Milwaukee Symphony

Musical Journeys

WEEKLY STREAMING PROGRAMS

Episode 3 Notes

OLIVIER MESSIAEN

Born 10 December 1908; Avignon, France
Died 27 April 1992; Paris, France

Hymne pour grand orchestre

Composed: 1932, originally titled *Hymne au Saint-Sacrement*
reconstructed 1947 as *Hymne*
First performance: 1933; Paris, France (original)
13 March 1947; New York, New York (reconstruction)

Oliver Messiaen was one of the most important composers of the 20th century. He studied at the Paris Conservatoire with Paul Dukas and Marcel Dupré and later taught there (Pierre Boulez was his most famous pupil) while also serving as the organist at the Église de la Sainte-Trinité. Always religiously devout, many of his works are explorations of Roman Catholic mysticism.

Like many composers and musicians, Messiaen possessed a form of synesthesia, a neurological condition that caused him to experience intense colors when he heard music. Regarding his *Hymne*, the composer stated, "Two developments are undertaken. They employ modal sonorities which are colored so that they are either opposed or allied to each other: orange to blue, violet to purple and gold. The dominant color: orange."

Originally set down in 1932 as *Hymne au Saint-Sacrement*, the composer stated at that time that the work was "dedicated to the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. It attempts to depict the marvelous gifts of communion: growth of love and grace, the force against evil and the promise of eternal life." The score was lost in the 1944 liberation of Paris. At the urging of Leopold Stokowski, Messiaen reconstructed it from memory in 1947 and called it simply *Hymne*. Stokowski led its first performance, conducting the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall. On that occasion, the program notes quoted the composer as follows:

> The work is based on two themes, with a middle and final development. The first theme ends with a burst of winds on the chord of the dominant appoggiatura. The second theme, more dreamy and very singing, built on the "modes à transpositions limitée," utilizes only violins and violas soli. The middle development is polymodal, alternating with and opposing the more belligerent first theme and the more passionate second theme. The final development resumes the martial character and the "polymodality" of the first development, and concludes on a joyous fanfare of brass, surrounded by a brilliant shimmering of all the instruments of the orchestra in the tonality of B major. 𝄐

LEONARD BERNSTEIN

Born 25 August 1918; Lawrence, Massachusetts
Died 14 October 1990; New York, New York

Chichester Psalms

Composed: 1965
First performance: 15 July 1965; New York, New York (world premiere)
31 July 1965; Chichester, England (U.K. premiere)

For the 1964-65 season, Leonard Bernstein was granted a sabbatical from his duties as music director of the New York Philharmonic. He chose that year only to compose, basking in the luxury of nothing to do but experiment. According to the maestro, he wrote lots of music, utilizing 12-tone rows and other *avant garde* techniques. Much of it "was very good," he later stated, "and I threw it all away. And what I came out with at the end of the year was a piece called *Chichester Psalms*, which is simple and tonal and tuneful and as pure B-flat as any piece you can think of... because that is what I honestly wished to write."

Bernstein had been commissioned by the Very Reverend Walter Hussey, Dean of Chichester (Sussex, England) to write a work for the annual summer music festival held by Chichester, Salisbury, and Winchester cathedrals. In offering the commission, Dr. Hussey – who in past years and locales had commissioned Britten's *Rejoice in the Lamb* and Finzi's *Lo, the Full Final Sacrifice*, among many others – told Bernstein not to feel inhibited by the fact that the new piece would be premiered in a 900-year-old Anglican cathedral. "I think many of us would be very delighted if there was a hint of *West Side Story* about the music," he opined.

It's safe to say Dean Hussey got what he asked for. Bernstein the Broadway composer saturated *Chichester Psalms* with piquant text painting and kaleidoscopic orchestration. The work is sung in Hebrew and cast in three movements. It opens with a striking introit (Psalm 108:2) whose music will recur at the end of this movement and again at the end of the piece. Psalm 100 is set in an aptly rollicking 7/4 rhythm that is then contrasted by the lyrical beginning of the second movement. Here, Bernstein depicts the shepherd boy David, singing Psalm 23 to the accompaniment of a harp. This affecting melody is taken up by the women's voices, but is fiercely interrupted by the men's chorus: "Why do the nations rage?" (Psalm 2:1-4). (The influence of *West Side Story* seems quite evident here.) Even when the pastoral melody is brought back, distant rumblings continue.

