

Messiaen's opera: Saint Francis of Assisi in Amsterdam

Oliver Messiaen's only opera, *Saint François d'Assise*, first premiered in Paris in 1983, lasting nearly 5 hours including two intermissions in 3 acts and 8 scenes, is a monumental work that took 8 years to write, requiring 120 musicians in the orchestra, 150 in the choir, and several soloists. Boldly undertaken by the Netherlands Opera and Resident Orchestra under the baton of Ingo Metzmacher, it is being performed only 5 times in the Music Theater in Amsterdam. This gigantic opera, though some would argue, merely a religious oratorio, summarizing Messiaen's personal beliefs and utilizing his serialistic, harmonic and rhythmic innovations, attracted a full-house on the last day of the annual Holland Festival, during this Centennial year of Messiaen's birth.

My Dutch friend Paulien who returned from Sydney for the Holland Festival invited me to join her for this unusual "Messiaen sound" ---- characterised by his stacking of 4ths upon each other into a huge chord. Such quartal harmony is exemplified by the final chord at the end of the opera where the crescendo of the orchestra and the choir paralleled that of the stage light that grew in brilliance and intensity until it blinded the audience in the deafening sound. Meanwhile the complexity of his rhythmic patterns can be heard in the beginning in the scintillating marimba-spiel alternating with the haunting motif of the strings.

The opera begins in silence as the monks walk on stage. As Messiaen was a proponent of symbolism, one can't help but guess what the different musical interruptions represent, certainly the audibly distinctive motifs. I can still hear it now as I write this. While the monks in their dark coloured robes expressed their concerns and beliefs, I found it of utmost necessity to understand the libretto that Messiaen wrote. Brother Leon admits to Saint Francis that he's afraid. There is philosophy behind this --- we are all afraid, after all.

These days we don't see lepers walking about. But we do encounter the handicapped, the under-privileged, and those less perfect than the average working professional who bear the burden of taxation. Just as people are afraid of getting close to a

leper, people are awkward around the minority of outcasts of society. But here is that poignant moment, so beautiful one can't help but feel guilty when Saint Francis hugs the leper and kisses him.

The contrast of the angelic soprano voice of Camilla Tilling who later disguises herself as a beggar to the baritone Rod Gilfry (Saint Francis) is a welcoming one. While all voices whether solo or choir are breathtakingly beautiful, it is the few moments of contrast that make the live experience especially memorable.

One must also not forget that Messiaen loved birds, just as Saint Francis did too. My first introduction to Messiaen was in the mid-80's performing his *Blackbird Le Merle Noir* (1952) for flute and piano. In this opera, there's a section devoted to birds, with the unusual appearance of children in colourful robes on stage. Here was the famous "Sermon of the Birds," about how the birds praise God.

My only regret is not to have prepared myself better for this afternoon of Messiaen. I know of two Dutch musicologists who wrote their doctoral theses on Messiaen, which were being revised for publication in book form a few years ago. And I missed the Messiaen Centenary Festival in Utrecht on 10th May. How I'd have rejoiced at seeing the score of this opera and even more an analysis of it, for those elements so unique to Messiaen. I am sure this work will live on as a masterpiece for all advanced music students.

As this review goes to press, the 4-day Messiaen 2008 International Centenary Conference at the Birmingham Conservatoire is drawing to a close. Surely there are other Messiaen centenaries this year --- forthcoming festival at the South Bank Centre in London, for instance. However, none of them would feature an opera --- Messiaen's only opera. And forever I am grateful to my friend who alerted me to it in the first place.

--- Anne Ku

<http://www.bonjournal.com/entries/j080624.htm>

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- Simultaneous Contrast and Additive Designs in Olivier Messiaen's Opera, *Saint François d'Assise* <http://www.societymusictheory.org/mto/issues/mto.02.8.2/mto.02.8.2.benitez.html>
- Opera in the 20th Century: Olivier Messiaen's St. Francis of Assisi <http://opera20thcent.blogspot.com/2004/12/olivier-messiaens-st-francois-of-assisi.html>
- Messiaen's 'Francois' Has Staying Power by PAUL GRIFFITHS, published: August 2, 1998 <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B03E4DB1738F931A3575BC0A96E958260&scp=13&sq=Olivier+Messiaen&st=nyt>
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- Successful new production of Messiaen's St Françoise d'Assise in Amsterdam, 12 June 2008: <http://mostfyoopera.blogspot.com/2008/06/successful-new-production-of-messiaens.html>
- Messiaen's Saint Francois D'Assise: Opera in Three Acts from 14th-Century Religious Text "Fioretti" http://frenchopera.suite101.com/article.cfm/messiaens_saint_francois_dassise
- Recollections on Singing Messiaen's Saint François d'Assise by Robert Grenier <http://www.societymusictheory.org/mto/issues/mto.02.8.2/mto.02.8.2.benitez.html> http://muse.jhu.edu/demo/opera_quarterly/v018/18.1grenier.pdf
- Ecstatic Joy by Don Mager http://www.eclectica.org/v3n4/making_time.html
- St François at the Bastille, an account by KEN QUANDT <http://www.amural.com/cww/the-q-review/st-francois/>
- Netherlands Opera: <http://www.dno.nl>