

## An Evening to Remember

A church on a hilltop. **Ong Te-Min** gives us a review on *Abendmusiken* which featured both organ and harpsichord works.



DEFT FINGERS: Ms. Yang Tien displaying her skills. Photo | Ong Te-Min

IT ISN'T often that one encounters harpsichord recitals in Singapore; so an occasion featuring both harpsichord and organ music at the same venue is truly rare indeed. This recital was held at a rather unusual venue: the Norwegian Church (Sjømannskirken) located along Pasir Panjang Road. Perched on a steep hillside commanding great views of the sea (and of the less than appealing container port); it is also home to a recently rediscovered one manual pipe organ by the Danish builders Starup & Son.

This is our Chapter's third concert in the *Abendmusiken* series with solo keyboard works featured this time. Yang Tien, a member of the Music Faculty of the School of the Arts, started the evening with the *Suite No.7 in G minor*

by Handel. The performance of this work was a tour de force of harpsichord playing. It was played with brilliance and panache with each movement gradually building up to the *Gigue* and thence to the riveting *Passacaille*. One could sense that the audience was enthralled by end of the piece from the very warm round of applause accorded. The Scarlatti sonatas which followed were also dexterously rendered with numerous and repeated hand crossings all done without missing a beat. The *Toccata* by Emma Lou Diemer is an example of contemporary music written for the harpsichord. It is poignant to see new music for an instrument which virtually vanished for so many years only to be revived in relatively recent times by early pioneers such as Wanda Landowska and Ralph Kirkpatrick.

## Message from the Dean

Dear Friends,



IT IS easy for us to become complacent in our society. Organists are few and far between; the staples of organ repertoire resound rather infrequently within our concert halls and churches. Desiderus Erasmus, a Dutch writer and philosopher quipped, "In regione caecorum rex est luscus" [In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king].

Society still expects very little from organists and remains somewhat uninformed about organ music. The number of people attending organ concerts is relatively low, and church organists are still largely untrained. There is a lack of exposure to good models, so people accept low standards, and feed the misconception that already prevails. In reality, the pipe organ is a breathtaking instrument. Let us do all we can to promote it, help continue its historical and practical legacy, and do justice to it.

The National AGO has declared 2008/2009 as the International Year of the Organ. As our chapter continues to explore avenues to promote this through various activities, let us work together to reach out to the community and encourage one another toward high ideals.

Evelyn Lim DMA  
Dean

*"Organ playing is the manifestation of a will filled with a vision of eternity"*

— Charles-Marie Widor



**JESU, JOY OF MAN'S DESIRING:** Singing in unison with accompaniment provided by Ten Yeen at the organ. Photo | Ong Te-Min

The one manual organ in the Norwegian Church is a gem; with only 4 ranks (two stopped wooden ranks and the other two metal ranks) much music can be played on it. Christina Suresh and Chong Ten Yeen, both Chapter members, performed works by various composers. Among the works played by Christina was a Chorale Prelude on *Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele* by Brahms from his collection of 11 Chorale Preludes, Op. 122. Lusty singing of the chorale *Werde munter* by the audience accompanied at the organ by Ten Yeen was followed by the playing of *Chorale variations* on the same tune by Pachelbel. In a church setting this brings to mind a probable use of a Chorale Prelude: it could have been played as an extended introduction to the hymn about to be sung by the congregation; usually the hymn tune is discernable but in



**THE FIVE BEAUTIES:** From left - Ms. Yang Tien, Ms. Christina Suresh, Ms. Chong Ten Yeen, Dr Evelyn Lim and Rev Katarina. Photo | Ong Te-Min

