

# MESSIAEN

L'ASCENSION  
LE TOMBEAU RESPLENDISSANT  
LES OFFRANDES OUBLIÉES  
UN SOURIRE

TONHALLE-ORCHESTER  
ZÜRICH

PAAVO JÄRVI



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# ORCHESTRAL CREDENTIALS – AND A MOZARTIAN SMILE

BY INGA MAI GROOTE

The orchestral works on this CD represent the early and late work of Olivier Messiaen, whose highly individual musical language places him among the foremost composers of the 20th century. *Les Offrandes oubliées*, *Le Tombeau resplendissant* and *L'Ascension* all date from the period in which Messiaen was establishing himself in his career. After his musical education at the Paris Conservatoire, he had competed for the Prix de Rome (unsuccessfully, like Ravel before him). Then in 1931, already a highly skilled keyboard improviser, he was appointed titular organist at the church of Sainte-Trinité in Paris, a prestigious post he was to retain for more than 60 years. Though over time organ music naturally developed into a major genre of his output, he was already composing important works for orchestra in the early 1930s. He later became a professor at the Conservatoire, at first teaching harmony, then analysis, and from 1966 composition. In 1985 Messiaen outlined four 'difficulties' that might put listeners off his music: his preoccupation with rhythm, his ideas about the properties of colours, his work as an ornithologist, and his Catholic Christian faith. Yet these so-called 'difficulties' are actually the characteristic qualities of his music, and – except for the use of birdsong – can already be seen in his early works.

*Les Offrandes oubliées* and *Le Tombeau resplendissant* are symphonic poems, a genre that had occupied a central place in French music since César Franck, allowing composers to employ programmatic texts so as to clothe expressible yet abstract ideas in symphonic musical forms. Messiaen wrote his own highly poetic texts; in an additional commentary to *Les Offrandes oubliées* he describes its three sections as a kind of altar triptych: 'The Cross – Sin – The Eucharist' – they might also be interpreted as Contemplation, Descent,



and Ecstasy. In the first section, the Contemplation of Suffering is expressed in structural terms by irregular groups of bars, something like the free form of Gregorian chant. The threatening nature of Sin is translated into motoric gestures – at times reminiscent of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. The third section, dedicated to the salvation wrought at the Last Supper, is by contrast extremely slow, seeming to transport the listener to a different, timeless sphere, an extraordinary state of musical ecstasy highly typical of Messiaen.

Following the 1933 premiere of *Le Tombeau resplendissant* the composer suppressed the work, probably because its programme makes it the most personal of his early orchestral works: it had to wait until 1984 to be performed again. The time of its composition, around 1931, was a transitional phase in Messiaen's life, overshadowed by the death of his mother. His father had started a new family, and Messiaen was preparing for his wedding to Claire Delbos. The text he formulated for the work is a disillusioned look back, which is however transformed by a hopeful future perspective. The first part, characterized by irregular rhythms, expresses a savage anger at his own youthful years, now past, while the contrasting second section recalls his earlier joys in a mood of idyllic nostalgia. After a further passage of stormy rebellion, and the recognition that his youth now lies in the 'resplendent tomb' of the title, the work ends with a hope of redemption. Messiaen's prose poem quotes the Sermon on the Mount's words of consolation to those who are 'weary and burdened': a promise that finds musical expression in the ecstatic ending of the work.

*L'Ascension* (1932/33) is better known today in its organ version – which was actually composed later, with a different third movement. The work is inspired by Christ's Ascension, its four movements preceded by brief quotations from the New Testament, in addition to descriptive movement titles. In the opening movement we can relate the predominantly rising melodic motives to the heavenwards impulse of Christ become man: with its relatively clear phrasing and straightforward harmonies the music identifies itself as 'human'. The second movement, the prayer of 'a soul yearning for heaven', combines fairly free passages

with long, unisono melodies, in which we can recognize the 'Alleluias' of the movement title – chanted songs of jubilation – even if no actual Gregorian plainsong models for them can be identified. In the third, joyful movement, trumpet fanfares introduce a dancelike episode. Once again, the finale evokes a holy ecstasy: as its title explains, this is the prayer of Christ ascending to the Father. The musical techniques used here are reminiscent of those found in other Messiaen works on this album: only the upper strings are heard, the tempo is extremely slow, and the entire movement consists of a haunting, densely harmonised melody that ends with a long-held, unresolved seventh chord, as if suspended in mid-air in a state of equilibrium.

In his commentary for its first performance, the composer mentions some unusual features of his composing technique: 'modes of limited transposition' in the first and second movements (i.e. modified scales), and in the second movement, melodies 'derived from Gregorian chants and hymns'. Both these features were to become central to the further development of Messiaen's composing and his theoretical ideas. This free adaptation of Gregorian plainchant is the expression of a modern conception, unconcerned with retaining the pure form of the chant, but rather reworking it and combining it with new harmonies so as to take church music in a new direction.

That Messiaen's music is not just Catholic in essence is clear from the way his orchestral work was received from the very start. *Les Offrandes oubliées* immediately attracted the attention of influential supporters of new music. Walther Straram, whose orchestra was particularly devoted to contemporary work, conducted the first performance in 1931; it was also played at the first concert given in 1936 by 'La Jeune France', a group of young composers campaigning for a humanity-centred music, to counter the austere, impersonal, mechanical tendencies of modern times. They were attracted to Messiaen's highly individual spirituality, one that avoided established religious and political ideologies.

