

OLIVIER MESSIAEN
(1908–1992)

Visions de L'Amen

- 1 I. Amen de la Création [6:27]
- 2 II. Amen des étoiles, de la planète à l'anneau [5:38]
- 3 III. Amen de l'agonie de Jésus [7:29]
- 4 IV. Amen du Désir [11:03]
- 5 V. Amen des anges, des saints, du chant des oiseaux [7:15]
- 6 VI. Amen du Jugement [2:57]
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MARILYN NONKEN, piano I
SARAH ROTHENBERG, piano II

Looking Back: Messiaen, Loriod
and *Visions de l'Amen*

IN THE SPRING OF 1943, in German-occupied Paris, a select audience of invited guests gathered at the Galerie Charpentier for the first performance of Olivier Messiaen's new work for two pianos, *Visions de l'Amen*. Although originally one of several pieces on the program, a printed announcement of a change of date explained that "the significance, the character and the duration of this work have led the Concerts de la Pléiade to present it in a concert which will be entirely devoted to it."¹ Performed by Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod, a prize-winning student at the Paris Conservatoire where the composer had recently been named professor of harmony, *Visions* represented the first musical collaboration between the two, and the beginning of a personal and creative partnership that would endure for half a century.

From its opening movement, Messiaen's *Visions de l'Amen* is revealed to be a major work. Slowly emerging out of silence like the birth of sound itself, the *Amen of Creation* is defined by an expansive sense of time, the radical separation of registers of the two pianos, and the mysterious build of the slowly repeated harmonic progression from the lowest depths of the bass. Messiaen had mastered the resonances of the modern piano in a truly original fashion. As a virtuoso organist, he had an acoustic imagination that was at ease with the keyboard but which transcended the conventional limits of piano sound. In *Visions de l'Amen*, the composer transforms two piano

[1] See Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).

keyboards into something far greater, far more resonant, than the doubling of two instruments.

The music expresses almost unbearable tenderness (the plaintive theme in Mvt III: *Agony of Jesus*, and the first Theme of Desire in Mvt IV: *Amen of Desire*); primal rhythmic force (the savage dance of Mvt II: *Amen of the Stars*); passion of Wagnerian urgency (second Theme of Desire in Mvt IV); purity and joy (Mvt V: *Amen of the Angels, the Saints and Birdsong*); terrifying inflexibility (Mvt V: *Amen of Judgement*), and finally, the dizzying ecstasy of the closing *Amen of Consummation* in which the Theme of Creation makes a final, jubilant return.

Messiaen drew upon an extraordinary range of musical materials and influences to build his musical vocabulary: tonal harmonies forming "cluster-chords" (the composer said, "the most important thing is not to destroy tonality but to enrich it"), non-metric rhythmic patterns that expand and contract, plainchant, Balinese music, Hindu rhythm, and birdsong. He recognized as direct influences the composers Debussy, Stravinsky and Russian music (Scriabin, interestingly, never mentioned but certainly present), Massenet, Jolivet, Schoenberg. The resultant music is an astoundingly unified musical construct. Shimmering colors seduce with the sheer pleasure of sound, while the rigor and procedural directness of Messiaen's compositional process not only provide structural form, but also reflect his deep belief in Catholic dogma. The music, in fact, becomes a mirror image of his faith: a supremely ordered universe with mystical power.

Messiaen described the unusual division of roles between the two pianists

in *Visions. Piano I*, performed by Loriod, was given "the rhythmic difficulties, the clusters of chords, all that is speed, charm and quality of sound," and *Piano II*, performed by Messiaen, held "the principal melody, the thematic elements, everything that demands power and emotion." With the composer retaining much of the musical control but delegating much of the virtuosity, one should remember that Yvonne Loriod was just twenty-years old when *Visions* was composed. Messiaen reports delivering the score to her on April 14, 1943—less than four weeks before the work's premiere(!) The work itself had been composed in fewer than three months.