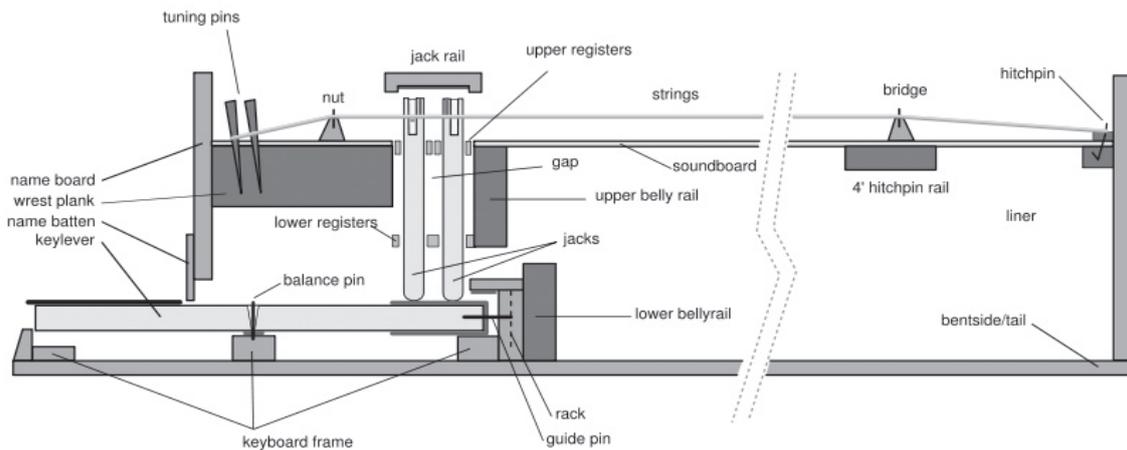
some cases it is a piece in its own right such as in the case of the Pachelbel *Chorale Variations*.

Those who braved the long (and steep) trek up to the concert venue will surely agree that it was well worth it. It was a comfortable and intimate environment wherein art and music was created in profusion. It was truly an evening to remember.

*Te-Min serves as organist at Telok Ayer Chinese Methodist Church and Trinity Methodist Church. He also happens to work at Oracle Corporation.*

# Harpsichord Mechanics 101

Source: Wikipedia and Wikimedia



A HARPSICHORD is a musical instrument played by means of a keyboard. It produces sound by plucking a string when each key is pressed.

As well as the large instrument currently called a harpsichord, the harpsichord family also includes the smaller virginals, the muselar or muselaar virginals and the spinet.

The harpsichord was widely used in baroque music. It became less popular following the invention of the piano, but is still used in contemporary music due to its distinctive sound.

Although harpsichords vary greatly in size and shape, they all have the same basic functional arrangement. The player presses a key, causing the far end of the key to rise. This in turn lifts a jack, a long strip of wood, to which is attached a small plectrum (a bit of quill or plastic), which on being lifted plucks the string. When the key is released by the player, the far end returns to its rest position and the jack is lowered. The plectrum, being mounted on a tongue that can swivel backwards away from the string, can then pass the string without plucking it again. As the key settles into its rest position, the string vibrations are halted by the damper, a bit of felt attached to the top of the jack.

# Journey of Faith Part Two

As part of the series, we feature two organists from our Chapter who will be pursuing organ studies in the United States. **Isaac Lee** recounts the various moments leading up to his successful placing at the Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester. **Victor Li** also chronicles the events leading to his placement at the Peabody Institute, John Hopkins University.

*Editor's Note:* We wish both of them God-speed and *Bon Voyage* to pursue their dreams with the 'King of Instruments'.

IN RESTROSPECT, I would never have imagined myself enrolled in full-time music studies. I was introduced to the organ during our chapter's first ever POE four years ago. Being able to observe the Sunday organists up close, one of the many privileges of being a chorister, further piqued my interest. I originally doubted that the organ would be any more difficult or different from the piano, seeing that they looked similar, but was immediately shamed by my assuming nature. Progress in learning music was slow and having conflicting schedules for organ practice made things even harder. To complete a piece took ages and I would never have dared entertain the thought of doing a degree in organ performance.

I began lessons with Dr Evelyn Lim half way through my stint in the army and after much encouragement and enlightened teaching; I began to seriously consider my options after my discharge from national service. The organ transformed me into a more confident and disciplined player. Schumann did say, "Lose no opportunity of practising on the organ; there is no instrument which takes a swifter revenge on anything unclear or sloppy in composition and playing". The uninitiated often quote Berlioz's permanent rebuke to those of us foolish enough to absorb ourselves in working alongside this most unforgiving and unexpressive musical instrument. As a chorister and band player I am constantly reminded of how important it is to breathe. It is up to the player to help phrase the music. Expressiveness is not a simply change of timbres and toying with the swell pedal, but also the many different nuances in touch and the subtleties in articulation. The organ has taught me to be a better listener due to profusion of lines and the importance of those lines. All this radically changed my outlook as a musician and reminded me that we are all

listeners before performers.

