

Turangalîla-symphonie

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

Introduction

Chant d'amour I

Turangalîla I

Chant d'amour II

Joie du sang des étoiles

Jardin du sommeil d'amour

Turangalîla II

Développement de l'amour

Turangalîla III

Final

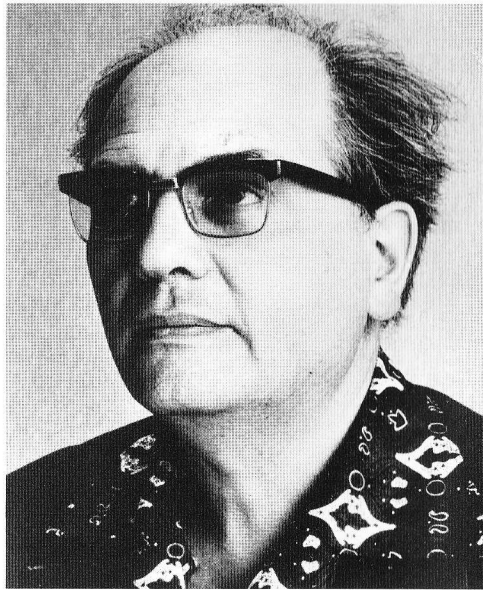
"A hymn to joy"

For composer Aaron Copland, it was "the Messiaen monster". For the *Boston Globe*, writing at the piece's premiere, it was "the longest and most futile music within memory". For its composer, the visionary mystic Olivier Messiaen, however, the *Turangalîla-symphonie* was simply "a song of love, a hymn to joy".

If you've heard the piece before, you'll have some idea of the power, opulence and sheer strangeness of one of the grandest orchestral works ever written. If you haven't, set aside any preconceptions of what a symphony can be: *Turangalîla* follows few traditional rules, mixing avant-garde complexity with Hollywood-style lushness (some would even say vulgarity), combining brutality and lyricism, and describing love in all its sensual and serene richness.

The composer

For one of the twentieth century's most influential musicians, Olivier Messiaen was an iconoclastic figure. A profoundly devout Catholic (he was organist at Paris' La Trinité church for six decades), he saw God in all of creation – especially in the beauty of birdsong, which makes many appearances in his music. He was a hugely inspirational teacher of composers such as Boulez,



Stockhausen and Xenakis at the Paris Conservatoire, and his radical rethinking of rhythm, harmony and musical time had a profound impact far beyond his own music.

The *Turangalîla-symphonie* was Messiaen's first major international commission, and it came from conductor Serge Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1945, with a brief that left duration, orchestration and style entirely in the hands of the composer. Messiaen initially indicated that he would need around six months to write the piece – in the end it took him more than three years.

During that time, the composer's first wife, violinist Claire Delbos, was admitted to hospital for a routine operation, but the procedure left her with serious amnesia. Messiaen was suddenly responsible for her daily care, and at the same time found himself falling deeply in love with one of his Conservatoire students, the pianist

Yvonne Loriod (who in 1961 would become his second wife). It was into this turmoil of desire, guilt and longing that Messiaen's huge symphonic creation was born.

And despite his deeply held Catholicism, the *Turangalîla-symphonie* is one of Messiaen's least overtly religious works. Instead, he used Koussevitzky's open commission to write about love and life on a grand scale, exploring his radical ideas on rhythm, harmony and form in the process. At its premiere, conducted by Leonard Bernstein in Boston in December 1949, the rather naive yet deeply sincere directness of the symphony was greeted with a mixture of bafflement and admiration. Koussevitzky, though, was delighted with the music he had commissioned, calling it the greatest piece of twentieth-century music after *The Rite of Spring*.

The title

The symphony's strange title is a combination of two Sanskrit words, which Messiaen discovered among a list of Indian rhythms noted down by the thirteenth-century scholar Sharngadeva. "Turanga" signifies the movement of time, and "lîla" refers to love, life, movement, creation and destruction. For Messiaen, the title signified nothing less than "joy, time, movement, rhythm, life and death".

The work requires a vast orchestra with a huge percussion section, including a sparkling "gamelan" of vibraphone, xylophone, celeste, glockenspiel and bells. There are two prominent solo instruments: a piano, whose highly virtuosic part was conceived for Yvonne Loriod, and an ondes Martenot, an early electronic instrument whose wailing tones had hitherto mainly been restricted to Hollywood horror movies. Played using either a traditional keyboard or by sliding a thimble along a ribbon, the ondes' unmistakable sound adds an otherworldly twang to the symphony's already psychedelic orchestration.

The music

The huge musical orgy of *Turangalîla* obeys few of a traditional symphony's rules. There's little sense of any traditional symphonic development, nor of natural flow from one section to another. Instead, Messiaen employs bald contrasts and juxtapositions, even superimposing different kinds of music on top of each other. Nevertheless, he described the symphony as "the most melodic, the warmest, the most dynamic and the most coloured" of all his works – and it's difficult to disagree.

