

"Performing Messiaen's Organ Music: 66 Masterclasses" by Jon Gillock

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With the publication of his book, *Performing Messiaen's Organ Music: 66 Masterclasses*, Jon Gillock has taken center stage among today's premier interpreters of Messiaen's organ works. In his sixty-six masterclasses on performing this music, Gillock serves as a guide to the compositional world of one of the twentieth century's greatest masters. In a career spanning over thirty years, Gillock has performed Messiaen's organ works to wide acclaim throughout the world. Indeed, in a conversation with Claude Samuel in 1986, Messiaen singled out Gillock as one of four internationally-known organists (the others being Almut Rößler, Jennifer Bate, and Louis Thiry) who played his music better than he did.¹ In particular, Messiaen appreciated Gillock's playing of his *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (1969), which Gillock premiered in New York City in 1974 to tremendous acclaim. Accordingly, Gillock is well-equipped to guide readers through the complex challenges of interpreting one of the most daunting yet genuine musical repertoires ever conceived for a solo instrument.

Although employing Messiaen's commentaries about his organ music from various sources, such as prefaces, liner notes, and the *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie* (1949-1992), as well as information gleaned from the composer's personal scores of these works, Gillock goes way beyond them in his interpretations of this music. Having studied Messiaen's organ music on his own, he helps readers to understand the process of how he formed his musical interpretations, which I believe is the book's most significant contribution. Gillock stresses the importance of truly understanding "the words and symbols that [Messiaen]...left...in his scores" (p. xxi) by advising performers not only to grasp the meanings of Messiaen's subtitles, along with his indications for tempos, dynamics, and registrations, but also to know how to apply them in different musical situations. In the final analysis, reflecting a pedagogical viewpoint comparable to that of Messiaen in his composition class at the Paris Conservatoire, Gillock hopes that performers, who are informed by his ideas, will pursue their own interpretative paths through Messiaen's organ music.

¹ See Claude Samuel and Olivier Messiaen, *Musique et couleur: Nouveaux entretiens avec Claude Samuel* (Paris: Belfond, 1986); trans. E. Thomas Glasow as *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1994), 203.

Performing Messiaen's Organ Music is organized into two parts. The lengthier Part 1 (chapters 1-14) consists of an introduction dealing with the performer's obligations as an interpreter, and Gillock's sixty-six masterclasses. The shorter Part 2 (chapters 15-17) contains information about the history and development of the Cavaillé-Coll organ that Messiaen played as titular organist for over sixty years at l'Église de la Sainte-Trinité in Paris. To close out the book, Gillock includes a biographical sketch of Messiaen in Appendix A, a list of those organ pieces by Messiaen that can be played during the Liturgical Year in Appendix B, a glossary of terms and techniques associated with Messiaen, notes, and a bibliography.

In the *Introduction: A Philosophy of the Performer's Role as an Interpreter* (3-10), Gillock outlines what he believes to be the prerequisites for a successful performance of Messiaen's organ music. Like a conductor studying a score, a performer should concentrate on learning the music away from the organ, imagining what the piece would sound like in an idealized performance before tackling it with fingers and feet. To comprehend the religious pictures Messiaen depicts in his organ works, a performer should study the biblical quotations and commentaries Messiaen provides for each of his pieces. For Gillock, it is vitally important to uncover key words in these texts in order to discern what Messiaen was trying to convey through his music (p. 6). A performer should understand, furthermore, the coloristic aspects of Messiaen's organ registrations and how they enhance the expression of the pieces with which they are associated. Finally, a performer should then experiment with the notes (not necessarily at the organ according to Gillock), attempting to discover how they represent the text in sound.