Visions de l'Amen is an overwhelmingly affirmative work. It was the composer's first commission following his return to Paris after his internment in Stalag VIII A in Silesia, the prisoner-of-war camp where he famously wrote the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*. Attempts have been made to view that seminal work as a response to the horrendous conditions under which it was composed; but it should more rightly be seen as early evidence of Messiaen's uncanny ability to create a world of his own through his music, a world of spiritual eternity and ecstatic joy far from the turbulence surrounding him. While his lifelong faith defined the composer's public image, his discreet private life held a central tragedy that most certainly drew upon such faith—the protracted brain-degenerative illness of Messiaen's first wife, the violinist and composer Claire Delbos, which began in the 1940's when their son was still a child, and would eventually lead to a prolonged institutional confinement until her death in 1959. Messiaen's music expresses a range of human emotions, yet it is never the personal that is important; the expression

is always in a larger context than that of the individual. For Messiaen, music was always a language of transcendence.

The impact of the composer's encounter with the pianist Yvonne Loriod—on this work and on his subsequent development—is immeasurable. Following *Visions de l'Amen*, the first work composed for her, the next twenty years would see the creation of numerous major works with a central piano part written for Yvonne Loriod, including the epic solo piano cycles, *20 Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* and the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*. In 1961, Loriod became his wife.

I first met Yvonne Loriod and Olivier Messiaen as I was completing my studies at The Curtis Institute of Music. Taking the train from Philadelphia to Swarthmore College to hear Loriod perform the *20 Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus*, I could not anticipate the transformative experience that awaited me. I still remember my inability to speak after the performance reached its climactic end, and I sat transfixed in my seat as the applause faded. Afterwards, awestruck, I was disarmed by Yvonne Loriod's down-to-earth warmth and Messiaen's graciousness. The composer reached into his jacket and handed me a calling card of enormous proportions, covered with an engraved list of honorary titles and awards in elaborate French script. "Ignore all this," he advised me, and pointed to the rue Marcadet address, which would subsequently appear frequently on the backs of envelopes addressed to me in Loriod's small cursive writing. With her encouragement, I arranged to go to Paris the following year and study Messiaen's music.

Lessons with Mme. Loriod brought a remarkable balance of reverence for the score and an acutely practical sense as a performer. As I played for

her movements from the *20 Regards de l'Enfant-Jésus*, with neatly sharpened pencils she would dot the score with fingerings, redistribute the large chords between the hands, and demonstrate her amazing fleetness on the keyboard. Unconventional solutions were found to produce the powerful *fortissimos* the music demanded—thumbs, even fists, could make the black keys ring resonantly. The physical and musical were inseparably linked, sound and gesture were conceived at once.

It was illuminating to witness, through her approach to the music, the intimately reciprocal relationship between performer and composer. Yvonne Loriod had literally formed herself as an artist around Messiaen's music—the composer's modes were as natural to her as major or minor scales—and, conversely, his unique writing for the piano had developed around her distinctive abilities. She had an agile musical intellect and a fearless pianism capable of championing multiple complexities, both musical and technical. Mme. Loriod's quick mind and quick fingers lived in Messiaen's encompassing musical universe.

At the time of my studies, Messiaen was immersed in finishing his opera, *St Francis of Assisi*, and Loriod often mentioned the progress of her own work in creating the piano reduction of this massive score. But the composer showed up for student recitals, encouraging, complimentary, and supportive of young pianists championing his music. They both seemed particularly pleased to have a young American there and I was touched by their attention.

The last time I saw Olivier Messiaen was in 1988, when he and Yvonne Loriod made the trip to New York for performances of the *Turangilila-Symphonie*

with Zubin Mehta and the New York Philharmonic. After the performance, as Mme. Loriod mingled with visitors in the hub of excitement, Messiaen sat patiently behind a table signing autographs, even, to my amazement, notating birdcalls on program pages, and generously inscribing a program page to me. The line of well-wishers seemed endless, winding out of the green room and into the corridor, everyone eager to greet the great composer. But Messiaen was characteristically unperturbed and unhurried, chatting amiably with each acquaintance as though he had all the time in the world.

—SARAH ROTHENBERG



Messiaen and Loriod rehearsing *Visions de l'Amen* in 1943

Olivier Messiaen: Notes on *Visions de l'Amen*

The following notes on the seven movements of *Visions de l'Amen* are the composer's own. Messiaen originally intended that his literary descriptions be read aloud before each movement, and this is what occurred in the early performances of the work, as with analogous annotations for the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* and even the *20 Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*—a practice that immediately met with controversy, and one that Messiaen eventually dropped. But telling evidence of how unified in concept were the literary, spiritual and visual with the musical imagination of this great composer.

—S.R.



