To mark the centenary of Messiaen's birth, *From the Canyons to the Stars* is a major Southbank Centre celebration (2 February - 10 December) of this truly inspirational composer (1908 – 1992). The festival is unequalled in its scope and ambition anywhere in the world. Lovingly and scrupulously curated by virtuoso pianist and close Messiaen associate **Pierre-Laurent Aimard**, *From the Canyons to the Stars* is a festival spanning 11 months with a line-up of world-class artists, many of whom had a close association with Messiaen, either as pupils or as trusted collaborators. The festival's finale sees Messiaen pupil **Pierre Boulez** return to the Royal Festival Hall to conduct **Ensemble Intercontemporain** and Aimard on 10 December, the anniversary of the composer's birth. The festival explores themes closely associated with the composer's music and life: religion, nature and birdsong, colour, sounds from around the world, and impossible love. These themes are explored through concerts, discussions, study days, workshops and masterclasses. *From the Canyons to the Stars* is presented in partnership with Southbank Centre Residents the Philharmonia Orchestra and the London Sinfonietta, and with the Royal Academy of Music (RAM).

Highlights of the festival include:

- Ensemble Intercontemporain from Paris under its new Music Director **Susanna Mälkki** open the festival with *Des canyons aux étoiles*
- Three performances throughout the year of *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*
- Performance of *Turangalila-symphonie* performed by the **Philharmonia Orchestra** under the baton of **Esa-Pekka Salonen**, with pre- and post-concert gamelan music

- Pierre-Laurent Aimard performs the mighty piano work *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus*
- Performances of the complete organ works of Messiaen by the world's greatest organists in London's grandest cathedrals and churches, with soloists including renowned Messiaen interpreters and collaborators **Olivier Latry**, **Jennifer Bate** and **Dame Gillian Weir**
- **UK premiere** of Gérard Grisey's *Les espaces acoustiques*, with the **London Sinfonietta** and **RAM Manson Ensemble**
- **Kent Nagano** conducts the Philharmonia Orchestra and Pierre-Laurent Aimard in *La Transfiguration de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ*
- Festival finale with Pierre Boulez conducting the Ensemble Intercontemporain in honour of his great teacher on the actual centenary day, 10 December 2008

Pierre-Laurent Aimard, Festival Artistic Director, said:

'London has always been at the forefront in celebrating the music of Olivier Messiaen. Messiaen, measurer of time and craftsman in sound and colour, has influenced generations of composers. His spirituality, his love of nature, and the sheer boldness of his music communicate directly with audiences. This gentle dreamer with a collector's soul worked independently of contemporary trends – unclassifiable because, piece by piece, he constructed a truly unique language. It is my great wish that this festival, in homage to Messiaen, will illuminate the many aspects of this great original.'

### Opening Concerts

**Ensemble Intercontemporain** under its new Music Director **Susanna Mälkki** opens the festival on 2 February with the huge and colourful work from which the festival takes its title *Des canyons aux étoiles*. This world-leading ensemble is joined by Pierre-Laurent Aimard who, prior to the concert, joins composer, conductor and Messiaen pupil **George Benjamin** for a discussion about the composer. The event is chaired by Gillian Moore, Southbank Centre's Head of Contemporary Culture.

On 3 February Pierre-Laurent Aimard leads a study day exploring Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* with the **Nash Ensemble**. The work was written in 1940 when Messiaen, a gifted keyboard player, was interned in a German prison camp, and discovered a clarinettist, violinist and cellist amongst his fellow prisoners. He found an old piano, formed a quartet with them, and composed eight jewel-like movements for this uniquely colourful combination of instruments. The piece was first performed to their fellow prisoners in 1941. The event

includes film and discussion and culminates in a performance of the quartet by the Nash Ensemble at 6pm in the Queen Elizabeth Hall.

Later the same evening this profoundly spiritual piece is performed again by the Nash Ensemble in a late night performance in the less formal setting of The Front Room, Queen Elizabeth Hall.

