ICH BIN DER WELT ABHAN DEN
GEKOMMEN

Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen,
Mit der ich sonst viele Zeit
verdorben;
Sie hat so lange nichts von mir
vernommen,
Sie mag wohl glauben, ich sei
gestorben!

Es ist mir auch gar nichts daran
glegen,
Ob sie mich für gestorben hält.
Ich kann auch gar nichts sagen
dagegen,
Denn wirklich bin ich gestorben der
Welt.

Ich bin gestorben dem Weltgetümmel
Und ruh' in einem stillen Gebiet!
Ich leb' allein in meinem Himmel,
In meinem Lieben, in meinem Lied.

OLIVIER MESSIAEN
Born December 10, 1908, Avignon,
France.

L'ascension

Messiaen composed these four "symphonic meditations" for orchestra in 1932-33. (He arranged the first, second, and fourth for organ in 1934.) The first performance of the orchestral version was given in February 1935, in Paris. The score calls for three flutes, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, triangle, cymbals, tambourine, bass drum, timpani, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-three minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's only previous subscription concert performances of L'ascension were given at Orchestra Hall on March 12, 13, and 14, 1981, with Erich Bergel conducting. The Orchestra has performed L'ascension at the Ravinia Festival only once, on June 30, 1960, with Pierre Monteux conducting.

From the beginning of his first published composition, Messiaen spoke with a voice new to music. Le banquet céleste, a work for organ, opens with a single chord that lasts seven seconds. The whole piece is only twenty-five measures long, yet at Messiaen's extreme and deliberate tempo it takes six minutes to play. Messiaen calls Le banquet céleste a meditation; it allows not only for contemplation and reflection, but it suggests that distinct, otherworldly sensation of time standing still. In this and the pieces which followed over the next sixty years, Messiaen established himself, as Paul Griffiths has written, as "the first great composer whose works exist entirely after, and to a large degree apart from, the great Western tradition.

There are several elements in Messiaen's life that gave him an
exceptional affinity with a non-Western understanding of music, starting with his mother's unusual and prophetic assertion, made in a cycle of poems she wrote during her pregnancy: "I carry within me the love of mysterious and marvelous things." As a child, Messiaen was fascinated with the melodic and rhythmic shapes of Sanskrit characters he found in the Lavignac encyclopedia. Much later, after he had begun to write music, he was bowled over by hearing Indonesian gamelan music—played by an ensemble primarily of gongs, chimes, and drums—at the Exposition Coloniale in Paris in 1931.

Messiaen also absorbed much of the great Western tradition—at eight his favorite Christmas presents were the scores of the Damnation of Faust and Don Giovanni from his parents, and, two years later, when his teacher handed him a copy of Debussy's Pelleas and Melisande, it was, in the composer's words, "a real bombshell . . . probably the most decisive influence of my life." His fascination with the exotic and his love of the classics merged to form a sensibility unique in modern music. Messiaen composed in a language all his own, even after he took on students and inspired disciples. It is difficult to think of another figure so out of sync with his own century, and yet so influential in determining its future.

Messiaen wrote Le banquet céleste in 1928, during his student days at the Paris Conservatory. It was the earliest of his compositions he cared to acknowledge. In 1930 Messiaen left the conservatory to take the post of organist at the Church of the Trinity in Paris (it houses one of the great Cavaille-Coll instruments). During the thirties he became known as an organist-composer, and at the same time he began a series of works, culminating with L'ascension, which expresses his devout theology through the voice of the orchestra. "I have had the good fortune to be a Catholic," he later wrote.

I was born a believer. . . . A number of my works are dedicated to shedding light on the theological truths of the Catholic faith. That is the most important aspect of my music . . . perhaps the only one I shall not be ashamed of in the hour of death.

The subject of L'ascension is eternity and human destiny, a theme to which he would often return, even as late as his final large-scale work, Eclairs sur l'au-Delà (Reflections on the hereafter), composed months before his death. There is a remarkable sense of Messiaen's outlook on his career. As he told The Times in an interview in 1971:

No, I am not like Beckett, who says, "I was such an idiot..." I always hear what I have as part of myself, I perceive it, I feel it, I experience it, and I remain bound to it because it is a part of me that I have lived.

