

philharmonia orchestra

OLIVIER MESSIAEN

(1908 – 1992)

La Transfiguration de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ

Premier septénaire

I. Récit évangélique

II. Configuratum corpori claritatis suae

III. Christus Jesus, splendor Patris

IV. Récit évangélique

V. Quam dilecta tabernacula tua

VI. Candor est lucis aeternae

VII. Choral de la Sainte Montagne

Deuxième septénaire

VIII. Récit évangélique

IX. Perfecte conscius perfectae generationis

X. Adoptionem filiorum perfectam

XI. Récit évangélique

XII. Terribilis est locus iste

XIII. Tota Trinitas apparuit

XIV. Choral de la Lumière de Gloire

For Messiaen, the second half of the 1960s was dominated by a single large-scale work for instrumental soloists, chorus and orchestra: *La Transfiguration de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ*, described by Messiaen in June 1968 as ‘certainly the most substantial work I have composed in terms of duration and performing forces’.

Messiaen was never in the habit of discussing work in progress, even with those closest to him, but the genesis of *La Transfiguration* is unusually well documented thanks to the correspondence between Messiaen and Maria Madalena de Azeredo Perdigão, Director of the Music Department of the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon.

The composer had been thinking of using the subject of Christ’s Transfiguration for about twenty years, inspired by a sermon he had heard at a country church in the Dauphiné on the Feast of the Transfiguration, and at the end of his pocket diary for 1961 he jotted down the idea of ‘a work for chorus and orchestra on the Transfiguration’.

In a letter dated 9 June 1965, Mme Perdigão requested a new work, to be performed at the 1966 festival, in memory of Calouste Gulbenkian:

We are commemorating this year the tenth anniversary of the death of our founder, Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian, and we wish to mark this occasion by commissioning a musical work in his memory, not of a funereal character, but above all celebrating the generosity of Mr Calouste Gulbenkian. We would like a symphonic work, preferably with chorus, which would last either 45 minutes to fill half of a

concert, or one hour and a quarter for an entire concert. ... We would like to give the world première in our next festival, in May–June 1966. ...

This was an extremely tight deadline, with less than a year before the planned first performance, but the project clearly appealed to Messiaen. He replied on 17 June, accepting the commission for a work lasting 45 minutes for choir (singing without text), orchestra, and five instrumental soloists: flute, clarinet, cello, piano and marimba. This is fascinating in view of the work's final form: multiple instrumental soloists, chorus and orchestra were already in place, but the piece was to last just 45 minutes, with a wordless choir. Mme Perdigão's next letter, dated 18 June, contained an important suggestion about the text:

I realise that that biggest problem for you will be to be able to complete the work soon enough for it to be presented at the 1966 Gulbenkian Festival, and it is for that reason that you have decided to suppress the chorus, or to use it solely for vocalises. In connection with this, I wanted to suggest that you might use a poem in Latin which could be sung easily by a Portuguese chorus and would be universally understood. It seems to me that such a solution would greatly simplify matters.

This was an inspired suggestion, though one Messiaen didn't at first take up. On 8 July, he outlined to Mme Perdigão a proposed plan of campaign for composing the new work:

I am away in the mountains for three months so that I can do my work for you in peace and quiet. The research for musical material will take me until 15 August, the date when I will start the music proper. I will therefore not be able to start the orchestration until 1 November. At that time I will be able to sign your contract in a more explicit manner. ... The best thing is that we have mutual confidence in each other until the start of term in October.

Having spent the summer of 1965 working on the piece, Messiaen was able to provide a good deal of information about its overall plan when he wrote to Mme Perdigão on 31 October. Remarkably, Messiaen thought it was almost complete, but in nine movements, rather than the eventual fourteen. For the first time, he also announced the title:

Apart from a fortnight's absence for the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland, I have been able to work every day without interruption, throughout July, August and September, since I was in the mountains, alone with my wife, and in complete peace and quiet. The work comprises nine sections. I first wrote nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7 and 8. Then I wrote the fifth movement which was finished at the start of October. I am in the process of completing the ninth and last movement which should be finished shortly. ... I can promise you that *all the music* will be finished at the end of November and that I can begin the *orchestration* at the start of December. The orchestration will take me until 1 April at the earliest, 15 April at the latest.

We remember the dead by their most saintly qualities, and those who were good people on earth will become one day the 'glorious body' in heaven. There is a moment in the life of Christ when this glory was shown to us and promised to us: the Transfiguration. So I have written a work on the Transfiguration: *La Transfiguration*. My chorus sing without words, but they also chant with words, to *Latin texts* drawn from the Gospel of St Matthew, from the Psalms, from St Paul, from the Book of Wisdom, from St Thomas Aquinas, and from the Office for the Feast of the Transfiguration. You can announce the title and the subtitles as follows:

La TRANSFIGURATION by OLIVIER MESSIAEN
Nine meditations on the Transfiguration of Christ, for five instrumental soloists, mixed chorus and large orchestra.

Early in 1966, some fundamental questions about the structure of *La Transfiguration* were starting to trouble Messiaen, though he did not at first confide these to Mme Perdigão. On 7 February, Mme Perdigão wrote to confirm that *La Transfiguration* would be played at the 1966 Festival and that he could now finish the work in a more tranquil frame of mind: 'Don't worry any more. Everything will now go smoothly.'