The conductor and composer Esa-Pekka Salonen credits Messiaen as one of the major influences in his career: it was after hearing Messiaen's *Turangalila-symphonie* on the radio at around the age of 11 that Salonen realised that he wanted to compose. On 7 February he conducts the Philharmonia Orchestra in this very work with its eclectic mix of influences, which embraces themes of transcendent love, the bell-like sonorities of Javanese gamelan, Hindu rhythms, Impressionist harmonies, birdsong and jazzy, Gershwin-like elements. The work also features the distinct sound of the ondes martenot, an electronic instrument which provides unique glissando effects. The gamelan influences can be explored further in free pre- and post-concert events on The Ballroom at the Royal Festival Hall at which there is the opportunity to hear the Southbank Gamelan Players perform on the Centre's gamelan.

**The Sixteen**, Associate Artists at Southbank Centre, join the celebrations of Messiaen on 9 February when they present a concert of French choral music in the Queen Elizabeth Hall. As well as music by Debussy and Le Jeune, the concert also includes Messiaen's *Cinq Rechants* and the powerful song-cycle *Harawi* for soprano and piano. This will be sung by **Gweneth-Ann Jeffers**.

### Messiaen and Birdsong

Messiaen was a great collector of birdsong and he incorporated birdsong transcriptions, using his own 'style oiseaux', into much of his music. This theme is introduced in the following two concerts. In the 1950s birdsong became central to Messiaen's music and on 10 February there is the chance to hear *Oiseaux exotiques* performed by the Philharmonia Orchestra and Esa-Pekka Salonen. On 12 February RAM students present a concert which includes the earliest of Messiaen's birdsong-inspired pieces – *Le merle noir (The Blackbird)* – and *Le merle bleu (The Blue Rock Thrush)*. This theme is continued on 15 February when Professor **Peter Hill** (pianist and co-author of the recent authoritative biography *Messiaen*) presents the *RAM Barbirolli Lecture*. Here he surveys the evolution of the *Catalogue d'oiseaux* and discusses the work's interpretation with **Roderick Chadwick**. Following this, the RAM Manson Ensemble with conductor **Pierre-André Valade** and pianist **Wu Qian**

present a programme which includes one of Messiaen's last works *Un vitrail et des oiseaux* and music by some of the composer's most renowned students, Stockhausen and Xenakis. It is no coincidence that one of the birds portrayed in *Catalogue d'oiseaux* should be a near namesake of the work's dedicatee, Yvonne Loriod, Messiaen's wife. In a concert on 18 February Royal Academy music students perform *Le loriot* alongside Jonathan Harvey's *Song Offerings*, settings of work by Rabindranath Tagore. Also in the programme is Messiaen's *O sacrum convivium!* for soprano and organ.

One of the highlights of the festival is Pierre-Laurent Aimard performing the major 20-movement piano work *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant Jésus* on 13 February. Aimard has received great praise for his performances of this work, arguably the pinnacle of 20<sup>th</sup>-century piano writing.

Pierre Boulez was another of Messiaen's pupils and on 17 February there is the opportunity to hear his monumental work *Rituel in Memoriam Bruno Maderna* alongside Messiaen's *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum*, commissioned in 1964 as a tribute to the victims of two world wars. These masterpieces are performed by the **London Sinfonietta**, conducted by **Peter Eötvös**.

### Messiaen and Organ Music

Messiaen was organist at the Church of the Holy Trinity in Paris from 1930 until his death in 1992, and his Roman Catholic faith was deep and lasting. He revolutionised 20<sup>th</sup>-century organ music and much of his music has an explicitly religious theme. He believed that all his music was written to glorify God and many events from 20 February through to 7 December are performed in churches and cathedrals around London, such as Westminster Abbey, Westminster Cathedral, St Paul's Cathedral and London Oratory. During this period organ recitals are presented by some of the greatest exponents of his organ music such as **Dame Gillian Weir** and **Jennifer Bate** (who both worked with and knew the composer), **Olivier Latry**, **David Titterington**, **James O'Donnell**, **Charles Cole**, **Thomas Trotter**, **Huw Williams** and **John McGreal**. On 21 February there is the chance to attend masterclasses involving students from the RAM with Olivier Latry (organist of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame) at St Marylebone Parish Church. There is also a research forum with David Titterington and **Christopher Dingle**, author of *The Life of Messiaen*, on 24 October. Highlights of the organ series include Latry performing *La Nativité du Seigneur* (22 February), Jennifer Bate performing his last great organ cycle, *Livre du Saint Sacrement* (21 May) and Dame Gillian Weir performing *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (15 July). Further concerts explore music by the composer's peers.

