

Music Notes for January 13th

Prelude: Olivier Messiaen: *O Sacrum Convivium*

Anthem: Hector Berlioz: *The Shepherd's Farewell* from *L'enfance du Christ*

Offertory: Olivier Messiaen: *La colombe*

Postlude: Louis Vierne: *Arabesque* op. 31, no. 15

From the Italian Baroque last week we travel north and forward in time a couple of centuries to France. The instrumental music is from the 20th century, the anthem is from a famous 19th century French oratorio.

Both Olivier Messiaen and Louis Vierne were organists in the city of Paris for large portions of their lives. Messiaen worked at La Trinité for over sixty years; Vierne at Notre Dame for nearly forty. Both were trained at the Conservatoire, and both succeeded their teachers in their jobs.

Messiaen was a composer unlike any other. He did not think of his music in terms of keys and scales as most composers, but rather in terms of colors. It was said that he actually heard color, and his ear was so keen that he transcribed birdsong into many of his works with such accuracy that ornithologists use his writings to identify rare species. He was also an extremely devout Catholic, and a religious influence can be seen in a large portion of his music. Though the piano piece *La colombe* (The dove) is from a collection of secular pieces written in 1929, the dove has a great deal of symbolism in religious work, and it is very likely that he intended the soft fluttering chords in the high register of the piano to represent the Holy Spirit.

The prelude, *O Sacrum Convivium*, was originally a communion motet for solo voices, but it translates beautifully onto the organ. Its color is bright but warm, and the irregular rhythms are slow enough to not feel jarring to the listener. It is a quiet, awe-filled meditation on the sacred banquet.

Louis Vierne was a legally blind organist who began most of his compositions as improvisations during Mass. His book of *Twenty-four pieces in free style* shows the breadth of his musical language. Much of it looks back at the 19th century, and there are a few pieces that even sound baroque, such as an Italian canzona and pastorale. The Arabesque, however, is simply a written-out improvisation over long, sustained chords, sparse at times, and very much in the same vein as Debussy. Vierne died in 1937, the same year in which Messiaen wrote *O Sacrum Convivium* and there are some similarities between the two pieces, especially the stillness and wonder that they both evoke.

Berlioz's oratorio *L'enfance du Christ* (The childhood of Christ) contains a wealth of music for voice and orchestra, including dramatic scenes, arias, choruses, and ensembles. The anthem selection, originally for chorus, strings, and pairs of oboes and clarinets, is a carol-like movement where the three Magi say goodbye to Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus as they leave Bethlehem for Egypt. Like the pastorales and French Noëls used to depict the quiet on Christmas night, there is no hint of panic or distress here, just a lulling melody and discreet accompaniment. Perhaps the infant is asleep and they do not want to startle him or wake him up. The third and final verse is marked very softly as it recedes into the distance.

Thomas Dawkins, interim organist/choir director