

Blurbs for 8-26-18

News and Notes:

This week's organ music will feature music by French 20th century composer Olivier Messiaen. Communion music will be music by Messiaen as well, for cello and piano, with new member and Peabody graduate David Chentian playing cello. Offertory music will be provided by our own Jeanne Lehning and our hymns will include "Thou whose almighty word," and "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty."

Sunday Bulletins:

8:00 a.m.

Today's prelude, *Le Banquet Céleste* (The Celestial Banquet) was composed by a twenty year old Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992). It was his first published work based on one of his own earlier unfinished works. He went on to become one of the most important composers of the 20th century. His organ music especially expresses his deeply felt Roman Catholicism. His compositions are mystical visions. In order to express eternity in sound he created music that seems suspended in time by a series of long sustained chords. We hear the logic of harmony and melody without feeling tied to a beat. The closest reference to a beat are the pedal notes marked "to be played like drops of water" which represent the blood of Christ. It has been suggested that the modern organ is the perfect medium for expressing the concept of eternity. Its sound is immovable and static because it does not rely on human agency to be created, like bowing, or breathing into, or striking. The sounds created by the organ do not have inflections or irregularities like other instruments have. In this way, the constant flow of sound helps evoke timelessness.

10:30 a.m.

Today's organ music features music by French composer Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992). He was one of the major composers of the 20th century. He was appointed organist of the Church of the Holy Trinity in Paris in 1931 and held the post for 60 years until his death. He entered the Paris Conservatory at the age of 11 and studied with the likes of Paul Dukas (*The Sorcerer's Apprentice*), as well as Charles-Marie Widor and Marcel Dupré. In the fall of 1927 Messiaen took the organ course from Dupré. He sat at an organ console for the first time as Dupré explained the organ to him for about an hour. A week later he came back and played a major Bach organ work for his teacher.

Today's prelude, *The Celestial Banquet*, was his first published work, written in 1928 while still a student. The communion piece "In Praise of the Eternity of Jesus" is scored for cello and piano and is from *Quartet from the End of Time*. In 1940, he was a POW in a German prison camp and wrote the piece for violin, clarinet, cello, and piano since these were instruments available at the time. These two pieces

have one thing in common: the extremely slow tempo suspends the conventional perception of time. In fact, the quartet movement is marked "Infinitely Slow."

Our postlude is a postlude included in the organ Mass, *Mass for the Pentecost*. The Mass was a compilation based on various improvisations that Messaien had performed for Masses at Holy Trinity over the years. On Pentecost 1951, he played the various movements at the appropriate times in that Sunday's liturgy. The "Sortie" (postlude) recalls Acts 2:2: "A mighty rushing wind filled all the house." The central section of the piece is called "the chorus of birds." Messaien studied bird calls and would notate the various calls of different bird species, in fact up to 250 different species. Almost all the Mass movements have music inspired by birds. The first time I heard this, I was in high school and we were at St. John the Divine in New York. With its 11-second reverberation, I have to say that the last page definitely sounds like the mighty rushing wind of the Holy Spirit bursting through the doors!

While absorbing seeming vastly disparate influences, from birdsong to Hindu rhythms, he constructed a highly personal style of music, going so far as creating his own musical modes. But underlying it all was his mystical understanding of his Roman Catholic faith. His music inhabits the thin places between this world and eternity.