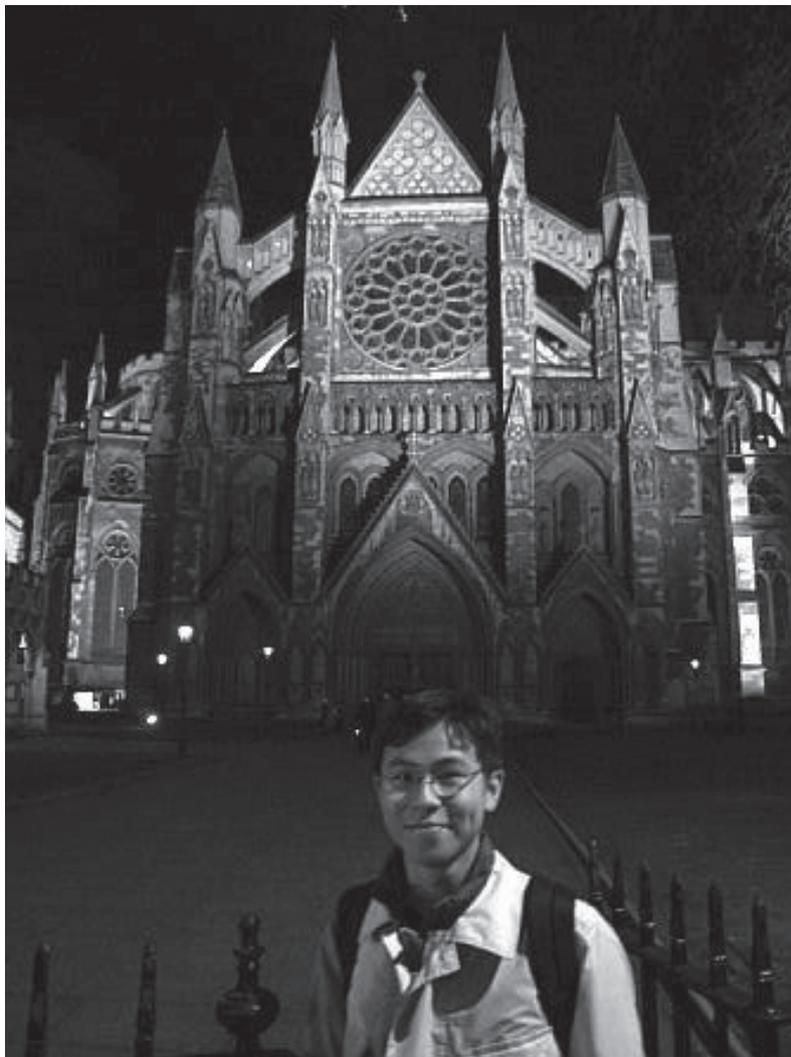
So the audition process was all very last minute like all my other decisions, a persistently bad habit of mine. I did not know what was out there or what I wanted exactly. I looked to Australia but was cautioned against studying for convenience's sake. Furthermore I did not have a huge body of repertoire to select from and I plunged into a race to master suitable pieces. I looked to the United Kingdom but costs deterred me. Eastman was accidental and it almost did not come to fruition. Applying for leave from the army was a difficult process but tenacity eventually paid off, and there I was eagerly waiting in the halls amidst fierce competition.

It was by God's grace and hard work from both parents and teacher that I managed to get in. I have tried every possible method of audition and though each one caters to a different situation and has its own perks, I would encourage going for a live audition. There is nothing better than seeing and practicing at their facilities and interacting with the students and members of the organ faculty. Every audition highlighted and alerted to me inadequacies in my preparation and playing.

