

MIT Student  
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## Messiaen Live: A Retrospective

I was in London over spring break and all the resident orchestras were on break or on tour, but I managed to see an orchestra concert anyway since the LA Phil was in town. They were playing *Des Canyons aux Étoiles...* and Mahler's Third on separate nights so I decided to pick one of the two programs to see. This was not a hard decision, though, since I have a predilection towards the Messiaen from the years I spent learning and playing the *Appel Interstellaire* solo horn movement, which in my opinion is one of the best pieces in the repertoire.

The first thing I noticed about the performance was Dudamel's conviction and control as a conductor. This was my first time seeing him live and I was expecting a showing more like Andris Nelsons, who takes many an opportunity to exaggerate his boyishness and playfulness in his conducting, sometimes (but not always) to good effect. I've seen videos of Dudamel conducting where he also seems a bit over-exuberant, but in this instance he was incredibly reserved and metronomic and rigid in his conducting. This isn't always good of course, but in this case I found it wonderful since it let him create a very clear and concise and not egotistical musical vision. It would be easy to overdo the conducting in a piece as transparent and chamber-like as *Des Canyons*, but Dudamel instead went only exactly as far as necessary to evince the character of the piece, which in this case was not far at all. All of this measured restraint, combined with the visible enthusiasm of the players, led to a powerful and delightfully energized performance.

Despite being on tour, the players, and soloists especially, sounded incredibly focused and together. I've been on a few tours where the musicians can barely stay awake and I've seen a few touring professional orchestras with similar problems, so it was nice to finally see such a good concert come from an orchestra on tour. The hall of the Barbican Center where they played provided an additional challenge, being weirdly shaped and very muffled, but the orchestra again rose to the occasion and filled the hall radiantly. It may have helped too that *Des Canyons* calls for a relatively small orchestra; some of the climaxes from the Mahler the next night (the couple hosting me in London went to this concert and reported back) were apparently diminished by the hall's lack of resonance. The *Appel Interstellaire* solo horn movement did suffer a bit in this acoustic, however, since the dryness of the hall led to a terrestrial sound, rather than the usual interstellar sound possible in a more reverberant room. The piano solos and tutti orchestral parts, however, sounded just great.

Hearing *Des Canyons* was especially interesting since I had just recently seen a performance of *Turangalila* in New York with Esa-Pekka conducting. This concert was also lacking resonance, of course, being in Avery Fisher hall, and Esa-Pekka's ambitiously fast tempos made it hard to distinguish many of the faster passages. The orchestra managed the speedy tempos by forgoing dynamic contrast, which was

especially apparent in the slow movement. Yuja Wang (who I don't particularly care for after hearing her play a rather tasteless Brahms concerto in Zürich) responded to this by playing as loud as possible, even in the slow movement, so as to be heard over the orchestra. It was fun to see *Turangalila* live but I wish they had found a more nuanced pianist like Joanne Pearce Martin who played in *Des Canyons*. Martin paid full attention to dynamics and responded wonderfully to the birdcalls and damped resonance passages in her solos. Her performance in this concert was truly outstanding.

A nice non-musical addition to the performance of *Des Canyons* was an accompanying visual display created by photographer Deborah O'Grady. She went to Bryce and Zion, the places that inspired Messiaen's music, and created a photo and video collage of the scenery, giving the audience a modern view of the natural beauty that inspired Messiaen, but also adding a layer of abstract artistry and visual mysticism to an otherwise purely auditory performance. These visuals were tied wonderfully to the actual orchestra through the innovative use of stage lighting to blend the colors of the images into the stage itself. The color schemes used were of course related to Messiaen's synesthesia, and the overall visual spectacle was enticing and thoroughly enjoyable – one that would have made even Scriabin proud.

The visuals and the music together made a great performance of a piece that can otherwise come off as dauntingly repetitive. The images broke up some of the longer sections of static birdcalls and gave way for the more involved tutti passages. I was expecting to be relatively unmoved by the visuals since they're theoretically unnecessary for a proper performance of the piece, but they were so well done and so evocative that I couldn't help but like them. The rest of the audience seemed to agree but in typical European fashion remained sitting for the duration of the applause.

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