I. "*Amen de la Création.*"

(Amen of the Creation)

Amen, so be it! "God said, Let there be light: and there was light" (Genesis). The first piano plays a double rhythmic pedal in carillon style, on non-retrogradable [i.e. palindromic] rhythms. The second piano expresses the theme of The Creation. The whole piece is a crescendo. It starts out from an extreme pianissimo, in the mystery of that primitive nebula which already contains the potential of light (and all the bells that shiver in that light)—light, and consequently Life.



II. "*Amen des étoiles, de la planète à l'anneau.*"
(Amen of the Stars and the Ringed Planet)

Brutal, savage dance. Violent spinning of stars, of suns, of Saturn, the planet with the multi-coloured ring. "God calls them and they say: Amen, here we are!" (Baruch). The second piano projects the theme of the planets' dance. First development: beneath the polymodal rotations of the first piano, the second varies the first five notes of the theme in rhythm and with sudden changes of register. Second development: the opening of the theme by elimination, backwards and forwards. A third development superimposes this same motif as a rhythmic pedal (piano I) and with changes of register (piano II). Then a varied repeat of the planets' dance. All these movements, mixed together, evoke the life of the planets and the astonishing rainbow that colors the turning ring of Saturn.



III. "*Amen de l'agonie de Jésus.*"
(Amen of the Agony of Jesus)

Jesus suffers and weeps. "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (St Matthew). He accepts: as thou wilt, Amen. The form is that of a Greek triad [a form followed by

choral odes in ancient Greek drama]: strophe, antistrophe, epode. Strophe: Jesus is alone on the Mount of Olives, face to face with his agony. Three musical motifs: 1) the Father's curse on the Sin of the world, which Jesus in this moment represents; 2) a cry, a rhythmic and expressive group of anacrusis, accent and desinence; 3) a tearing lament on four notes, different in rhythm. Antistrophe: the same music, more developed, with the addition of low rhythmic ostinatos suggesting the sounds of gongs and tam tams. Epode: recollection of the theme of Creation (Christ's sufferings lend grace, and create the new man). A long silence, broken by pulsations, evokes the suffering of this hour: an indescribable suffering, revealed a little in the sweated blood.



IV. "*Amen du désir.*"
(Amen of Desire)

The word "desire" must be understood in the most elevated spiritual sense—the sense in which the angel called the prophet Daniel "man of desire." There are two themes of desire. The first—slow, ecstatic, an aspiration of deep tenderness: already the calm scent of Paradise. The second is much more vehement: the soul is drawn by a terrifying love mounting to a paroxysm of thirst. These two feelings alternate. In the coda the two main voices seem to intermingle, and there is nothing beyond the harmonious silence of Heaven...



V. "*Amen des anges, des saints, du chant des oiseaux.*"

(Amen of the Angels, the Saints, and Birdsong)

Song of the purity of the Saints: Amen. Exultant vocalise of the birds: Amen. Angels bow down before the Throne: Amen. At first the song of the Angels and Saints, uncomplicated, very pure. Then a middle section on birdsongs, requiring a more brilliant style of keyboard writing. Some of the best singers—the Thrush, the Chaffinch, the Blackcap—are stylized, idealized, confused with the thousand sounds of nature, in turbulent, joyous combination. Varied reprise of the song of the Angels and Saints, with a canon in non-retrogradable rhythms on three levels. Brief coda on the birds.



VI. "*Amen du jugement.*"

(Amen of Judgement)

Three frozen notes, like the bell of evidence. In truth I tell you, Amen.
"Depart from me, ye cursed" (St Matthew).



VII. "*Amen de la consommation*"

(Amen of Consummation)

Consummation, Paradise. Life of the resurrected in a carillon of light. "From brightness to brightness" (Proverbs). The second piano takes up the theme of Creation and draws from it a long chorale of glory. The first piano, at both extremes of the keyboard together, creates a ceaseless carillon of chords and brilliant, scintillating rhythms, in increasingly crowded rhythmic canons: sapphire, emerald, topaz, jacinth, amethyst, sardonyx, the whole rainbow of precious stones mentioned in the Apocalypse, sounding, jarring, dancing, colouring and perfuming the light of Life.