Messiaen's love of Mozart expressed itself on many occasions: he greatly admired works such as *Don Giovanni*, analysed Mozart's Piano Concertos with his students, and regarded Mozart's music as among the very greatest. So he gladly accepted the commission in 1989 to write a work in honour of the bicentenary of Mozart's death, for the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France. *Un sourire* (A Smile) with its reduced orchestral forces, was composed 'in the spirit of Mozart', wrote Messiaen in his journal. In this 'homage' he was not trying to imitate Mozart's style, but his illustrious predecessor's attitude of serene cheerfulness in the face of all adversity. As he explained in an interview, 'I thought to myself: Mozart always had many enemies. He was cold, starving, nearly all his children died, his wife was ill, he experienced only misfortune... Yet he was always smiling. In his music, as in his life.'

In this work we perceive two different soundworlds. A calm, lyrical texture of strings and woodwind, shifting between tonal and modal harmonies, is punctuated by fast, birdsong-like sections of wide-ranging melodic contour, with the xylophone to the fore. Since the 1950s the composer had been notating birdsong and using it in his work, but here for once he does not identify the bird in question – the African white-browed robin-chat. Its melody features a downwards leap of a major sixth – which for Messiaen was a typical Mozartian fingerprint: a subtle link between the natural world and the addressee of this musical homage.

## **PAAVO JÄRVI** CHIEF CONDUCTOR AND MUSIC CONDUCTOR

Talking to Paavo Järvi, it soon becomes clear that he never considered any other path in life: “Had I been born into a family of firemen, I might have wanted to become a fireman. But that’s purely hypothetical, because I had no other choice but to become a musician – and that’s a good thing.”

Who had the greatest influence on his development? “Undoubtedly my father, the conductor Neeme Järvi. It was certainly the experience of growing up in the family of a conductor – one who loves music to distraction and devotes himself to it with such abandon – that made a musician out of me.” Järvi started studying percussion and conducting while still in his native city of Tallinn, before going to the United States in 1980 to study under such masters as Leonard Bernstein. Paavo Järvi supports Estonian composers, is Artistic Adviser to the Estonian Festival Orchestra, and conducts concerts and master classes at the Pärnu Music Festival, which he co-founded with his father.

Paavo Järvi has been Chief Conductor of the NHK Symphony Orchestra (Tokyo) since 2015. He is also Artistic Director of the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen. Furthermore, he is Conductor Laureate of the Frankfurt Radio Symphony and Music Director Laureate of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. As a guest conductor, he collaborates with orchestras such as the Berlin Philharmonic, the London Philharmonia Orchestra, the Staatskapelle Dresden and the New York Philharmonic. Until 2016, he was Music Director of the Orchestre de Paris. Paavo Järvi has held the post of Chief Conductor and Music Director of the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich since the beginning of the 2019/20 season.

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# TONHALLE-ORCHESTER ZÜRICH

Following the celebrations for the 150th anniversary of the Tonhalle-Gesellschaft Zürich over the past two seasons, which also featured numerous world premières and staged performances, the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich will begin a new chapter of the orchestra's history as of the 2019/20 season together with Chief Conductor and Music Director Paavo Järvi. David Zinman directed the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich until the 2013/14 season and is now its Conductor Laureate; Lionel Bringuier was Chief Conductor until the 2017/18 season. A successful tour of Asia with Paavo Järvi in the autumn of 2018 was followed by live recordings for the first CD, with orchestral works by Olivier Messiaen. Recordings of all the Tchaikovsky symphonies are planned for the 2019/20 season, complementing the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich's more than 40 CD productions. These include complete recordings of all the Beethoven, Mahler, Brahms and Schubert symphonies, as well as Ravel and anniversary box sets.

Consisting of just over 100 musicians from 20 nations, the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich performs 50 different programmes at more than 100 concerts every season. These are supplemented by guest appearances in more than 70 cities in 16 countries to date. The orchestra's principal players can be heard in the TOZ Soloists series. Both at home and on tour, the ensemble performs with renowned soloists such as Janine Jansen, Martin Grubinger, Joshua Bell, Rudolf Buchbinder, Julia Fischer, Gautier Capuçon, Yuja Wang, Jean-Yves Thibaudet, Lisa Batiashvili and Sabine Meyer. The orchestra maintains close links with guest conductors such as Franz Welser-Möst, Bernard Haitink, Herbert Blomstedt, Manfred Honeck, Krzysztof Urbanski, Jakub Hrušša, Kent Nagano, Giovanni Antonini and Jan Willem de Vriend.

The orchestra has played at the Tonhalle Maag since the beginning of the 2017/18 season. In March 2021 the orchestra will move back to the renovated Tonhalle concert hall on the shores of Lake Zurich.

[tonhalle-orchester.ch](http://tonhalle-orchester.ch)





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# OLIVIER MESSIAEN (1908-1992)

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## TONHALLE-ORCHESTER ZÜRICH PAAVO JÄRVI



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