

Olivier Messiaen: A force of nature

From its birth in a Nazi PoW camp, Olivier Messiaen's work changed the course of classical music.

Jessica Duchen hails a new festival of his greatest hits

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Winter, 1940-41. Olivier Messiaen, a French PoW in Stalag VIII A in Silesia, wandered out into the snow. Hungry and freezing, he found comfort in his faith, his music, three fellow captive musicians, and a German guard who, remarkably, supplied him with manuscript paper. Above him the aurora borealis flooded the night sky with colours. Messiaen had synaesthesia – the joint perception of sound and colour. With his physical state intensifying such experiences, his creative spirit was heightened, too.

In January 1941, Messiaen and friends premiered his *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (Quartet for the End of Time) in the Stalag, to an audience of PoWs and guards. Its title was inspired by the Revelation of St John, when the Angel of the Apocalypse says: "There will be no more time." Groundbreaking, technically radical, yet filled with tenderness and faith, the quartet was Messiaen's first masterpiece. He became the greatest French composer of his era and the teacher of generations of composers.

This year marks the centenary of Messiaen's birth, and the Southbank Centre is staging a massive celebration entitled *From the Canyons to the Stars*. With the French pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard as artistic director, the festival is spread across more than 10 months, featuring everything from the Philharmonia under Esa-Pekka Salonen performing the *Turangalila-symphonie*, to concerts by students from the Royal Academy of Music. The *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* will be played three times – twice at the beginning of the festival, once at the end.

Aimard agrees that it was in the quartet that Messiaen began to discover his musical potential. "The circumstances and what the work meant to him are key," he says. "Not only the anecdotes of the camp, but the fact that captivity, cold and hunger took him further in his creative process.

"And it is extraordinary that a creator in such an environment conveys such a message of hope, light and transcendence."

The *Quatuor's* premiere had positive effects, too. It seems to have inspired the authorities to listen when contacts in France pleaded for the composer's release: a few months later, Messiaen was free. So, too, was his cellist, the well-known Etienne Pasquier. The violinist Jean Le Boulaire, who wasn't famous enough to be useful to Nazi propaganda, and the Jewish-Algerian clarinettist Henri Akoka were less fortunate. But Akoka, a communist atheist who became Messiaen's closest friend, eventually leapt from the roof of a moving train with his beloved clarinet under his arm – and survived.

Back in Paris, Messiaen got a teaching post at the Conservatoire; and became organist at the Eglise de la Trinité. He remained at both for decades, helping young composers at the former – his students

included Pierre Boulez, Iannis Xenakis and Karlheinz Stockhausen – and thrilling Sunday congregations with his improvising at the latter.

He cut an unusual, sometimes eccentric figure: he was fond of colourful Hawaiian shirts, and his obsession with transcribing birdsong baffled his students. In a musical age dominated by intellect and irony, he also flummoxed some contemporaries by writing works that were overtly religious and emotionally charged. But his intellect was stronger than most, and the energy, conviction and passion that underpinned his every note could usually win over the most cynical of detractors.

Birdsong and religion were far from being Messiaen's sole inspirations: he delved into musical techniques drawn from traditional Indian, Japanese and Indonesian music – the influence of the Javanese gamelan is evident in the *Turangalila-symphonie's* percussive patterns, for example – and he responded to developments in contemporary music. But he kept his "voice" throughout: his music can overwhelm with its sheer scale – a Force-10 eulogy to life, nature, love and God rolled into one.

His personal life was not without torment. His first wife, Claire, suffered from mental illness and spent her last years in hospital. After her death, Messiaen married Yvonne Loriod, a virtuoso pianist who was already his muse. Her playing inspired him to write some of the greatest works for piano since Debussy and Bartok.

Aimard was among the young musicians who revelled in Messiaen's presence and influence. "He had a great ability to hear," he recalls. "He could notate birdsong exactly, and he also had this ability with people. He wasn't somebody who spoke or revealed a lot; he was shy, modest, discreet. But he was always warmly present and attentive. He was transparent, enlightened, very sweet, and he had immense energy."

In the festival, Aimard aims to explore Messiaen's place in today's musical landscape, 16 years after the composer's death. Besides the Philharmonia and the Royal Academy, the Nash Ensemble, the London Sinfonietta and the Ensemble InterContemporain from Paris will be vital presences; Aimard himself will play *20 Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus* on 13 February. Events are concentrated in February and October, while organ recitals take place in various London churches throughout the festival. There are also lectures, discussions and study days galore.

Curiously, London's festival far exceeds any anniversary celebrations planned for Messiaen's home city, Paris. "London has always been the champion for honouring Messiaen and other French composers," says Aimard. With such a wealth of music to look forward to, we're certainly the winners.