

DORATI

1974

## Dorati's Magnificent Messiaen

MESSIAEN: "La Transfiguration de Notre Seigneur Jesus-Christ." Yvonne Loriod, piano; Janos Starker, cello; Wallace Mann, flute; Loren Kitt, clarinet; Frank Anthony Amers, marimba; John A. C. Kane, xyloimba; Ronald Barnett, vibraphone; Michael Sylvester, tenor; Paul Aquino, baritone; Westminster Choir and National Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Antal Dorati. London OSA-1298, 2 records, \$12.96.

Olivier Messiaen's enormous "Transfiguration de Notre Seigneur Jesus-Christ" is finally available in your favorite record shop, and whatever you may happen to think of this man's strange exotic, prolix musical vocabulary and singular musical intelligence, the two-record album certainly proves one thing — the National Symphony is quite an orchestra.

The sound of this piece, *qua* sound, is absolutely glorious, and London's engineers have done a spectacular job in capturing it.

YOU MIGHT have thought that Antal Dorati, having presented the American premiere of "La Transfiguration" in the Kennedy Center, with its marvelous acoustics, on Mar. 28, 1972, the work would have been recorded there. Not so — London went to much maligned Constitution Hall to do its job, and the result vindicates their judgment conclusively.

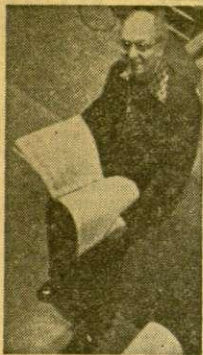
The orchestra was, of course, considerably augmented for the occasion — Messiaen never was bashful about his demands for music-making machines. But it is still recognizably the National Symphony, and it is recognizably a great ensemble.

A taste for Messiaen is, I suppose, something like a taste for olives, caviar, or sacramental wine. Not everybody has it, and I must candidly confess that, while I can admire the man's music, I can't fall in love

with it. I find those gigantic pieces with deep philosophical implications filled with bird songs and reflections of Messiaen's synesthesia especially difficult to swallow, and the "Transfiguration" is definitely one of these.

As to the birds, they are very much there. Messiaen gives credit to the great indicator (Africa), alpine chough, accentor, superb starling (Africa), Baltimore oriole, barred owl, American blue robin, rock thrush, nightingale, golden oriole, melodious warbler (Greece), Western meadowlark (Canada), blue mockingbird (Mexico), slate-colored solitaire (Mexico), grayish saltator (Mexico), tropical mockingbird (Mexico), blackcap (France), olive-tree warbler (Spain, Greece), scarlet tanager, indigo bunting, rose-breasted grosbeak (North America), crimson-winged finch, Moussier's redstart of the High Atlas, peregrine falcon and Bonelli's eagle for assists. A treat for the ornithologists.

As to the synesthesia, this enables Messiaen to describe, for example, a portion of the "Perfecte conciscus illius" as "a refrain, the harmonies of which go from blue striped with green to black spotted with red and gold, by way of diamond, emerald, purplish-blue, with a dominant pool of orange studded with milky white" in the sincere belief that he is communicating something meaningful to his listeners. The



Olivier Messiaen

words are lovely, but they have meaning only for Messiaen; synesthesia is an aberration not shared by mankind as a whole.

As to the work itself, here's what I wrote about the 1972 Kennedy Center premiere at the time:

"MESSIAEN IS, of course, an enormously gifted composer. He is also a very undisciplined composer (in a sense), a religious mystic, and something of an eccentric. His great gifts were evident, intermittently, throughout the long evening. The 'Quam dilecta tabernacula tua' and the

'Chorale of the Holy Mount' in the first septenary were exquisitely lovely and eloquent music; the 'Terribilis est locus iste' and the 'Tota Irinitis apparuit' in the second septenary were strong, beautifully balanced, and awe-inspiring in their majesty.

"But for the most part, the 'Transfiguration' struck me as some sort of aural flea market from which Messiaen picked and chose this or that sonic oddity or knickknack which happened to strike his fancy.

"The 'Transfiguration,' which took Messiaen almost four years to compose, strikes me as enormously overblown. The composer, intoxicated with sound, simply cannot bear to excise anything. Were it twice as short, it would be twice as good."

Washington Star-News  
1974 Jan. 20.