Lastly I would like to pass on a word of advice echoed by every judging panel. Music is a highly practical subject that requires utmost dedication and attention. Do not choose to study unless you are absolutely sure of it and have no distractions in detracting you from your goal. Daunting words

but I am also sure that it is very rewarding.

*Isaac Lee is an organist who will be attending Eastman School of Music at the University of Rochester. He is currently under the tutelage of Dr Evelyn Lim, lecturer at the Methodist School of Music.*



**WESTMINSTER ABBEY:** Isaac in a glam shot outside the church.  
Source | Isaac Lee



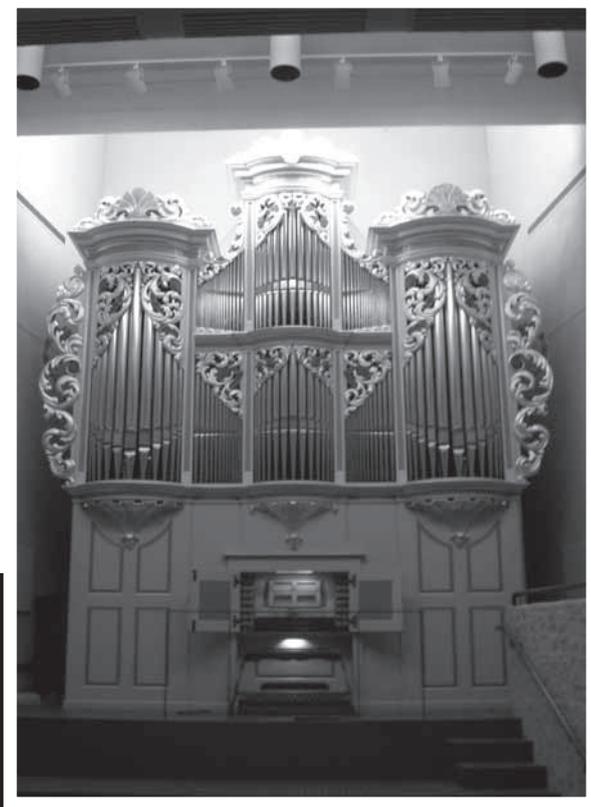
## Peregrinations in *America*

# PEREGRINATONES PEREGRINATORIS PERIGRINANTIS

"IT'S 91 degrees outside again, a far cry from the 26 it was when I boarded the aircraft thirty hours ago. Or... opps, shouldn't that be in Celsius? I need to reorient myself again: right side of the road, not left (important especially when you are driving!); kilograms, not pounds; Celsius not Fahrenheit..."

Wandering AGO Singapore member **Victor Li** returns from America, after visiting Detroit, Monroe, Birmingham, Ann Arbor, Baltimore, Washington DC, New York City, Ithaca, Rochester, Brighton, Brookline, Cambridge, New Haven and Providence. He was in America for University Auditions at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor (very cold!!), Peabody in Baltimore (cold!), and Eastman in Rochester (coldest!!!!). During this period, he also toured and played various historic instruments and historic replicas. Following the auditions, he spent a month recuperating from audition stress staying with his sister in the Boston area.

He shares a few pictures with us.



*Kia lai kia ke, kia ki kia loh,  
kia gao bor lo kia America.\**

\* Transliteration of (Hokkien) dialect: "Walk here walk there, walk up walk down, walk until no road walk America".

*From Left to Right:  
The United Parish of Brookline, where Victor assisted the organist in playing choral anthems and service music on a historic Skinner Instrument. (E Power Biggs was formerly organist at this Parish);  
Victor with Dr. Marilyn Mason, organ legend and the longest serving faculty member of the University of Michigan;  
The other Marilyn Mason, this one a CB Fisk organ modelled after the instruments of Gottfried Silbermann; and  
Victor playing at the playground with the best swings in the whole of the Boston Metropolitan Area!*

# A to Z of Composers

by Dr Tang Boon Sen

This installment of the 'A to Z of organ composers' features two prominent French organist-composers – Langlais and Messiaen – whose birth centenaries happen to fall on 2007 and 2008 respectively. The material in this article was gathered from various sources.