In his sixty-six masterclasses (pp. 12-350), Gillock covers Messiaen's organ works chronologically from *Le Banquet céleste* (1928) to the posthumous *Prélude* (2002). For each piece, he supplies information about its composition and premiere, provides translations of appropriate commentaries by Messiaen, and explores relevant performance considerations. Throughout his commentaries, Gillock gives valuable insights into Messiaen's organ registrations, such as how different stops (or stop combinations) can either connote certain emotional states (e.g., the *Gambe* and *Voix céleste*, or *Salicional* and *Unda maris*, suggesting love) or reinforce Messiaen's religious pictures (16' *Basson* suggesting the pain of Christ's Crucifixion, or the barking of the beast of the Apocalypse); or how to adapt the composer's registrations to different organs; or how the term *mixtures*, as opposed to *Fourniture* or *Cymbale* (the mixtures on a French organ), for instance, actually calls for *mutation* stops such as the *Nazard 2 2/3'* and *Tierce 1 3/5'*, coupled possibly to a 2' stop.

In his masterclasses on Messiaen's music, Gillock is preoccupied with touch and rhythm. He insists that in order to play Messiaen's organ works artistically, a performer must possess a fine legato (p. 7). Yet, this is only one of several different touches one must employ to interpret Messiaen's works. More importantly, Gillock maintains that a performer must discover how these touches can be used to enhance the meaning of Messiaen's religious imagery. For example, a finely wrought non-legato touch in the manual parts of "Les Yeux dans les roues" from the *Livre d'orgue* (1951-52) is needed to convey the energetic, swirling motion of the wheels mentioned in the piece's biblical epigraph (see pp. 184-8). Such a detached touch shapes the music's intense movement, making it sound faster than it actually is. A choppy, mechanical touch, on the other hand, would leave the music devoid of the energetic aura

mandated by the imagery linked with the piece. A sensitive legato is required, moreover, to bring out the fluid lines of the Alleluia from the plainsong *Adorabo ad templum sanctum tuum* used in *Méditation II* (“La Sainteté de Jésus-Christ”) of the *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (see pp. 210-4). The lines should sound smooth and connected, as if they were being sung, despite the presence of staccato marks on repeated notes (a French notational convention).

On the subject of rhythm, Gillock advises performers to count the smallest durational value when learning the composer’s works. Although potentially tedious, this is absolutely necessary in order to play Messiaen’s music fluently (particularly for pieces such as the “Reprises par interversion” from the *Livre d’orgue*), since his approach to rhythm involves the free multiplication of a small note value to generate rhythmic sequences. But one does not stop with counting small note values. In order to shape rhythm in Messiaen’s works more artistically, Gillock advocates feeling the notes that are beamed together into groups as “beats.” This allows the performer not only to convey the irregular rhythmic surface of a composition but also to project the motion of a piece in terms of the rise and fall of energy. Finally, counting the smallest durational value and then taking note of the beats will allow the performer to find the correct tempo for a composition.

Part 2 focuses on the great organ at La Trinité in Paris. In chapter fifteen (pp. 353-60), *Les Grandes Orgues de l’Église de la Sainte-Trinité à Paris [The Great Organ of the Church of the Holy Trinity in Paris]*, Gillock provides a translation of a brochure by Messiaen dating from October 1980 tracing the history of the organ Aristide Cavaillé-Coll built for La Trinité in 1868.² In the brochure, Messiaen describes the three restorations performed on the instrument (prior to 1980) by Charles Mutin, the successor to Cavaillé-Coll, and the firms of Pleyel-Cavaillé-Coll and Beuchet-Debierre. While he insists that the timbres of the organ’s original stops were respected for the restorations performed during his tenure at the church, Messiaen mentions how the organ was enriched through the addition of more mixture and reed stops, as well as how the instrument, through its electrification, new combination generals, and three keyboards, was now capable of more frequent and varied changes of color. Yet for Messiaen, the most beautiful sounding stops remain those created by Cavaillé-Coll, particularly the *Basson 16’* and *Quintaton 16’* of the Positif. Messiaen also compares the organ at La Trinité with other instruments in France and the United States, provides additional remarks about the organ’s construction and tonal qualities, and supplies the instrument’s specification (which Gillock does not include here but in the next chapter).