RAM students survey the organ music when the composer's *Livre d'orgue* is performed on 19 February – a work which when premiered in Paris caused an unexpected stampede. The evening provides the opportunity to hear the **world premiere** of *Umbra* by Diana Burrell. Burrell has been awarded an Arts & Humanities Research Council Fellowship at the Royal Academy of Music for a period of five years from 2006, during which time she will write a major series of ensemble organ works. *Umbra* is the first of these works.

### Messiaen and the Church

With Messiaen's faith remaining core to so much of his output, a number of churches involved in the festival are presenting Messiaen's music as part of the liturgy. On 1 May the Ascension Day service at Westminster Abbey includes a liturgical presentation of Messiaen's four-movement cycle *L'Ascension*, under the musical direction of James O'Donnell and with organist **Robert Quinney**. Movements from Messiaen's organ work, the Pentecost Mass, can be heard on 11 May in the context of the High Mass, together with the timeless Gregorian chant for Pentecost Sunday, one of the great musical inspirations in Messiaen's life. Victoria's *Missa Dum complerentur* provides the polyphonic setting of the Mass.

The first in a series of four concerts at the London Oratory placing Messiaen's organ works in the context of the liturgical French organ tradition begins on 6 October. This first concert includes the *Vespers* of Messiaen's organ teacher Dupré. The following concerts on 13, 20 and 27 October include works by Migot, fellow Dupré pupil Demessieux and Tournemire. The final concert presents movements from Messiaen's devotional final testament as a liturgical organist, *Livre du Sacrement*, together with Gregorian chant associated with the Blessed Sacrament.

For the penultimate event of the year-long celebration, organist **Huw Williams** plays Messiaen's *La Nativité du Seigneur* as part of meditation for Advent in St Paul's Cathedral on 7 December.

### Messiaen and Modern Music

On 14 October events move back to Southbank Centre with the **UK premiere** of Gérard Grisey's *Les espaces acoustiques*. This concert by the London Sinfonietta and RAM Manson Ensemble is conducted by George Benjamin. Both he and Grisey (who died 10 years ago) were pupils of Messiaen. Benjamin, who began studying with the composer at the age of 15, was his youngest pupil.

The Philharmonia Orchestra returns on 21 October when George Benjamin conducts a programme, which includes his own *Sudden Time*, and fellow pupil Xenakis' *Pithoprakta*. Messiaen had the highest regard for Benjamin and kept contact with him throughout his life, describing him as 'gifted like no-one else'.

### Messiaen and the Next Generation

Young musicians from the Royal Academy of Music enthusiastically take the Messiaen performing tradition into the next generation with a series of concerts throughout the year involving student soloists, the RAM Manson Ensemble and the RAM Symphony Orchestra conducted by Susanna Mälkki. Alongside performances of Messiaen's work, including *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, *La Ville d'en-Haut* and *L'Ascension* there is an opportunity for RAM student composers to showcase their own compositions. On 23 October students present a concert of piano music which includes George Benjamin's *Shadowlines*, which he dedicated to Pierre-Laurent Aimard.

### Understanding Messiaen

There are opportunities to delve beneath the skin of this extraordinary composer with a number of workshops and discussions throughout the year. There is a family workshop on 10 February in which RAM musicians and professional artists bring Messiaen's birdsong to life. *Synaesthesia and Improvisation*, on 15 February, is a practical afternoon workshop on colour and sound with cellist **Neil Heyde**, artist **Mark Rowan-Hull** and art historian and musicologist **Simon Shaw-Miller**. Peter Hill and Pierre-Laurent Aimard take part in a free symposium at the Royal Academy of Music entitled *Interpreting Messiaen's Piano Music* on 17 October, with talks and discussions, and an evening concert of the composer's piano music with performances by RAM students.

*Contemporary Music and Spirituality*, a conference from 1-3 February, explores why and how composers such as Andriessen, Birtwistle, Grisey, Messiaen, Pärt, Stockhausen, Tavener and others have sought to convey religious or spiritual expression through music. Keynote speakers include composers Jonathan Harvey, James MacMillan and Francis Pott.