JEAN LANGLAIS (1907 – 1991) was born into an impoverished family of stonecutters in rural Brittany, and became blind by the age of two. From these humble beginnings, Langlais was to become one of the most significant organ composers and performers of the twentieth century. His prolific output of organ compositions, more than 300, exceeds even that of J. S. Bach. He also enjoyed a long career as cathedral organist and respected pedagogue, and was among the most active touring performers of his time, his legendary recitals always concluding with an improvisation on a submitted theme. As an internationally acclaimed virtuoso organist, he performed extensively throughout Europe and North America and made numerous recordings.



**LANGLAIS: A portrait picture of composer Jean Langlais. Photo | [www.classical-composers.org](http://www.classical-composers.org)**

Despite, or rather because of his visual handicap, he was sent at the age of ten to the National Institute for the Blind in Paris where he began formal academic and musical training in piano, violin, organ, theory and composition. This institution had been responsible for the world-class education of such blind organist-composers as Louis Vierne, Augustin Barié (1883 – 1915), André Marchal (1894 – 1980, who taught Langlais at the Institute), and Gaston Litaize (1909 – 1991). In addition, he studied at the Paris Conservatoire, learning counterpoint under Noël Gallon (1891 – 1966) and organ with Marcel Dupré (1886 – 1971). From 1934 he studied composition with Paul Dukas (1865 – 1935), and he was also taught improvisation privately by Charles Tournemire (1870 – 1939) until the latter's death. At the Conservatoire, Langlais obtained *premiers prix* in organ and improvisation in 1930, as well as composition in 1934.

Langlais' style of playing and composition were marked by the traditions of César Franck (1822 – 1890) and Charles Tournemire, his predecessors at the Basilica of Sainte-Clotilde in Paris, where he served as organist from 1945 until 1987. Both Franck and Tournemire were noted for the lyricism

and freedom of interpretation of both their playing and compositions. From his very first published works, Langlais became known as an extremely fine composer, particularly for the organ. He may be considered the culmination of the French post-Romantic school of Charles-Marie Widor (1844 – 1937), Louis Vierne (1870 – 1937) and Marcel Dupré, to which he brought the same love of Gregorian chant and modal harmony as did his mentor Tournemire.

Many elements from the past played an important part in his music: medieval music (e.g. *Suite Médiévale*), Gregorian chant (e.g. *Trois paraphrases grégoriennes*), folk melodies (e.g. *Folkloric Suite*), and modality (e.g. *Huit pièces modales*). One senses the old styles and forms imbued with a very new flavour (e.g. *Suite Baroque*, *Hommage à Frescobaldi* and *Hommage à Rameau*). Composition professor Paul Dukas often urged his students to continually search for new ideas so that each work would sound different from an earlier one. Langlais heeded this advice, and hence some of his very early compositions could have been his last ones, and vice versa. His frequent use of polymodality, synthetic scales, added rhythms, extra-musical symbolism, and new uses of the colours and timbres of the organ also show Langlais' search for innovation. But in all of his music, the listener directly perceives the emotion he expresses and the unique spark of his personality.

OLIVIER MESSIAEN (1908–1992) was born in Avignon of literary parents who encouraged his early leanings towards music. He entered the Paris Conservatoire in 1919 where he studied until 1930, and like Langlais, received organ lessons from Marcel Dupré and studied composition under Paul Dukas. He excelled to win *premiers prix* in counterpoint and fugue (1926), piano accompaniment (1927), organ, improvisation and music history (1928), and composition (1929), and was appointed to the church of *La Sainte Trinité* in Montmartre as organist in 1931 where he served for the rest of his life. Messiaen was on the faculty of the Paris Conservatoire from

1941 until 1978. There he taught harmony, analysis and later, composition, influencing a generation of avant-garde composers including Pierre Boulez (b. 1925), Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928 – 2007) and Iannis Xenakis (1922 – 2001).

