

Lori Sims & Yu-Lien The

VISIONS DE L'AMEN

For Two Pianos

Olivier Messiaen

1908-1992

A Catholic by religion and a mystic by nature, composer and organist Olivier Messiaen tied his music intimately to his beliefs and his visions. He claimed that the three cornerstones of his music are first, “the theological truths of the Catholic faith...perhaps the only aspect of my work that I will not regret at the hour of my death;” second, “the greatest theme of human love” referring to the medieval Tristan and Iseult; and third, the sounds of nature.

Messiaen's works are replete with a personal symbolism associated with certain chord progressions and melodies. His broad interest in Gregorian chant, Hindu rhythms and oriental mysticism also influenced many of his works. Moreover, he tried to couple these influences with painstakingly faithful instrumental replications of bird songs; he traveled extensively around the world to record and notate these songs to use in his compositions.

In addition to his fame as composer and organist, Messiaen was also one of the century's most respected teachers. From 1941 he taught at the Paris Conservatory, which he had entered as a student at age ten. His students included a veritable who's-who of mid-century composers, including Pierre Boulez, Iannis Xenakis, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Alexander Goehr. His personal musical language, however, made him a loner in his musical style and few of his students sought to emulate it.

Messiaen composed *Visions de l'Amen* in 1943 to perform with one of his gifted students, the pianist Yvonne Loriod, who became his muse and eventually his second wife. The first performance in 1943 in Nazi-occupied Paris was hush-hush – to keep out undesirable Germans or known collaborators – and included such luminaries as Francis Poulenc, Christian Dior, Paul Valéry, François Mauriac and Jean Cocteau.

Visions de l'Amen consists of seven sections whose titles all contain the word “Amen.” The composer wrote on the score descriptions and explanations of the entire work. We reproduce these as the most direct means of understanding the composer's musical and symbolic language:

“*Visions de l'Amen* was conceived and written for two pianos, demanding from these instruments their maximum force and diversity of sound. I have entrusted the rhythmic difficulties, clusters of chords, all that is velocity, charm and tone quality to the first piano. I have entrusted the principal melody, thematic elements and all that expresses emotion and power to the second piano.

“Amen” has four different meanings:

- Amen, So be it, the creative act
- Amen, I submit, I accept. Your will be done!
- Amen, the wish, the desire that this may be so, that You give Yourself to me and I to You!
- Amen, it is as it will be, everything is fixed forever, and has reached fulfillment in Paradise.

“Adding to these the lives of creatures that say Amen by the very fact that they exist, I have tried to express the varied richness of Amen in seven musical visions.”

Typical of Messiaen is the use of a mystical chord progression that he serves as a unifying device across all the movements.

1. *The Amen of the Creation*

“God said ‘Let there be light’ and there was light!” (Genesis). The first piano plays a double-layered rhythmic ostinato like a carillon, with non-retrograde rhythms, which are augmented or diminished with each repetition. The second piano plays in long and solemn chords, the theme of the Creation, the main theme of the whole work. The whole movement is one crescendo. It starts from an absolute pianissimo, the mystery of that ancient mist which already contains the germ of light; all the bells quiver in that light, and hence, in Life itself.

2. *The Amen of the Stars, of the Ringed Planet*

“A savage, brutal dance. The stars, the suns and Saturn, the planet with the multi-colored ring, ‘God calls them and they answer; Amen, we are here!’ (Apocrypha) The second piano plays the theme of the dance of the planets. The first development: beneath the poly-modal turbulence of the first piano, the second piano varies the beginning of the five-note theme through rhythmical changes and unexpected changes in register. Second development: The beginning of the theme varies through elimination, as well as through contrary and parallel motion. A third development is superimposed: the first piano plays the beginning of the theme with a rhythmic ostinato. The second piano plays the beginning of the theme with changes in register. Then follows a varied repetition of the dance of the planets. The mélange of movement evokes the life of the planets and the stunning rainbow which colors the revolving ring of Saturn.

3. *Amen of the Agony of Jesus.*

“Jesus suffers and weeps, ‘Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. In this let Your will, and not mine be done’ (Matthew). He accepts, ‘Thy will be done, Amen.’

“Jesus is alone on the Mount of Olives and faces his coming death. There are three musical motives:

- 1) The malediction of the Father against the sins of the world, which are at that moment represented by Jesus;
- 2) A cry, a rhythmical and expressive group “upbeat-accent-conclusions”;
- 3) A heartrending lament on four notes in contrary rhythms.

This is followed by another invocation of the theme of Creation. A great silence broken by a few pulsations evokes the suffering of that hour; an inexpressible suffering, conveyed somewhat by blood and sweat.” The halting rhythm of this movement and the pounding chords suggest the waves of agony and doubt that come before a resigned calm of acceptance.

4. *Amen of Desire.*

“There are two aspects of desire. The first slow, ecstatic, the longing for deep tenderness, a foretaste of the calm, pleasant fragrance of Paradise; The second is extremely passionate, the soul drawn by a terrible love that expresses itself carnally

(see the Song of Songs); but there is nothing carnal here, only an intense thirst for love. To finish, the first theme creates a great calm. The two principal voices appear to merge until there is only the harmonious silence of the heavens...

5. *The Amen of the Angels, Saints and Birdsong.*

“The song of the purity of saints; Amen. Vehement voices of birds; Amen. ‘Angels kneel before the Heavenly Throne; Amen.’ (Revelation) First comes the song of the angels and saints, very simple and pure; then comes the ‘word’ of birdsong, generating brilliant piano playing. These really are the strains of nightingales, blackbirds, chaffinches and whitethroats, an animated and endearing mélange. There follows a reprise of the song of the Saints with a canon of non-retrograde rhythms on three levels, then a short coda about the birds. The exultant voice of the birds: Amen....

5. *Amen of the Judgment.*

“Three icy notes, the clock strikes the hour of truth. Verily I say unto you Amen. ‘Get ye hence, ye who are doomed to damnation!’ (Matthew). The damned are fixed in their state of damnation. A deliberately severe and short piece.” This movement has a pounding refrain of a three-note theme played in the lowest register of the piano.

6. *Amen of the Fulfillment, Paradise.*

“The life of the chosen in a carillon of light. ‘Light to light’ (Proverbs). Amen. The second piano takes up the chordal theme of Creation and makes of it a long chorale of glory. The first piano surrounds the second (combining the very low and very high registers) with a ceaseless carillon of chords and brilliant, scintillating rhythms in rhythmic canons succeeding each other more and more rapidly; jewels of Apocalypse reverberate, collide, dance and impart color and fragrance to the light of Life.”

Program notes by:

Joseph & Elizabeth Kahn

Wordpros@mindspring.com

www.wordprosmusic.com