### Autumn / Winter Finale

*La Transfiguration de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ* was in gestation for seven years and the resulting colossal cantata is of symphonic proportions and one of the largest works Messiaen ever wrote. On 16 October Kent Nagano conducts the Philharmonia Orchestra

with Pierre-Laurent Aimard and soloists from the Orchestra in this work, which requires over 100 players, choir and seven soloists.

Messiaen experienced a mild form of synaesthesia manifested as a perception of colours when he heard certain harmonies, particularly harmonies built from his modes, and he used combinations of these colours in his compositions. Scriabin, who is also thought to have had the condition, played with these ideas too and on 23 October the Philharmonia Orchestra under the baton of **Sylvain Cambreling** present a programme which includes his *Le poème de l'extase*.

The **Royal Academy of Music Symphony Orchestra** and **Westminster Cathedral Choir** join forces under the directorship of **Thierry Fischer** and **Martin Baker** on 24 October when Westminster Cathedral will resonate with a programme which includes Messiaen's immense work, *Eclairs sur l'Au-delà* (completed in 1992, the year of his death). Life after death was a subject Messiaen had become preoccupied with since the 1930s, and this (his last completed work) revisits much of the musical imagery he had found for it: The dazzling woodwind and percussion jewels of *Couleurs de la Cité Céleste*, the string adagio song of *Les offrandes oubliées* and *L'Ascension*, the wind-orchestra chanting of *L'Ascension* and *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum*, the imitation of birdsongs as harbingers of the brilliance and agility of the angels, and the potentially endless rhythmic mechanisms as fragments of eternity. Above all, the contrasts from movement to movement – and the depictions of scenes from Revelation, and the presence of two slow movements for strings – point back to the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*.

Bringing the festival full-circle, there is the opportunity to hear this work again on 6 November. Renowned pianist **Mitsuko Uchida** performs this *Quartet for the End of Time* (one of the composer's most famous) alongside acclaimed young artists, all of whom have received a *Borletti-Buitoni Trust* award in recent years.

### Messiaen Centenary Concert

Finally on 10 December – the actual anniversary of Messiaen's birth – one of the composer's most lauded pupils, Pierre Boulez, returns to the Royal Festival Hall to conduct the Ensemble Intercontemporain and Pierre-Laurent Aimard in a concert which includes *Sept Haïkai* (a work with a dazzlingly virtuosic piano part that was the result of Messiaen hearing Japanese music and oriental birdsong). The concert ends with Boulez's 30-minute tour de force, *sur Incises*, which includes three pianos and a battery of percussion.

**For further press information, please contact Jenny Wegg at Southbank Centre Press Office on 020 7921 0824, [jenny.wegg@southbankcentre.co.uk](mailto:jenny.wegg@southbankcentre.co.uk) or Kenny Morrison on 020 7921 0962, [kenny.morrison@southbankcentre.co.uk](mailto:kenny.morrison@southbankcentre.co.uk)**

Notes to Editors

A specific website, [www.southbankcentre.co.uk/messiaen](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/messiaen) will be launched in January which will give insights into the composer, look at the influences on Messiaen's music and include video interviews with those who worked with him such as George Benjamin and Pierre-Laurent Aimard, and those artists and musicians who have been inspired by him, from James MacMillan to *Goldfrapp's* Will Gregory.

Biography:

Messiaen, Olivier (Eugène Prosper Charles)  
(b Avignon, 10 Dec 1908; d Paris, 28 April 1992). French composer, organist and teacher. He was a musician apart. The sources of his music may be traced on the one hand to the French organ tradition and on the other to the innovations of Debussy, Stravinsky and Bartók, but right at the start of his career he found a modal system that has a completely individual sound, and to this he remained true, even when he vastly extended the possibilities of his style after World War II. He was alone, too, among major 20th-century composers in his joyously held Catholic faith, which again was unswerving, however much he came to value non-European cultures, especially Indian and Japanese. As a teacher he instructed many of the most prominent composers of the next two generations.

Paul Griffiths, 'Messiaen', Olivier, Grove Music Online ed. L. Macy (Accessed 30/11/07), [www.grovemusic.com](http://www.grovemusic.com)

**Ticket Office: 0871 663 2500**

**Online booking: [www.southbankcentre.co.uk](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk)**