Following the densely scored string passage that opens the third movement, we hear the comforting words of Psalm 131: "Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty." At the very end, Bernstein brings *Chichester Psalms* full circle by recasting the powerful music that began the entire work for unaccompanied choir, *pianissimo* – "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" (Psalm 33:1).

Dean Hussey granted Bernstein permission give the world premiere of the *Psalms* with the New York Philharmonic. After the first U.K. performance 16 days later, the Bishop of Chichester said he had seen David dancing before the Ark. For his part, the Dean was, he told the composer, "excited that [the *Psalms*] came into being at all as a statement of praise that is ecumenical. I shall be tremendously proud for them to go around in the world bearing the name Chichester." And sure enough, in no time at all, the *Chichester Psalms* became Bernstein's most popular choral work.

FRANCIS POULENC

Born 7 January 1899; Paris, France
Died 30 January 1963; Paris, France

Gloria

Composed: 1959-60
Premiere: 21 January 1961; Boston, Massachusetts

Francis Poulenc grew up in a family of pharmaceutical manufacturers. Their wealth afforded him a fine education and gave him an early sophistication, both musical and literary. He began piano lessons with his mother at age five, had memorized some of Mallarmé's poetry at age ten, and had experienced *The Rite of Spring* at age 14. By the time he began composition lessons with Charles Koechlin, in his early 20s, he had already penned the song cycle *Le bestiare* (The Bestiary) and the sonata for two clarinets. In 1924, his ballet *Les biches* (The Does, a mildly derogatory term for coquettish young women), written for Serge Diaghilev's Ballet Russe, established him as a member of the "smart set." In the ten years that followed, his music continued in his naturally ebullient vein.

In 1936, the death of his friend and fellow composer Pierre-Octave Ferroud in a car accident – and his reacquaintance with the singer Pierre Bernac – brought about a new maturity. The tragedy of Ferroud's death – the crash was so violent he was decapitated – and a subsequent visit to Notre Dame de Rocamadour reawakened his childhood faith. The first fruit of that experience was the *Litanies à la vierge noir* (Litanies to the Black Virgin), written in the week after his pilgrimage and scored in a modal idiom for women's voices and organ.

After his return to Roman Catholicism, Poulenc penned a steady stream of religious works over the next 25 years. "I am religious by deepest instincts and heredity," he stated. "For me, it seems quite natural to believe and practice religion. I am a Catholic. It is my greatest freedom."

Poulenc enjoyed freedom of another kind when composing his *Gloria*, using a variety of styles in the musical language of the piece. He boldly interpolated words into the final phrases that belonged earlier, and strove to blow the dust off the sacrosanct Latin text with misplaced accentuation. These deliberate distortions bring new life, casting fresh light on the meaning of the words. At the work's premiere, the second movement caused an uproar, much to Poulenc's bewilderment: "I was simply thinking, in writing it, of the Gozzoli frescoes in which the angels stick out their tongues; I was thinking, too, of the serious Benedictines whom I saw one day playing soccer."

In the final movement, "Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris," we are led through the whole gamut of religious experience: from the chant-like opening, through the "worldliness" of the tune with trumpets and drums, to an ethereal calm with the angelic sounds of the solo soprano floating above. The composer once said, "I try to create a feeling of fervor and, especially, of humility, for me the most beautiful quality of prayer... My conception of religious music is essentially direct and, if I may say so, intimate."

The *Gloria* was commissioned by the Koussevitzky Music Foundation in the Library of Congress. It was first performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Chorus Pro Musica, conducted by Charles Munch. Adele Addison was the soprano soloist.

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.