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Olivier Messiaen 1949–64 Organ Recital II: Messiaen and his contemporaries

Tuesday 1st March, 2022 | 9.30pm Trinity College Chapel
Harrison Cole..... organ

PROGRAMME

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| JEAN LANGLAIS
1907–1991 | Vision prophétiques,
from Cinq Meditations
sur l'Apocalypse |
| JEANNE DEMESSIEUX
1921–1968 | from 12 Choral Preludes
on Gregorian Chant
Themes, Op. 8
I. <i>Rorate Caeli</i>
II. <i>Tu es Petrus</i> |
| CLAIRE DELBOS
1906–1959 | Deux pièces
I. <i>L'homme né de la femme
vit peu de jours...</i>
II. <i>La Vierge berce l'Enfant</i> |
| OLIVER MESSIAEN
1908–1992 | From Livre d'orgue
I. <i>Soixante-Quatre durées</i>
II. <i>Chants d'oiseaux</i> |
| JEREMY THURLOW
1976– | Cinquante-six
durées-couleurs |

NOTE FROM THE COMPOSER OF *CINQUANTE-SIX*
DURÉES-COULEURS

The final movement of Messiaen's *Livre d'orgue*, '*Soixante-quatre durées*' is renowned for its grand and ambitious design: an ingenious double presentation of 64 different 'durations' or note-lengths in two simultaneous layers, one the reverse of the other, while a third layer decorates with birdsong-inspired arabesque. The piece has a distinctive atmosphere which has been described as 'chilly, bleak', and it's often assumed that this quality is a consequence of the abstract and uncompromising numerical plan. However, I believe this is a false logic. An array of finely differentiated rhythmic durations is not in itself an innately harsh or bleak experience; the quality or colour of that experience comes to a great extent from the kind of sounds and musical materials that fill out the different durations. In *Soixante-quatre durées* Messiaen selects from the organ a palette of opaque and rather gloomy sonorities, and fills the rhythmic durations with chords which are consistently dissonant both in themselves and in relation to the free arabesque. This was by no means the only way that he might have realised his duration scheme. Indeed, one of the most distinctive things about Messiaen's music (in general) is his extraordinary gift for vibrant, sensuous, alluring harmonies. And he often spoke elsewhere of using harmony to give colour to different durations and thus to our perception of time.

I thought it would be an interesting experiment to realise Messiaen's grand rhythmic scheme using the distinctively rich harmonic language that he perfected in other works but eschewed in *Soixante-quatre durées*. The new piece, slightly shorter, is called *Cinquante-six durées-couleurs*. Though it is freshly composed, both the overall concept and the specific harmonic techniques come directly from Messiaen. Many listeners love Messiaen's voluptuous harmony while others have found it sentimental and cloying; it may have been the latter reaction that prompted Mes-

siaen's move into twelve-note atonality around the time of the *Livre d'orgue*. Today's recital offers a chance to experience Messiaen's grand rhythmic scheme realised in two different ways—first in the atonal soundworld of his original *Soixante-quatre durées*, then reimagined in *Cinquante-six durées-couleurs* in the colouristic harmonies which are such a distinctive part of his compositional voice (and which he would soon bring back in subsequent works).