MARILYN NONKEN, pianist

Marilyn Nonken is one of the most celebrated champions of the modern repertoire of her generation, known for performances that explore transcendent virtuosity and extremes of musical expression. Heralded upon her New York debut as “a determined protector of important music” (New York Times), she is recognized as “one of the greatest interpreters of new music” (American Record Guide). Her repertoire covers a vast range of 20th and 21st century works, ranging from the New York School to the New Complexity and including classics of Ives, Schoenberg, Stockhausen, and Boulez as well as works by emerging voices. Composers who have written for her include

Pascal Dusapin, Jason Eckardt, Michael Finnissy, Liza Lim, Tristan Murail, and David Rakowski. Her performances have been presented at venues such as Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Miller Theatre, the Guggenheim Museum, and IRCAM; festival appearances include Résonances, Festival d'Automne, When Morty Met John, Making Music, Works and Process at the Guggenheim, the Helsinki Festival, Aspects des Musiques d'Aujourd'hui, Messiaen 2008, New Music Days, Musikhøst, and the William Kapell International Piano Festival and Competition.

Marilyn Nonken has recorded for New World, Mode, Tzadik, Kairos, Bridge, Lovely Music, Albany, Metier, Divine Art, Innova, CRI, BMOP Sound, and New Focus. Recent releases include Murail's complete piano works, Morton Feldman's Triadic Memories, Rakowski's Piano Concerto (Boston Modern Orchestra Project under Gil Rose), Roger Reynolds's piano concerto The Angel of Death (Slee Sinfonietta under Magnus Martensson), and chamber music of Brian Ferneyhough (Elision under Jean Deroyer).

A student of new music pioneer David Burge at the Eastman School, Marilyn Nonken received a Ph.D. degree in musicology from Columbia University. Her writings on music and aesthetics have been published in *Perspectives of New Music*, *Contemporary Music Review*, *Current Musicology*, *Tempo*, *Ecological Psychology*, and the *Journal of the Institute for Studies in American Music*. Currently Director of Piano Studies at New York University's Steinhardt School, she is a Steinway Artist. She lives in New York with her husband, the theatre artist George Hunka.



SARAH ROTHENBERG, pianist

Pianist Sarah Rothenberg has an unusually creative and distinguished career, recognized internationally as soloist, chamber musician, and for her innovative programs relating music to literature and visual art. Performances include Great Performers at Lincoln Center, Washington's Kennedy Center, London's Barbican Centre, Gilmore International Keyboard Festival, Aldeburgh Festival, Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, Palais des Beaux-Arts (Brussels), The Menil Collection, Guggenheim Museum, Getty Museum, Library

of Congress and leading concert series across the United States. Recordings include Fanny Mendelssohn's *Das Jahr* (Indie Award for Best Solo Classical Recording); *Rediscovering the Russian Avant-Garde 1912-1925*: Roslavetz, Mosolov, Lourié; *Shadows and Fragments*: Brahms and Schoenberg. Over 75 premieres include works by Charles Wuorinen, George Tsontakis, Gunther Schuller, Shulamit Ran and, forthcoming, Tobias Picker. Active as a writer, her essays appear in literary, art and music publications, including *Threepenny Review*, *Brick*, *Conjunctions*, *Nexus*, *Tri-Quarterly*, *Chamber Music*, and *The Musical Quarterly*.

Sarah Rothenberg is Artistic Director of Da Camera of Houston, and was previously co-founder and co-artistic director of the Bard Music Festival. Performance works conceived, directed and performed by Sarah Rothenberg include *Marcel Proust's Paris*, *The Musical World of Thomas Mann*, *St. Petersburg Legacy* (all for Lincoln Center Great Performers and Da Camera of Houston); *The Blue Rider: Kandinsky and Music* (for Works & Process at the Guggenheim and Miller Theatre, New York) and *Chopin in Paris: Epigraph for a Condemned Book* (co-commissioned by Yale Repertory Theatre, UMS Ann Arbor, Krannert Center for Performing Arts and Da Camera of Houston). She received the French medal of Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters in 2000. Sarah Rothenberg lives in Houston and New York.

Following her graduation from The Curtis Institute of Music, where she studied with Seymour Lipkin and Mieczeslaw Horszowski, Sarah Rothenberg lived in

Paris and studied the music of Messiaen with Yvonne Loriod, who wrote:
"Sarah Rothenberg is richly gifted: generous, sensitive, fiery, intelligent. This
is a 'Presence' at the piano, a flame between the composer and the public!"
Olivier Messiaen wrote, "A magnificent pianist."

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