L'ascension begins with a slow, slightly flat chord, a feeling of being detached from the world; the rhythm is slow and deliberate, and the sounds are subdued. The music seems to be played on an instrument that is both strange and familiar, existing somewhere between the world of the real and the world of the surreal. The music is beautiful, with the use of drones and chant-like melodies creating a sense of mystery and wonder. The orchestra is used sparingly, with the focus on the individual instruments and the interplay between them. The piece is structured in a series of movements, each with its own particular character and mood. The music is often somber and introspective, with moments of brightness and hope interspersed. Overall, the piece is a powerful exploration of the human condition, with a sense of both joy and sadness, a sense of both hope and despair. It is a piece that encourages the listener to reflect on their own beliefs and experiences, to consider the meaning of life and the nature of the human soul.
the hereafter), completed only six months before his death in 1992. There is a remarkable consistency to Messiaen's outlook throughout his career. As he told the New York Times in an interview in 1988:

No, I am not like Samuel Beckett, who says, "Oh my God, I was such an idiot in that period, and I wrote such nonsense at the other time." I always know what I have written as part of myself given sincerely, and it remains a part of me because it is a place where I have lived.

L'ascension begins with a prayer from the world as we know it and ends with a slow ascension into the hereafter. There are four, strongly characterized, diverse movements. Like many of Messiaen's works, L'ascension is marked by the contrast between extremely slow music, with its seemingly unending melodies and stationary harmonies, and music of brilliant exuberance. The first movement is solemn, outdoor music—resounding chords scored for winds and brass, carried by a bold trumpet theme. In the second movement, long, fluid, unaccompanied melodies played by all the winds—the earliest influence of plainsong in Messiaen's music—alternate with delicate trios. The third movement is a dance of joy. The last of the four meditations is scored for a small group of strings. With its extremely slow pace and waves of gradually rising chords, it gives a sense of ascending into eternity. The final harmony—a sustained, open-ended, unresolved seventh chord played fff—makes the everlasting startlingly concrete (on Messiaen's own recording it lasts nearly a minute).

Each of the four movements is prefaced by a text relating to the feast of the Ascension:

1. Majesty of Christ Asking Glory from his Father: "Father, the hour has come; give glory to your Son, that your Son may give glory to you" (the Gospel according to John)

2. Serene Alleluias of a Soul Desiring Heaven: "Nous vous en supplions, ô Dieu, ... fai tes que nous habitions aux cieux en esprit" (We beseech you, O Lord, ... let us dwell in spirit in the heavens) (Mass for Ascension Day)
3. Alleluia on the Trumpet, Alleluia on the Cymbal: "La Seigneur est monté au son de la trompette . . . Nations, frappez toutes des mains; célébrez Dieu par des cris d'allelégresse!" (The Lord mounts [his throne] amid trumpet blasts . . . . All you peoples, clap your hands, shout to God with cries of gladness) (Psalm 46/47)

4. Christ's Prayer Rising to his Father: "Father, . . . I have made your name known to those you gave me out of the world. . . . I am in the world no more, but these are in the world, as I come to you." (the Gospel according to John)

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

For the record

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Mahler's Five Rückert Songs with Hanna Schwarz, Claudio Abbado conducting, in 1981 for Deutsche Grammophon. Pierre Boulez and José van Dam have recorded Ravel's Five Popular Greek Melodies and Don Quichotte à Dulcinée with the BBC Symphony Orchestra for CBS.

Recommended reading

Alan Rich provides a substantial chapter on Varèse in his new American Pioneers, part of an impressive series on twentieth-century composers published in paperback by Phaidon.

G. W. Hopkins's article on Ravel for The New Grove is a good introduction to the composer's life and music; it is included in Twentieth-Century French Masters (Norton paperback). Arbie Orenstein's Ravel: Man and Musician (Columbia University Press) is more detailed and illuminating.

A good place to begin reading about Mahler is the article from The New Grove written by Paul Banks and Donald Mitchell and reprinted in Turn of the Century Masters (Norton paperback). The long-awaited English translation of the second volume of Henry-Louis de La Grange's definitive Mahler has recently been published (Oxford University Press). Exhaustive, endlessly detailed, and highly illuminating, it follows the composer's life as far as the period of the Fifth Symphony and the Rückert songs. (Two additional volumes, as well as a revision of the currently available first volume, are promised.) Donald Mitchell's multi-volume study of Mahler's music is a compelling and insightful, if awkwardly organized, work (University of California Press).

Paul Griffiths's Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time (Cornell University Press) is a particularly fine introduction to this fascinating composer. Griffiths also wrote the article on Messiaen included in Twentieth-Century French Masters (Norton paperback).

—P. H.