

Olivier Messiaen

“Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum,” for orchestra of woodwinds, brass, and metallic percussion

OLIVIER MESSIAEN was born in Avignon, France, on December 10, 1908, and died in Paris on April 28, 1992. He composed “Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum” in Petichet in 1964, on a commission from André Malraux, the French Minister of Culture, for a major work to be performed as part of national commemorations for the dead of the two World Wars. The first performance was a private one in the Sainte-Chapelle, Paris, on May 7, 1965, conducted by Serge Baudo. The public premiere, again with Baudo conducting, took place in the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres on June 20, 1965.

THE SCORE CALLS FOR THREE ENSEMBLES: Woodwind—two piccolos, three flutes, three oboes and English horn, three clarinets, E-flat clarinet, and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon; Brass—trumpet in D, three trumpets, six horns, three tenor trombones, bass trombone, tuba, and bass saxhorn in B-flat; and Metallic Percussion—three sets of tuned cow bells (cencerros), tubular bells, six gongs, and three tam-tams.

Olivier Messiaen began his musical education as a young child in his native Avignon. His taste for music was awakened by a Christmas gift he received in 1916—scores of *The Damnation of Faust* and *Don Giovanni*, a remarkable gift for an eight-year-old! Two years later his family moved to Nantes and he took formal instruction in harmony. His teacher, Jehan de Gibon, gave him the score of Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Messiaen has described his encounter with this work as “a real bombshell...probably the most decisive influence of my life.” Messiaen entered the Paris Conservatoire at eleven. In 1926 he won the first prize in fugue, following that in 1928 with the prize in piano accompaniment. During the two successive years he bore off the palm in music history and in composition. His teachers included Marcel Dupré for organ, Messiaen’s principal instrument, and Paul Dukas in composition.

Almost immediately after finishing his studies, Messiaen took up the position of organist at the church of La Trinité in Paris, remaining in the post from 1930 until his death. He began teaching in Paris in the École Normale de Musique and the Schola Cantorum. And, of course, he continued composing. Already during the 1930s his music was introduced to Boston by Serge Koussevitzky, who led the American premiere of *Les Offrandes oubliées* (*The Forgotten Sacrifices*) in October 1936, when the composer was not yet twenty-seven. Messiaen’s connection with the Boston Symphony Orchestra continued for the rest of his life. He was composer-in-residence at Tanglewood in 1949; that December Leonard Bernstein led the BSO in the world premiere of the *Turangalîla-symphonie*, commissioned by Koussevitzky. Other Messiaen works performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra over the years include *L’Ascension* (Koussevitzky, Eugene Ormandy, and Richard Burgin), *Chronochromie* (Georges Prêtre), *Concert à quatre* (Myung-Whun Chung), *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* (Michael Tilson Thomas and Simon Rattle), *Oiseaux exotiques* (Seiji Ozawa), *Réveil des oiseaux* (Ingo Metzmacher), and *Three Short Liturgies of the Divine Presence* (Ozawa). After Seiji Ozawa conducted the world premiere of Messiaen’s six-hour-long opera *Saint Francis of Assisi* in Paris in 1985, he gave the American premiere of three scenes in concert format with the Boston Symphony. In the winter of 1992, the BSO gave its last American premiere of a new Messiaen piece, *Un Sourire*, a tribute to Mozart, under the direction of Marek Janowski, who had commissioned it.

One of the major elements of Messiaen’s work was his deep and mystical religious faith. He thoroughly absorbed the musical elements of the Catholic tradition through his many years as a distinguished organist, and he could, when he chose, employ the traditional melodies of Gregorian chant for both musical and symbolic purposes in his own scores, as he does in the fourth movement of *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum*. This religious thread is central to many of his most significant and effective works.

That religious faith formed the basis for one of his best-known and most moving compositions, *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (*Quartet for the End of Time*), which he wrote while imprisoned in a Silesian military camp in 1940. Finding three other musicians who had managed to retain their instruments, he composed the work for a quartet, with himself as pianist, drawing upon imagery from the book of *Revelation* (the same source as some of the images in *Et exspecto*). The four musicians gave the first performance of the quartet in those stark surroundings in 1941.

After his release from the camp in 1941, Messiaen became professor of harmony at the Conservatoire. Not long afterward he began the series of lessons in the home of a friend that attracted the attention of the brightest young composers at the institution, notably Pierre Boulez. He was named Professor of Composition at the Conservatory in 1966 and was elected a member of the Institut the following year.

Messiaen was a renowned ornithologist and often included actual birdcalls, collected all over the world, in his music. For a period in the 1960s, especially, some of his largest works were based almost entirely on musical gestures created in imitation of the songs of specific birds, which the composer always gratefully acknowledged in his prefaces.

As a musician, Messiaen liked to refer to himself as a “rhythmician,” since he had spent years in a detailed study of the elements of rhythm, not only in the European art-music tradition, but also the rhythmic concepts of the ancient Greek and Hindu traditions.

The three threads of Catholic mysticism, birdsong, and exotic rhythms all come together in *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum*. The title comes from the Nicene Creed: “And I look for the resurrection of the dead.” Though the five movements are untitled, each is preceded in the score by a Biblical quotation (or an assemblage of quotations) to reflect the theme of a transition from despair to faith. For a composer who could, upon occasion, write some of the most complex music of our time, Messiaen’s score is amazingly direct and straightforward, though, as always, filled with gestures that have symbolic significance as much as a purely aesthetic one.

