

contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Toop, Richard. 1984. 'Messiaen's *Saint François*'. *Contact*, 28. pp. 49-50. ISSN 0308-5066.

Richard Toop

Messiaen's 'Saint François'

Olivier Messiaen, *Saint François d'Assise* (*Scènes franciscaines*), conducted by Seiji Ozawa, Paris Opéra, 28 November 1983

To Laura, who decided not to go . . .

To begin with the obvious: it is not an opera (no one could seriously have expected it to be one). Certainly it plays in an opera house, and uses sets and costumes of a type that (mercifully, perhaps) would be inconceivable elsewhere. But it also comprises some four-and-a-half hours of leisurely paced music, and hence has a duration which, despite Wagner, belongs to ritual rather than to any current Western notions of drama, operatic or otherwise. On the whole, the music is slow, static, or both, and the action, too, is minimal. It is surely no accident that Messiaen describes his eight 'Franciscan scenes' as 'tableaux': indeed, far from being 'tableaux vivants', they often seem more like 'still lives' (or in French, 'natures mortes' . . .).

So what is this piece? 'Scenic oratorio' is the imaginary genre that springs to mind. An exhibition of Parisian Wagneriana in the foyers of the Opéra dangled the tenuous option of a *Bühnenweihfestspiel* à la *Parsifal*. But compared to *Parsifal*, the spiritual trajectory of *Saint François*—a saint's gradual attainment of total grace—is a monochrome affair. The very linearity and inflexibility of this progression—its immunity from setbacks—rules out those physical or psychological conflicts that underpin most accepted notions of drama.

At one level, criticism is out of place, be it of genre or of content. For this is not just 'an opera' (or whatever else it may be), it is The Long-Awaited Messiaen Opera. Its performance was a national event, and even at the final dress-rehearsal, which I attended, everything—the tumultuous crowds around the doors of the Opéra, the frantic rush for the few unassigned seats, and the respectful hush in the auditorium (marred only by the clicking cameras of journalistic Judases)—suggested a tense vigil before the nativity of a great work. And, of course, it was also a 'family affair', the apotheosis of the Messiaen/Loriod family. Accordingly, Mme Jeanne Loriod presided over a trinity of ondes Martenots lodged up in the royal boxes; admittedly there was no epic solo piano part for her sister Yvonne, but Mr and Mrs Messiaen were much in evidence at the centre of the hall, as they had apparently been at all the previous rehearsals.

Perhaps all criticism of *Saint François* must rank as heresy. In no respect is the work a rational spectacle: it is an act of faith that demands that same faith from its listeners. But in art, as opposed to ritual, reason cannot be entirely subject to the tyranny of belief, and it is precisely because certain aspects of *Saint François* were so unspeakable that one must speak of them.

The staging, of which Messiaen can be held neither totally guilty nor totally innocent (since he apparently played no role in its execution but a considerable one in its conception), was frankly distressing. The mixture of naivety and sophistication that was always characteristic of Messiaen here pronounced its own presumed last will and testament. Yet sadly the visual

incarnation of the miraculous (laser crosses and stigmata) was effected by means of a cut-price technology that the average eight-year-old reared on *Star Wars* and video games could view only with derision. As luck (good or bad) would have it, I had spent the afternoon before *Saint François* at a showing of *Le retour du Jedi*. Certain comparisons were enlightening, and not to Messiaen's advantage. The revelatory symbolism of 'blinding light' was similar in both; but how poor were the technical resources of 'art' when set beside those of 'entertainment'! Moreover, while both *Saint François* and *The Return of Jedi* lean heavily on legend and allegory to promote spiritual and ideological conviction, the latter seems far more potent, not least because it uses technology as an amplifying factor in the struggle between good and evil, whereas the opera employs it merely for external effect in the Meyerbeer tradition (in both cases, the fight is clearly 'fixed', but Messiaen never even lets the adversary into the ring). It is as if Messiaen, at the moment when he renounced human frailty in favour of a paradisaical ornithology, lost touch with (and interest in) the current state of effective human communication (compare the headline of Maurice Fleuret's review of Stockhausen's *Inori*: 'En s'approchant de son Dieu, Stockhausen s'éloigne de nous.' ('As he approaches his God, Stockhausen draws further away from us.')).

It was not only the 'technology' of the production that gave cause for regret. The sets were impossibly disparate—at one moment 'naturalistic', then suddenly sub-Cézanne, and, soon after, quasi-geometric. Symbolically, perhaps, everything mechanical proclaimed its own flaws: just as the laser cross wobbled embarrassingly on its destinatory rock, so the various raised and lowered screens shuddered (sometimes audibly) through every centimetre of their perilous journeys, and went on quivering for several seconds after supposedly coming to rest.