Two constants predominate in the work of Messiaen, two themes of inspiration that never left him during the course of his life: his deep faith in God and his passion for



**IN COMMEMORATION: Plaque in honour of Jean Langlais at the National Institute for the Blind, Paris. Photo | [www.jeanlanglais.com](http://www.jeanlanglais.com)**



**ALL READY:** Messiaen noting down birdsong. Photo | Olivier Messiaen, Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone.

birdsong. They are present in his large symphonic, vocal and keyboard works. Messiaen was also an ‘adventurer’ in music, an explorer of all techniques, of worlds before Europe (as seen in his avid interest in Greek metrical rhythms and ancient Hindu rhythms). In the manner of Widor and Dupré before him, Messiaen also renewed the repertoire for the organ.

Theological subjects inform nearly all of Messiaen’s organ music, which is permeated with a Catholic mysticism. His earliest published organ work, *Le Banquet Céleste* (The Heavenly Banquet) (1928), already contains characteristics of his general style in its slow, sustained movement and rich chromatic colouring. Another student work, *Diptyque* (1930) has two sections representing the contrast between earthly life and eternal bliss, and is dedicated to his teachers, Dukas and Dupré. In *L’Apparition de L’Église Éternelle* (Vision of the Eternal Church) (1932), another slow piece, the Eternal Church comes to sight and recedes in an inexorable crescendo and diminuendo.

*L’Ascension* (The Ascension) (1932 – 4) is a suite of four pieces contemplating upon the last moments of Christ on earth leading to His ascension, with accompanying texts taken from the Catholic liturgy. Although lacking the extreme rhythmic refinements and complexities of Messiaen’s later music, *L’Ascension* is noteworthy for the unusually slow, sustained nature of the first and last movements with their quasi-hypnotic repetitions, the rhythmic plasticity of the middle movements and the highly chromatic harmony and the correspondingly rich registration throughout.

It is in his early works that we find Messiaen developing his theories of the modes of limited transposition and non-invertible rhythms – his characteristic harmonies and musical

forms which he later discussed in his own theoretical treatise, *Technique de mon langage musical* (The Technique of my Musical Language) (1944, revised 1969). These were used in his cycle *La Nativité du Seigneur* (The Lord’s Nativity) (1935) which first brought Messiaen to the attention of contemporary music circles outside France. The explanatory note prefacing this cycle of nine meditations on the feast of Christmas outlined his theological aims in the cycle, and also analysed the technical means by which he sought to attain them.

His next cycle *Les Corps Glorieux* (The Glorified Bodies) (1939) contains seven pieces providing ‘brief visions of the life of the resurrected ones’. It is pervaded by the influence of Greek and Hindu rhythms, and plainsong. Serial composition techniques were employed in *Messe de la Pentecôte* (Mass for Pentecost) (1950) and *Livre d’Orgue* (Organ Book) (1951). The jubilant *Verset pour la Fête de la Dédicace* (Verset for the Festival of the Dedication of a Church) (1960) is an isolated work written as a test piece for the Paris Conservatoire. *Méditations sur le Mystère de Sainte Trinité* (Meditations on the Mystery of the Holy Trinity) (1969) consists of nine pieces contemplating upon the persons of the Trinity, and is the first work to use the composer’s ‘communicable language’. Extensive birdsong passages can be identified in the last three organ cycles mentioned above, as well as in Messiaen’s final organ cycle, *Livre du Saint Sacrement* (Book of the Holy Sacrament) (1984–5). This is his most monumental organ work with eighteen movements depicting the life and worship of Christ.

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### **Recommended Reading**

Labounsky, Ann, *Jean Langlais: The Man and His Music* (New Jersey: Amadeus Press, 2000).

Messiaen, Olivier, *The Technique of my Musical Language, originally ‘Technique de mon langage musical’,* trans. J. Satterfield, 2nd edition (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1969).

Hill, Peter (ed.), *The Messiaen Companion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995).

