

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Olivier Messiaen – *Les offrandes oubliées*

Born December 10, 1908, Avignon, France.

Died April 27, 1992, Paris, France.

Les offrandes oubliées

Messiaen composed *Les offrandes oubliées* (The forgotten offerings) in 1930. It was first performed on February 19, 1931, in Paris. The score calls for three flutes, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, and strings. The work lasts approximately thirteen minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra has performed Messiaen's *Les offrandes oubliées* on subscription concerts at Orchestra Hall only once previously, on April 22 and 23, 1993, with Myung-Whun Chung conducting.

From the very opening of Olivier Messiaen's first published composition, it was clear that here was a composer with a voice new to music. *Le banquet céleste* (The celestial banquet), a work for organ, begins with a single chord that lasts seven seconds. The entire piece is only twenty-five measures long, yet at Messiaen's extreme and deliberate tempo it takes six minutes to play. Music that moves that slowly denies us the familiar sensation of a pulse; one perceives individual sounds, but not a sense of forward movement from one to another. Messiaen calls *Le banquet céleste* a meditation; it allows not only contemplation and reflection, but that distinct, almost otherworldly sensation of time standing still.

Messiaen wrote *Le banquet céleste* in 1928, during his student days at the Paris Conservatory. It was the earliest of his compositions he cared to acknowledge. In 1930, Messiaen left the conservatory to take the post of organist at the Church of the Trinity in Paris. That year, he composed *Les offrandes oubliées* (The forgotten offerings), his earliest important work for orchestra and the first one he allowed to be published. Like *Le banquet céleste*, it is marked on every page by the strong personal stamp of this utterly individual composer, and it speaks with the fearless assurance essential to a true pioneer. It is difficult to think of another figure so out of sync with his own century and yet so influential in determining its future.

Les offrandes oubliées is the first of a series of works in which Messiaen states his devout theology through the voice of the orchestra. Messiaen explained the score in this prose-poem:

Arms outstretched, afflicted unto death, you shed your blood on the cross. We have forgotten, sweet Jesus, how you love us. Driven onward by madness and forked tongues, in breathless, uncontrolled, and headlong flight, we have fallen into sin like a bottomless pit. It is here to be found, the unsullied table, the source of charitability, the feast of the poor, the well of holy sympathy which is to us the very bread of life and love. We have forgotten, sweet Jesus, how you love us.

Les offrandes oubliées is a religious triptych; two gentle outer panels surround a central bold image. The three sections present the cross, man's descent into sin, and the promise of salvation offered by the Eucharist. *Les offrandes oubliées* is a small but magnificent and powerful altarpiece. Although Messiaen omitted titles from the printed score, he used them in this discussion of his work:

THE CROSS (very slow, grieving, profoundly sad): Lament of the strings whose plaintive "neumes" divide the melody into groups of different lengths, broken by deep grey- and mauve-colored sighs.

SIN (quick, fierce, desperate, breathless): A type of race toward the abyss at an almost mechanized speed. One will note the marked accents (comparable to declensions in grammar), the whistling of the connecting notes in the glissando, the cutting cry of the trumpets.

THE EUCHARIST (extremely slow): The long, slow motion of the violins, which raises itself over a carpet of pianissimo chords in tones of red, gold, and blue (like a church window), to the light of soloists playing string instruments with mutes. Sin is forgetfulness of God. The cross and Eucharist are offerings to God, who gave his body and shed his blood.

This is all quintessential Messiaen: the florid, deeply personal use of words to describe his music and the idea of color to mirror sounds—potent imagery for powerful music. The music itself is pure Messiaen, even though his unique language would later be refined and enriched by the study of birdsong, Eastern thought, and an exhaustive exploration of rhythm. Already in the first section, Messiaen writes measures of unequal length, giving the music a free, floating quality that he would carry to great lengths in his *Quartet for the End of Time* and other later scores. The extreme slowness of the outer sections plays with our perception of passing time; at certain moments, we sense the eternal. It is unlike any music from any other time or place.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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