In chapter sixteen (pp. 361-6), *Evolution of the Organ, 1930-1992*, Gillock discusses the development of the organ at La Trinité from 1930-92. He supplies the specification of the Trinité organ, as Messiaen knew it in 1931, when the composer assumed the post of titular organist.³ Gillock deduces the specification from an Inauguration Program of 28 May 1935 autographed by Messiaen (Gillock reproduces the program on pp. 356-9). He then lists the organ’s mechanical controls, which were

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I possess a photocopy of the original brochure, provided to me in 2005 by Nigel Simeone from his private collection, “Nigel Simeone, private collection.”

³

La Trinité appointed Messiaen to the post in 1930.

reversible and operated by the feet, accompanied by some commentary. In the rest of the chapter, Gillock details ensuing renovations of the organ by Pleyel-Cavaillé-Coll in 1934; Beuchet-Debierre in 1962-5; Jacques Picaud and Olivier Glandaz in 1980; and Glandaz in 1992-3 (although the disposition of stops was not changed from Messiaen's time). Gillock also mentions the addition of a new computerized combination system to the organ in 2007. For the renovations by Pleyel-Cavaillé-Coll and Beuchet-Debierre, Gillock notes what new stops were added and what changes were made to the organ's existing resources. He lists the organ's specification when Messiaen retook possession of the instrument in October 1966 and describes aspects related to the recently-installed computerized combination system.

In chapter 17 (pp. 367-78), *Characteristics of the Organ since 1966*, Gillock describes the tonal qualities of the Trinité organ, assessing each division's coloristic possibilities as a whole before examining individual stops. By doing so, he hopes to "give interpreters some ideas about the kinds and qualities of sounds Messiaen had in mind when registering his works on his own organ at La Trinité" (p. 367). Of the three chapters devoted to an exploration of the Trinité organ, this one is the most valuable for organists desiring to play Messiaen's music, not only for its descriptions of the timbral qualities of each stop but also for Gillock's insights into how one stop can be combined with another. Gillock's scholarly thoroughness is capped off by his listing of Messiaen's twelve-stage dynamic sequence for the crescendo pedal, determined by his visit to the Trinité organ on 26 September 2007. Messiaen's description of the sequence in the *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* is rather general, while Gillock's is quite detailed, showing the specific stops added during each stage of the process. Gillock notes that this is the crescendo pedal's default sequence, for the pedal can be programmed to sound thirty levels of increasing dynamic intensity.

Performing Messiaen's Organ Music is a remarkable book with only a limited number of content and production errors. While his *Glossary of Terms and Techniques Unique to Messiaen* is impressive for the most part in its scope and thoroughness, Gillock's definition of Messiaen's *Chords in transposed inversions over the same bass note* on pp. 388-9 is incomplete. What Gillock describes is a technique that Messiaen applies to different sonorities in which a chord's inversions are all transposed so that they share the same bass note as the chord's root position form. Missing from the definition is the fact that Messiaen also used this term to describe a later version of the chord on the dominant.⁴

Although containing a small number of editorial errors in relation to a volume of this size, my biggest criticism about the book's production is that *Performing Messiaen's Organ Music* could have benefited from a more elegant-looking font for its musical accidentals. As it stands, sharps, flats, and naturals are subscripted when attached to pitch names, which, in my opinion, is less than desirable in a published book.

⁴ See Olivier Messiaen, *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie (1949-1992)*, 7 vols. (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1994-2002), 7: 135-47, especially 138-9; and Vincent P. Benitez, "Aspects of Harmony in Messiaen's Later Music: An Examination of the Chords of Transposed Inversions on the Same Bass Note," *Journal of Musicological Research* 23/2 (2004): 187-226.

Performing Messiaen's Organ Music is a significant contribution to both the Messiaen literature as well as to performance practice in general. Gillock has succeeded admirably in making Messiaen's music more accessible to a wider audience. As he states in his Preface, "Although [the book] deals specifically with his compositions for organ, the principles that are revealed within them apply to all of Messiaen's music" (p. xv). Gillock has also left us an historical record of Messiaen's writings about his organ works and instrument at La Trinité. Finally, through his numerous interpretative insights about Messiaen's organ works, Gillock has shown himself to be not only a first-rate artist but also a fabulous teacher of a music whose beauty and grandeur reflect the qualities of the French Romantic-symphonic organ school from which it emerged.