

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 31 May 2024
7.30pm

Nicolas Hodges piano

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus (1944)

- I. Regard du Père • II. Regard de l'Etoile • III. L'échange •*
- IV. Regard de la Vierge • V. Regard du Fils sur le Fils •*
- VI. Par Lui tout a été fait • VII. Regard de la Croix •*
- VIII. Regard des Hauteurs • IX. Regard du Temps •*
- X. Regard de l'esprit de joie •*
- XI. Première Communion de la Vierge •*
- XII. La Parole Toute-Puissante • XIII. Noël •*
- XIV. Regard des Anges • XV. Le baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus •*
- XVI. Regard des prophètes, des bergers et des Mages •*
- XVII. Regard du Silence • XVIII. Regard de l'Onction terrible •*
- XIX. Je dors, mais mon cœur veille •*
- XX. Regard de l'Eglise d'amour*

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Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus was composed between 23 March and 8 September 1944, mostly during the final months of the Nazi Occupation of Paris. Messiaen was living at the time in the North-East of the city, an area where French *résistants* had erected barricades in the streets. Surrounded by insurrection and chaos, Messiaen was only two weeks away from completing the *Vingt Regards* when Paris was liberated. It was Messiaen's longest and grandest work to date, and its music is utterly original in both sound and conception, though the composer later said that the piano writing was also influenced by Liszt, Chopin, Albéniz, Debussy and Ravel.

The première of the *Vingt Regards* took place on 26 March 1945 at the Salle Gaveau when it was played by Yvonne Loriod, the work's dedicatee. On that occasion, Messiaen gave a spoken introduction: 'The work uses a great many new procedures that vary with each piece. Three main themes run through the *Vingt Regards*: the 'Theme of God', which you will hear almost constantly,

right from the first page; the 'Theme of the Star and of the Cross' [first heard in No. 2]; and finally, a 'Theme of Chords' which is intended to return fragmented or concentrated in a rainbow. Much love, joy, suffering and meditation are at the origin of this work... Finally, it contains a number of special pianistic characteristics and effects – a little revolution in piano writing.'

Critics were divided by Messiaen's 'little revolution': 'Clarendon' (Bernard Gavoty) in *Le Figaro* was uncompromisingly hostile ('Is this heaven? No, it's purgatory'), while others were far more positive. Arthur Honegger called it 'a magnificent work by a great musician', and Alexis Roland-Manuel praised its 'dazzling and magnificent diversity of style and expression, the cohesion of the whole being assured by three important themes which unify this vast meditation on the childhood of Christ. Everything an impressionist sensuality might use to express earthly delights, Olivier Messiaen devotes to the praise of the divine.'

Messiaen's commentaries on each movement were printed in the programme for the first performance:

I: Regard du Père: And God said: 'This is my beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased.'

II: Regard de l'Etoile: The fall of Grace: the Star shines innocently, surmounted by a Cross.

III: L'échange: Descending in a spray, rising in a spiral; the terrible trade between humans and God. God made man to make us gods.

IV: Regard de la Vierge: Innocence and tenderness ... The woman of purity, the woman of the Magnificat, the Virgin gazes upon her child.

V: Regard du Fils sur le Fils: Mystery, rays of light in the night – refraction of joy, the birds of silence – the person of the Word made flesh – union of the human and divine natures in Jesus Christ.

VI: Par Lui tout a été fait: Abundance of space and time; galaxies, photons, spirals, inverted lightning: by Him (The Word) was Everything made ... in an instant, creation reveals to us the luminous shadow of His Voice.

VII: Regard de la Croix: The Cross said to Him: You will be a priest in my arms.

VIII: Regard des Hauteurs: Glory in the Heights ... the Heights descend to the manger like the song of a lark.

IX: Regard du Temps: The mystery of the infinity of Time; Time sees born in itself the One who is Eternal ...

X: Regard de l'esprit de joie: Violent dance, joyful sound of horns, rapture of the Holy Spirit ... the joyous love of Blessed God in the Soul of Jesus Christ.

XI: Première Communion de la Vierge: After the Annunciation, Mary adores Jesus within her ... My God, my Son, my Magnificat! – my love without the sound of words.

XII: La Parole Toute-Puissante: This Child is the Word who sustains all things through the power of His voice.

XIII: Noël: The Christmas bells say with us the sweet names of Jesus, Mary, Joseph.

XIV: Regard des Anges: Sparkling, beating; a powerful blast from immense trombones; Your servants are flames of fire – then the song of birds who feast upon blue – and the amazement of the angels grows – for it is not to them but to the human race that God is united.

XV: Le baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus: At each Communion, the Infant Jesus sleeps with us, close to the gate; then he opens it onto the garden and comes forth in a blaze of light to embrace us.

XVI: Regard des prophètes, des bergers et des Mages: Tamtams and oboes, a vast, buzzing chorus.

XVII: Regard du Silence: Silence in the hand, an upside-down rainbow ... each silence of the Manger reveals music and colours which are the mysteries of Jesus Christ.

XVIII: Regard de l'Onction terrible: The Word assumes a definite human form; the choice of the flesh of Jesus by the awesome Majesty of God.

XIX: Je dors, mais mon cœur veille: It is not the bow of an angel which smiles, it is the sleeping Jesus who loves us on his Holy Day.

XX: Regard de l'Eglise d'amour: Grace made us love God as God loves us; after the night, the spirals of anguish, here are bells, glory and the kiss of love ...

All the passion of our arms around the Invisible One.