Similar misfortunes attended at least one of the costumes: that of the Angel. Christine Eda-Pierre, who took the part, is a magnificent soprano with a physique that is anything but ethereal; her robe gave her an unjustly inelegant profile, aggravated by two vulgarly gaudy wings, which seemed more appropriate to the Christmas window display of a department store than to the astral heights. So if Mme Eda-Pierre's slow procession around the stage holding a pseudo-viol (which sounded a lot like an ondes Martenot to me . . .) threatened to bring a secular smirk to one's lips, it wasn't her fault. In fact the whole treatment of the movement of characters (on the rare occasions when they moved at all) was questionable. There were moments when gesture was called upon to supplement or replace song in a manner inaccessible to most opera singers. It was surely enough that Michel Senechal sang the part of the Leper so well; to expect him to be capable of a beatific dance after his cure was really to place too much faith in miracles—such an *alter ego* could better have been supplied by a professional dancer (though perhaps that would have been too 'secular' for the composer's taste).

But these problems are simply symptoms of a broader one that afflicts every aspect of *Saint François*: the wildly eclectic approach to style. And that, inevitably, brings one to the music. In effect, it is a vast Messiaen Retrospective, ranging from the neo-Franckian gestures of *Les offrandes oubliées* to the more astringent world of *Des canyons aux étoiles*. Not all of what came in between is equally represented; for example, the celestial mechanics of the *Livre d'orgue* don't get much of a showing. In fact, apart from the omnipresent birds (which, given

Messiaen's ornithological interests, must have made the selection of St Francis from the standard hagiography a matter of predestination rather than choice), the musical language of the opera is mainly rooted in the world of *Turangalila*, and even the *Poèmes pour Mi*. The very first vocal phrase, an archetypal falling tritone over second-mode-of-limited-transposition harmonies, emblematically announces the work's flagrantly restorative intentions.

Of course, it is all very beautifully done. And yet somehow it seems largely superfluous, not least because the past is recalled at only 80% intensity. Only the largely choral tableau in which St Francis receives the stigmata covers new ground (new for Messiaen, that is); significantly, even after nearly three-and-a-half hours of music, its effect was suddenly electrifying—I stopped gazing mournfully at my watch, and found myself sitting, at last, on the edge of my seat.

But whatever the problems of the musical substance, one level at which Messiaen's new work excels is that of sheer sound. The orchestration is brilliant, both in the writing for individual instruments and in Messiaen's flair for discovering rich and striking sonorities. The traditional problem of the 'pit orchestra' receives a radical solution: Messiaen brings most of it up onto the sides of an extended stage—the septuple woodwind is on the left, the brass and pitched percussion on the right, and three ondes Martenots and a cordon of trumpeters lodged up in the boxes. This polychoral distribution may aggravate the conductor's synchronisation difficulties, but the gain in acoustic clarity (vital in so complex a score) is startling: the orchestral sound radiates out into the auditorium. In other circumstances, the bringing of the orchestra onto the stage

might be seen as a means of 'deformalising' the spectacle. With Messiaen the effect is quite opposite: the two ranks of orchestral players provide a formal frame for the singers; their constant visibility destroys any lasting illusion of 'reality', and insists on the artificial, ritualised, 'allegorical' quality of the stage action. To that extent the comparisons that spring to mind are with Eastern traditions as diverse as the kathakali and gagaku, rather than the history of opera.

As for the performance: at one level—that of apparent accuracy—the orchestral playing seemed to be exemplary, but at another—more specifically 'musical'—it left much to be desired. Partly (and perhaps uniquely) this could be attributed to an excessive number of preparatory rehearsals—such, at least, was the opinion of some of the orchestral musicians. Another cause could have been the uniformly legato quality of Seiji Ozawa's beat: clear and reassuring, but not calculated to put much 'kick' into the execution of Messiaen's ornate rhythms. As befits any opera, the evening really belonged to the voice: the chorus sounded very impressive, and the general level of solo singing was very high. But pride of place must go to St Francis himself, or rather to his current representative on earth, José Van Dam. His singing was, really, beyond praise. His part is enormous and exhausting; throughout the evening he sang with unfailingly beautiful tone, clear pitch, and irreproachable musicianship. I don't think I have ever been so impressed by an opera singer, and if there was any credible element of the miraculous in *Saint François*, it was the performance of Mr Van Dam.

Que conclure? A grandiose work, but not a great one; it will have a place of honour in the annals of Parisian opera, but I can't foresee other major houses rushing to make it their own.


 The logo for EMAS (Electro-Acoustic Music Association of Great Britain) features the word 'emas' in a stylized, rounded, lowercase font. The letters are interconnected and have a thick, double-line outline. The logo is centered between two horizontal lines that extend across the width of the text area.

ELECTRO-ACOUSTIC MUSIC ASSOCIATION OF GREAT BRITAIN

the national organisation promoting the aims of research, composition and performance in the field of electro-acoustic music

Electro-acoustic music covers all types of music requiring electronic technology, from musique concrète and electronic music, to live electronics, computers and microprocessors. EMAS publishes a quarterly newsletter, organises meetings and technical seminars and administers a Sound Equipment Pool of high quality for concert playback. EMAS campaigns for better facilities and opportunities for British composers, performers and listeners to this music.

For information and details of membership contact:

**72 Hillside Road,
London, N15 6NB**