Introduction

After its gruff opening on low strings, the *Introduction* reveals the symphony's main elements. First comes an imposing melody (which Messiaen likened to "the heavy, terrifying brutality of old Mexican statues") on trombones and tuba, heralded by a wail from the ondes, and it's followed by a gentle, caressing, "flower" theme on two clarinets. An assertive piano solo leads to the movement's longest section, with unstoppable, machine-like rhythms for the "gamelan". After a repeat of the "statue" theme, the movement ends with a resolute thud.

Chant d'amour I (Love song 1)

The symphony's first amorous movement contrasts two aspects of love: passionate, carnal desire (symbolised by a spiky, dancing melody for brass), and tender, idealistic affection (in sweet, slow-moving music for soaring ondes and strings). After a couple of interruptions, the slow theme returns triumphant, blasted out in loved-up ecstasy on trumpets and ondes.

Turangalîla I

The symphony's first "dark" movement begins with a sultry, smoky melody shared between clarinet and ondes, which suddenly erupts into a loud, plainchant-like theme in trombones. The opening theme makes two returns, louder and stronger each time, and builds to a dense, awe-

inspiring climax before disappearing into nothingness.

Chant d'amour II (Love song 2)

Probably the closest thing the symphony has to a traditional *scherzo* shows Messiaen at his most mischievous. It opens with a perky melody for piccolo and bassoon, which leads to a grand statement of the "love" theme on ondes and strings, growing ever richer as its accompaniment becomes ever more complex. After a tongue-in-cheek anti-climax, things get more serious towards the end, with a sparkling piano *cadenza*, returns for the "flower" and "statue" themes, and a quietly glowing memory of the "love" melody.

Joié du sang des étoiles (Joy of the blood of the stars)

A long, frenzied dance of joy expresses the climax of sensual passion and serves as a fantastical finale to the first half of the symphony. Messiaen's opening melody dances in unbridled happiness, and a more dissonant central section includes fragments of the "statue" theme. Just when it seems like things can't get any more intense, five bright chords signal a frenetic piano *cadenza*, a grand return for the "statue" theme, and a blazing conclusion in which Messiaen seems intent on overwhelming the listener with joy.

Jardin du sommeil d'amour (Garden of the sleep of love)

The calm, quiet ecstasy of the sixth movement makes a bold contrast with the frenzy of the fifth. The strings and ondes sing the slow "love" theme with lazy warmth; birds flutter on the piano; there are quiet comments from the woodwind, a tinkling celeste, and the quiet fizz of cymbals.

Turungalila II

Messiaen explained that this movement, probably the symphony's strangest, was based around the short story *The Pit and the Pendulum* by American gothic writer

Edgar Allan Poe: "the double horror of the pendulum knife gradually approaching the prisoner's heart while the red-hot iron closes in." After a birdsong-like piano solo comes a passage that sounds like it's straight from a horror movie soundtrack, with wailing ondes and growling trombones. Percussion beat out complex rhythms before a more delicate, chamber-like section, and a bass drum signals the abrupt ending.

Développement de l'amour (Development of love)

It's strange that Messiaen uses the word "development" in this movement's title. Development – the technique of varying, changing and expanding musical material – is one of the cornerstones of traditional symphonic writing, but it's one that Messiaen almost entirely ignores in favour of repetition and bald contrasts. Nevertheless, he pushes the soaring "love" theme to ever greater heights of ecstasy here, building to an overpoweringly loud climax that gradually dies away to calmness.

Turungalila III

A dark, ritualistic melody for clarinet is answered by the ondes, and after a percussion passage, it's taken up again by the piano. The movement ends with the opening melody combined against itself in all kinds of strange, unexpected ways, creating a nightmarish atmosphere of relentless doom.

Final (Finale)

The final movement's joyful, dancing theme is first announced by the brass, and contrasted with a racing, breathless expression of happiness based around the "love" theme. After a final, slow statement of the "love" theme, the symphony hurtles to its ecstatic conclusion in a blaze of ondes, brass, thudding drums and roaring tam-tam.

© David Kettle

Forthcoming Concerts

rsno.org.uk/whatson

RECOMMENDED BY
CLASSIC fm

PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION

Saariaho Circle Map (UK PREMIERE)
Prokofiev Violin Concerto No1
Mussorgsky/Ravel Pictures at an Exhibition

Susanna Mälkki (CONDUCTOR)
Jack Liebeck (VIOLIN)

EDINBURGH: FRI 21 MAR 2014: 7.30PM
GLASGOW: SAT 22 MAR 2014: 7.30PM

OUNDJIAN CONDUCTS EIN HELDENLEBEN

Rossini Overture to *The Silken Ladder*
Beethoven Piano Concerto No4
R Strauss Ein Heldenleben

Peter Oundjian (CONDUCTOR)
Ingrid Fliter (PIANO)

DUNDEE: THU 27 MAR 2014: 7.30PM
EDINBURGH: FRI 28 MAR 2014: 7.30PM
GLASGOW: SAT 29 MAR 2014: 7.30PM