

The New York Times

MUSIC REVIEW

Portraying Spirituality of Messiaen as Organist

By ALLAN KOZINN

Published: May 31, 2008

The works of Olivier Messiaen that have traveled best are chamber, vocal and orchestral scores. But Messiaen was an organist, and he composed an imposing body of works for his instrument. This year several organists have taken the occasion of Messiaen's centenary to make that point. Gail Archer began a six-concert tour of the major Messiaen works in January, and undertook a tour of Manhattan's organs while she was at it, playing each concert in a different church. For her finale, on Thursday evening, she performed the huge "Livre du Saint Sacrement" (1984) at St. Patrick's Cathedral.

This 18-movement, 100-minute work was Messiaen's last organ score, and it makes the greatest demands on both player and listener. Messiaen was a believer in Roman Catholic mysticism, and to a great extent his complete body of works is a symbolic lexicon through which he explored the mysteries of faith.

For him, meditation was turbulent rather than serene, and belief was a matter of intellectual and emotional struggle rather than of simple acquiescence or platitudinous certitude. And the music he wrote to express his thoughts on divinity — particularly in the "Livre du Saint Sacrement" — tended to be dissonant and texturally broad, with walls of abrasive, reedy timbre supported by heavy pedal tones.

Occasionally, Messiaen stepped back for a gentler, more translucent rumination, as in "La Transsubstantiation" and the two "Prière" movements. Within Ms. Archer's vivid, muscular performance, in fact, were moments of striking simplicity, most notably the declarative single-line melodies, based on plainchant, that open several movements and seem like straightforward professions of faith before the inevitable grappling with the terrors of the sublime.

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In the more expansively dense sections Ms. Archer played with an unflagging power and assertiveness. Those are necessary qualities here: the best way to deal with this score as a listener is to stop wondering why Messiaen painted God in such harsh colors and let the music envelop you. When it does, Messiaen's vision becomes clear.

Ms. Archer made that possible, but she was working in tough conditions. Listeners who might have been expecting something else began streaming out before the third movement. Others seemed more concerned with taking flash photographs or chatting. And in balancing the need for ventilation against the need for quiet, St. Patrick's chose ventilation: its unusually loud air-conditioning system rumbled through the entire performance.