

## SOUNDBITE #5: Visions de l'Amen

THURSDAY 14 NOVEMBER 11AM

ROSINA AUDITORIUM, ABBOTSFORD CONVENT

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Olivier MESSIAEN (1908-1992) Visions de l'Amen (1943)

49'

Matthew Garvie \* (NSW) piano

Po Goh \* (VIC) piano

*Approximate duration: 50 minutes*

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Located in Dorm 2, Rosina Building at Abbotsford Convent, enter through the Rosina Courtyard.

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*\* Matthew is supported by ANAM Syndicate donors Meredith Baldwin, Louise and Hermann Bischoff, Eric Dias and Roger Bau, Carolynne and Geoffrey Dobbin, the late Jan Grant, Robyn Harris, Ian Hogarth and Peter Larsen, Anthony Knight OAM and Beverly Knight.*

*\* Po is supported by ANAM Syndicate donors Gina Fox, Janet Limb AO, Kim Low.*



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## PROGRAM NOTES

*"I speak about faith to people who don't have any, about birds to people who don't like them, about rhythm to people who understand nothing, and about sonorous colors to people who see nothing." - Olivier Messiaen*

*Visions de l'Amen* was Messiaen's first composition after his release from the German prisoner-of-war camp Stalag VIII-A in 1941, where his nine-month confinement famously birthed his *Quartet for the End of Time*. In 1943, *Visions de l'Amen* was commissioned by the Concerts de la Pléiade, premiered in a still German-occupied Paris by himself and Yvonne Loriod, his student and future second wife.

The work takes its inspiration from a quote of French Catholic writer Ernest Hello: "Amen, word of Genesis, which leads to Revelation; Amen, word of Revelation, which is the consummation of Genesis." Messiaen's Catholic faith pervades his music - he was organist at Sainte-Trinité for more than sixty years, and imparted theological subject matter onto most of his works. As such, he was fixated on the eternal and transcendence from time, and he largely does not evoke time-bound narratives but rather seeks musical representations of a figure's different sides. This seems antithetical to the zeitgeist of humanism that was fuelling Western art music at the time, yet Messiaen is regarded as one of the greatest composers of the 20th century.

The two pianos take on different roles: Messiaen delegates "the rhythmic difficulties, the clusters of chords, all that is speed, charm, and quality of sound" to Piano I (Matthew), whilst Piano II (Po) is responsible for "the principal melody, the thematic elements, everything that demands power and emotion". Often the two pianos are pit against each other, playing in opposing extremes of register, providing crude commentary on the other, or communicating from a whole separate world, occasionally uniting in carefully choreographed moments of catharsis.

Messiaen's musical language is distinctive, guided by his synaesthesia, which caused him to perceive colours when he heard or imagined music. Cellular blocks of irregular rhythms loop and dance in their own ways; modal organisations of pitches echo traditional harmony but obey their own gravitational pulls; an acute understanding of timbre creates sound worlds both astonishingly large and desperately intimate; simple melodies call back to plainchant and to the exotic.

Living still under the shadow of war and amidst his own personal adversities, Messiaen creates a work that is greater than the sum of its parts, where music transcends the individual and seeks to honour the universe and beyond.

*Written by Po Goh*

The following are notes on each movement written by the composer.

### **I. Amen de la Creation ("Amen of creation")**

Amen, so be it! "God said, Let there be light: and there was light" (Genesis).

The first piano plays a double rhythmic pedal in carillon style, on non-retrogradable [i.e. palindromic] rhythms. The second piano expresses the theme of The Creation. The whole piece is a crescendo. It starts out from an extreme pianissimo, in the mystery of that primitive nebula which already contains the potential of light (and all the bells that shiver in that light)—light, and consequently Life.

### **II. Amen des étoiles, de la planète à l'anneau ("Amen of stars, of the ringed planet")**

Brutal, savage dance. Violent spinning of stars, of suns, of Saturn, the planet with the multi-coloured ring. "God calls them and they say: Amen, here we are!" (Baruch). The second piano projects the theme of the planets' dance.

First development: beneath the polymodal rotations of the first piano, the second varies the first five notes of the theme in rhythm and with sudden changes of register. Second development: the opening of the theme by elimination, backwards and forwards. A third development superimposes this same motif as a rhythmic pedal (piano I) and with changes of register (piano II). Then a varied repeat of the planets' dance. All these movements, mixed together, evoke the life of the planets and the astonishing rainbow that colors the turning ring of Saturn.

### **III. Amen de l'agonie de Jésus ("Amen of Jesus' agony")**

Jesus suffers and weeps. "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (St Matthew). He accepts: as thou wilt, Amen, The form is that of a Greek triad [a form followed by choral odes in ancient Greek drama] : strophe, antistrophe, epode.

Strophe: Jesus is alone on the Mount of Olives, face to face with his agony. Three musical motifs:

- 1) the Father's curse on the Sin of the world, which Jesus in this moment represents;
- 2) a cry, a rhythmic and expressive group of anacrusis, accent and desinence;
- 3) a tearing lament on four notes, different in rhythm.

Antistrophe: the same music, more developed, with the addition of low rhythmic ostinatos suggesting the sounds of gongs and tam tams.

Epode: recollection of the theme of Creation (Christ's sufferings lend grace, and create the new man).

A long silence, broken by pulsations, evokes the suffering of this hour: an indescribable suffering, revealed a little in the sweated blood.

### **IV. Amen du Désir ("Amen of desire")**

The word "desire" must be understood in the most elevated spiritual sense—the sense in which the angel called the prophet Daniel "man of desire." There are two themes of desire. The first—slow, ecstatic, an aspiration of deep tenderness: already the calm scent of Paradise. The second is much more vehement: the soul is drawn by a terrifying love mounting to a paroxysm of thirst. These two feelings alternate. In the coda the two main voices seem to intermingle, and there is nothing beyond the harmonious silence of Heaven...

### **V. Amen des Anges, des Saints, du chant des oiseaux ("Amen of angels, of saints, and of bird chant")**

Song of the purity of the Saints: Amen. Exultant vocalise of the birds: Amen. Angels bow down before the Throne: Amen. At first the song of the Angels and Saints, uncomplicated, very pure. Then a middle section on birdsongs, requiring a more brilliant style of keyboard writing. Some of the best singers— the Thrush, the Chaffinch, the Blackcap are stylized, idealized, confused with the thousand sounds of nature, in turbulent, joyous combination. Varied reprise of the song of the Angels and Saints, with a canon in non-retrogradable rhythms on three levels. Brief coda on the birds.

### **VI. Amen du Jugement ("Amen of judgement")**

Three frozen notes, like the bell of evidence. In truth I tell you, Amen.

"Depart from me, ye cursed" (St Matthew).

### **VII. Amen de la Consommation ("Amen of consummation")**

Consummation, Paradise. Life of the resurrected in a carillon of light. "From brightness to brightness" (Proverbs). The second piano takes up the theme of Creation and draws from it a long chorale of glory. The first piano, at both extremes of the keyboard together, creates a ceaseless carillon of chords and brilliant, scintillating rhythms, in increasingly crowded rhythmic canons: sapphire, emerald, topaz, jacinth, amethyst, sardonyx, the whole rainbow of precious stones mentioned in the Apocalypse, sounding, jarring, dancing, colouring and perfuming the light of Life.