

A COSMIC PORTRAIT OF THE AMERICAN WEST

SEATTLE SYMPHONY PRESENTS OLIVIER MESSIAEN'S COLORFUL MASTERWORK, *DES CANYONS AUX ÉTOILES...*



Bryce Canyon. Photo: Deborah O'Grady

**“Gazing skyward,
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By Christopher DeLaurenti

Countless tourists have marveled at Bryce Canyon's titanic pillars of rust-hued rock, yet Olivier Messiaen also listened. When he visited in 1972, the French composer felt the presence of God not only as the creator of unforgettable camera-ready geological formations, but as a real presence resounding through and above canyon walls. In *Des canyons aux étoiles...* (From the Canyons to the Stars...), Messiaen transformed his tour of Bryce Canyon and two other monuments of the American West — Cedar Breaks and Zion Park — into sacred music filled with birdsong, sensuous melodies and divine breath. Judith Fong Conductor Emeritus Ludovic Morlot and the Seattle Symphony with special guest pianist Steven Osborne kick off June with two performances of the entire 110-minute-long work.

“With Messiaen, all is prayer,” wrote Charles Tournemire, an organ virtuoso who mentored the young composer at the Paris Conservatoire in the 1920s. Throughout his life, Messiaen practiced a mystic Catholicism where religious visions were not mere allegories but exuded spiritual power. He sensed and heard gifts from God everywhere: “In a present eternity, I glimpse infinite life unbounded by Time and Space.”

Born in 1908 to religiously indifferent parents — later described by their dutiful son as non-believers — Messiaen's Catholic faith grew alongside a wonderment at his own precocious musical ability. While reading a score at age 7, he started hearing music in his mind's ear. The notes on the page came to life, evoking sounds as well as colors. “I have a gift,” said the composer, describing his synesthesia. “It's not my fault, it's just how I am — whenever I hear music, or even if I

read music, I see colors. They correspond to the sounds, rapid colors which turn, mix, combine and move with the sounds. Like the sounds they are high, low, quick, long, strong, weak, etc. The colors do just what the sounds do.”

Messiaen brings color and sound to life in *Des canyons aux étoiles...* with an astonishing range of instrumental textures. Birdsong, considered by Messiaen to be an angelic manifestation and a symbol of freedom, animates the 12-part suite. In *The Technique of My Musical Language*, the composer quoted his beloved teacher, Paul Dukas, prominently: “Listen to the birds. They are great masters.”

Carefully transcribed on the spot by Messiaen into musical notation, the birdsong represented in *Des canyons aux étoiles...* still flutters and exclaims as birds do, but the music often slows down to unfurl a lush melody. The composer did not want anyone to miss a single note of the bird's music. Performers are often surprised to find each bird and its locale credited in the score. Although it was commissioned to celebrate the United States Bicentennial, Messiaen deliberately embedded birdsong from countries around the world — among them, Japan, China, Australia, Sri Lanka and Namibia. As implied by the ellipsis in the title, Messiaen believed the sacred to be without boundaries.

Fascinated by the wind-worn rocks and cliffs of Bryce Canyon, Messiaen added two unusual instruments to an already sizeable percussion section. Scrawled in the score as if tracing a drifting cloud's silhouette, the aeoliphone is a quieter cousin of the stout wind machines heard in grand opera; a swath



Cedar Breaks. Photo: Deborah O'Grady

of silk stretched over a hand-cranked barrel whirls into a fierce or furtive divine breath. The géophone, invented by Messiaen for *Des canyons aux étoiles...*, contains lead pellets sliding and tumbling against a thin drum head. The tiny avalanches enclosed inside this drum can echo ancient tectonic movement or hint at microscopic shifts of dirt and rubble on a canyon floor.

Gazing skyward, Messiaen was inspired by the innumerable expanse and “inexplicable order” of the stars. The second of three parts in *Des canyons aux étoiles...* begins with *Appel interstellaire*, an unforgettable showpiece for solo horn. Translated as “Interstellar Call,” this virtuosic movement requires the soloist to create stopped trills, choked tones and other effects. Yet instead of a tedious parade of tiny noises, Messiaen enfoldes these sounds into a melodic line that mourns, pleads and otherwise seeks to duet with who or what awaits beyond the sky.

Messiaen spotlights other instruments, too. Additional solos from the glockenspiel, xyloimba and piano almost convert *Des canyons aux étoiles...* into a secret quadruple concerto. Sequenced to give strategic rest to strings, winds and percussion, the piano has two formidable

solo movements — one devoted to the chiming white-browed robin (*Le Cossyphe d'Heuglin*) and the other about a chatty avian most everyone knows, the mockingbird (*Le Moquer Polyglotte*). The composer is honest, describing the pianist's part as “très difficile” (very difficult) in the score's preface. Messiaen challenges all of these instruments and indeed the entire orchestra to master core elements of his style: slow, hallucinatory chorales inspired by plainchant; devotional and often ecstatic rhythmic trances; eruptive clusters; and nuptial love-music that glitters and sings.

The Seattle Symphony program also includes a collaboration with filmmaker Deborah O'Grady, who retraced Messiaen's footsteps through the canyons he traveled. Her captivating video projections (paired with Seth Reiser's unique lighting design) enmesh the music in a spectacular landscape. Combining Messiaen's unearthly, cosmic music with O'Grady's gorgeous images offers a juxtaposition at once surreal yet fitting.

When asked if he was a Surrealist in the spirit of Breton, Éluard, Ernst, Miró, Magritte, Dalí and other noted poets and painters, Messiaen replied, “If you define Surrealism as a mental vantage point where visible

natural realities and invisible supernatural realities are no longer in opposition to each other — and where they cease to be perceived as contradictions — then I am a Surrealist composer.”

Adding an impish jab at the uproarious and scandalous lives of the Surrealists, Messiaen suggested those artists “wanted passionately to have on earth a state of the beyond. It did not occur to them to have that through faith.”

For additional insight into Messiaen's work, see the program notes on pages 26–28.

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