Murray, Michael, *French Masters of the Organ: Saint-Saëns, Franck, Widor, Vierne, Dupré, Langlais & Messiaen* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

### **Selected Recordings**

Jean Langlais – Complete Organ Works (25 CDs in 12 volumes) performed by his pupil Dr. Ann Labounsky on the ‘Musical Heritage Society’ label. Vols. 1 to 9 have been released so far. Vol. 1 is an excellent introduction to Langlais’ organ music. It includes some of the composer’s better-known and more accessible works: *Trois poèmes évangéliques* (1932); *Trois paraphrases gregoriennes* (1933–34); *Neuf pièces* (1942– 43); *Suite brève* (1947); *Incantation pour un jour saint* (1949); *Huit chants de Bretagne* (1974). Ann Labounsky plays the organ of St. Peter Cathedral, Erie, Pennsylvania. Recorded in 1980. Musical Heritage Society (USA) MHS 424127L (2 CDs).

Olivier Messiaen – Complete Works for Organ (6 CDs). Olivier Latry plays the Cavallé-Coll organ at Notre-Dame Cathedral, Paris. Recorded in July 2000. Deutsche Grammophon DG 471 480–2 (box set). Also included in this very fine set are previously unpublished pieces *Prélude pour orgue & Offrande au Saint Sacrement* from the early 1930s, and *Monodie* (1963).

# Perhaps --

## *reflections on an aporia\**

by Yeo Huan

THE ENGLISH writer Aldous Huxley once wrote, in his collection of essays *Music at Night*, these words which have become famous: “After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music.”

Expressing the inexpressible: perhaps, this too is the aporia that underlies Olivier Messiaen’s music; the aporetic mortal glimpses of heaven: in coming to his music, we give ourselves the opportunity to be touched by what we do not—cannot—understand. For, in the French philosopher Maurice Blanchot’s words, understanding is no longer a “pure movement of comprehension”: it is—has to be—situated “beyond comprehension or short of comprehension.”

Perhaps, this is how we “begin” to approach Messiaen: by *undoing* our understanding of Western music, of music. At the beginning of her highly informative lecture, Dr Evelyn Lim light-heartedly remarked that the untrained ear either ends up liking or disliking Messiaen. But maybe, I thought to myself as the night ebbed, to like or to dislike would simply be irrelevant as we seek, through Messiaen’s music, a glimpse of transcendence and timelessness.

Perhaps, it is only in shedding the garments of our idiosyncrasies that we can come, as we did on Monday night, to the visions, colours, eternity and spirituality that emanate from Messiaen’s music. The night was wonderful because each of us got to *experience* Messiaen’s music: not simply from the (intellectual) discourse on the key elements of his music, but from the precious opportunity to imbibe the spatial harmonies of *Le Banquet Cèleste* [The Celestial Banquet], the luxuriant chords of *Prière du Christ montant vers son Père* [Prayer of Christ Ascending Unto His Father], the bright toccata flourishes, solemn Cornet solos and joyful rhythmic figurations of *La Nativité du Seigneur* [The Nativity of the Lord].

And perhaps, it was the utter brilliance of the climax in *Apparition de l’église éternelle* [Apparition of the Eternal Church] that completely dazzled—blinded—me: to mortally *come close* to beholding the full magnificence of eternity’s glory was almost unbearable; in a divine moment, I understood the smallness of my being.

\* *These reflections were penned after “Glimpses of Heaven: An Introduction to Olivier Messiaen’s organ music (pre-1950 works),” a lecture-workshop held on 2 June, 7.45 pm, at the Barker Road Methodist Church. It featured a lecture by Dr Evelyn Lim, a presentation by Ng Chet Wei and performances by members of the Singapore AGO.*

Yeo Huan is the current Programme Director of the Singapore AGO. He’s doing his full-time postgraduate studies in English Literature at the National University of Singapore, and serves as organist at the Wesley Methodist Church.



ON WINGS OF SONG: Headstone of Messiaen’s grave. Photo | [www.oliviermessiaen.org](http://www.oliviermessiaen.org)

## What’s Hot?

2 Oct 08, Thursday, 7.30pm  
Organ recital by Dong-ill Shin (Korea-USA)  
Victoria Concert Hall  
Tickets at \$15 and \$10 (conc)  
Pre-concert talk at 6.45pm

8 Nov 08, Saturday, 7.30pm  
Abendmusik, featuring the choral group Ab Oriente  
Danish Seamen’s Mission  
Ticket details to be advised



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