During the decade before the composition of *Et exspecto*, Messiaen had concentrated on the exploitation of timbre and rhythm, with little or no attention to melody. Then with *Sept Haïkai* of 1962, inspired by Japanese gagaku music, he returned to a kind of melody-based music. And in his next piece, *Couleurs de la cité céleste* (1963), he made greater use of chant melodies and less of the birdsong that had so dominated his work of the few years previous. Thus, with *Et exspecto* (1964) he blends melody (including subtle and rare quotations of birdsong or chant), rhythm, and timbre in a way that allows each aspect its own significant role.

The overall effect of the work is one of monumental grandeur and a new simplicity. One elementary illustration of the simple directness of Messiaen’s musical imagery comes in a comparison of the beginning and end of the work: it starts in darkness, a “cry from the abyss,” with a low A-flat on the saxhorn; the last movement, symbolizing the multitude of resurrected humanity, ends with a shimmering chord whose top note is G-sharp in the piccolos— exactly five octaves above the opening pitch. The gap of five octaves symbolizes the full expanse of the space between the abyss and celestial glory; at the same time, the achievement of the original pitch as the culmination of the final chord brings a purely musical sense of closure. The feeling of grandeur in this score, of formal hieratic event, is emphasized, too, by the composer’s request that the work’s five movements each be separated from one another by a minute of silence.

The following paragraphs begin with the Biblical quotation that heads each movement, followed by a brief analysis:

I. Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord: Lord, hear my voice. (Psalm 130:1-2).

Beginning on a low A-flat in the saxhorn, the low woodwinds and brass begin to unwind a long and slow melody in a solemn mood, deepened by the soft rumble of the tam-tams. A gradual crescendo culminates in eight massive dissonant chords (each containing all twelve notes of the chromatic scale) that represent the cry from the Abyss.

II. Christ, being raised from the dead, dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. (*Romans 6:9*).

A splash of arabesque decoration in the upper woodwinds and a sustained chord in the horns anticipate the elements of a slow lyrical melody begun in the oboe and continued by the other woodwinds. A contrasting section begins with a complex rhythmic figure in the cowbells. This is a Hindu rhythm (*Simhavikrama*) consisting of fifteen units—here eighth-notes—in a complex pattern. Messiaen chooses it for its symbolic significance. The Hindu name for this rhythm means “the power of the lion,” and it contains embedded within it a shorter rhythm (*Vijaya*), the name of which means “victory.” The number fifteen is also symbolic, being a multiple of three and five. Three, of course, represents the Trinity in a Christian context; five is the number of Shiva in Hindu belief—Shiva, the destroyer of death, and therefore also a symbol of Christ. The movement alternates twice between the opening lyric melody and the faster rhythmic passage, then closes with a reference to the opening material.

III. The hour is coming when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God. (*John 5:25*).

Messiaen begins this movement with his first use of birdsong in the piece—the song of the uirapuru (musician wren) of the Amazon. As with the Hindu rhythm of the preceding movement, he turns an exotic image into a Christian symbol: according to a legend prevalent among the natives of the Amazon, one hears the uirapuru only at the moment of death. There is an improvisatory feeling to the birdsong; the rest of the movement is formal in structure, as if emphasizing death’s ultimate unavoidability. Four notes on the bells, permuted to different shapes, an orchestral crescendo on a repeated chord, and long notes, allowed to vibrate freely, on the gongs and tam-tams make up the stock of musical gestures. On its last appearance, the sound of the gongs appears from under the woodwind figure and grows to the loudest moment in the movement (marked *fffff*), then dies away into silence.

IV. They shall be raised in glory, with a new name, when the morning stars sing together, and all the sons of God shout for joy. (*I. Corinthians 15:43; Revelation 2:17; Job 38:7*).

This is the longest and most complex movement, built out of the repetition of a few specific blocks of material shaped into a long crescendo to a powerful climax. Three long-held notes played on three tam-tams begin the movement; the gesture recurs many times, each time louder than before. It alternates with two different kinds of ideas: chant melodies from the Easter service (the introit “Resurrexi” played on bells and cowbells, followed by the “Alleluia” on trumpet and all the woodwinds), and the song of another bird, the calandra lark of southern Europe, which symbolizes for Messiaen “heavenly joy and one of the four qualities of the Heavenly Host, the ‘gift of agility.’” Each time a section recurs, it grows slightly longer and more elaborate. At the third statement of the plainsong material, Messiaen creates a powerful climax by combining it contrapuntally with the opening theme of the first movement in the horns and trombones. The overall plan of the movement is as follows:

- Three tam-tam strokes (*pp*)
- Plainsong from Easter service
- Three tam-tam strokes (*p*)
- Calandra lark
- Three tam-tam strokes (*f*)
- Plainsong from Easter service
- Three tam-tam strokes (*ff*)
- Calandra lark
- Three tam-tam strokes (*fff*)
- Plainsong from Easter service combined with theme of first movement
- Tam-tams and gongs (*p*, then *f*)
- Eight long chords (full ensemble), recalling end of first movement

V. And I heard the voice of a great multitude. (*Revelation 19:6*).

The brief finale has correspondences with the opening movement; the smoothly lyrical melody, however, is now driven along by an implacably steady sixteenth-note rhythm in the six gongs. The pulsing surge of the great multitude runs on without pause until finally arriving at a series of massive closing chords, on the last of which the three piccolos rise to the high G-sharp—five octaves above the work's opening pitch—to complete the ascent from the abyss to the celestial heights.

Steven Ledbetter