This was unduly optimistic. Mme Perdigão spoke to Messiaen on the phone on 14 March and learned that he would not now have the work finished in time. She sent a robust letter to the composer by express post the next day. Messiaen responded on 19 March, grumbling about the tight deadline he had been given (and accepted), and the many subsequent changes in arrangements. It was, he said, force of circumstances which obliged him to put off the first performance of *La Transfiguration*. He also revealed that he had found structural weaknesses in the work as it stood. A rather despairing Messiaen wrote:

The decision is not mine to make as we are faced with a situation which distresses me still more than it does you: I have fallen ill and aged ten years: The deadline was too short for such a monumental commission, and everything has conspired to prevent me finishing. And the fact of the matter is that I have not finished. ... It would have been a tour de force to have completed even half the work under these circumstances. I should explain to you that I have made a first sketch, with music and Latin words, which in many places consists of just the melodic line alone. ... Moreover, in the course of my work I have discovered a formal imbalance: the piece lacks a development at the centre and a true finale. There are two pieces to add for which I have written no music at all yet. ...

By December 1966 the work had grown to its final number of fourteen movements, divided into two seven-movement sections ('septenaries'), and now requiring six soloists instead of the five previously envisaged. On 18 December, Messiaen wrote to Mme Perdigão with a more realistic timescale for completion, aiming to have the orchestration completed by January 1968. In fact, he continued to work on *La Transfiguration* throughout 1967 and well into 1968 – a year which saw the traumatic events on the streets of Paris. However, on 29 June 1968, eighteen months after his previous letter, Messiaen was able to give an encouraging progress report: 'My work is now very advanced and I have no more than three large sections to orchestrate out of fourteen, which is about six months of orchestration.'

On 30 September, Messiaen wrote that only two movements remained to be orchestrated, and that everything else was finished, despite the disruption in his teaching arrangements as a result of the widespread protests during the Summer of 1968.

I have worked a lot on my *Transfiguration* and I am continuing to do so despite numerous distractions. Of the 14 pieces, all are finished and orchestrated save two: the 12th and the 13th on which I am working at the moment. The copyist has already done half of his work, and my wife is helping us with the corrections to the orchestral parts, and those for soloist and chorus. All will be finished for January.

Messiaen was confident that the work would be completed early in 1969, and on 23 February he wrote 'to announce some great news: my work is completely finished. To be exact, it was finished on 21 February, the day before yesterday.'

The score is a dazzling mixture of Messiaen's favourite techniques: a brilliant birdsong style for the solo piano and tuned percussion, a sort of neo-plainchant in the *Récits évangéliques*, and ravishingly coloured harmonies, especially in the *Chorals* which close each of the two halves, and at climactic moments elsewhere, especially the vast climax at the end of *Tota Trinitas apparuit*.

The text of *La Transfiguration* is in Latin, and was drawn by Messiaen from a variety of religious texts: the Bible, the Office for the Feast of the Transfiguration, the Roman Missal and the *Summa Theologica*

by St Thomas Aquinas. The first Septenary is, according to Messiaen himself, 'devoted to the idea of light, because Christ transfigured became radiant', while the second Septenary is based on the idea of the filiation of Christ: 'a voice emerges from the cloud saying "This is my Son, whom I love." There are two kinds of filiation: eternal filiation of the Word-become-Man in Jesus Christ, and the adoptive filiation of all the poor human beings that we are.'

During the spring, Messiaen managed a trip to Rome, and on 10 March he was at the Trinité to play for a special Mass in memory of Berlioz (who had died almost exactly a hundred years before, on 8 March 1869); Messiaen's diary recorded what must have been a memorable occasion: 'I play an introit and sortie *fortissimo*, and improvise on themes by Berlioz. Sermon by Père Carré and three unaccompanied motets by Berlioz.'

The first performance of *La Transfiguration* was drawing closer, and on several occasions Messiaen lugged suitcases to his copyist or photocopying firm in order to collect material for the conductor Serge Baudo, for the orchestra, or for the choir in Lisbon. He also needed to write a detailed commentary for the programme, which he finished on 25 March. The Messiaens spent Easter at Jarnac, between Cognac and Angoulême, visiting the woods at Gardépée to listen to birdsong. On 9 April they were back in Paris.

The world première of *La Transfiguration* was at the Coliseu in Lisbon, on 7 June 1969. There was alarm backstage that evening when Rostropovich failed to appear. Mme Perdigão phoned his hotel room and was told there was no reply. Not one to give up easily, she went to the hotel and made her way to the great cellist's room only to find him in bed with a fever, the result of food-poisoning. After five years of patient negotiations, arrangements and numerous rearrangements, Mme Perdigão was sympathetic but firm: Rostropovich must get up at once; she would take his cello and music in her car, and he should follow in a taxi as soon as possible. Knowing nothing of all this, the vast audience was becoming restless at the delayed start, but eventually an ailing and feverish Rostropovich arrived, and the performance was able to begin. Despite Rostropovich's fragile state of health, the work was a triumph. Nine thousand people applauded for half an hour at the end, and Messiaen's reaction was even more enthusiastic than usual – noting in his diary a 'succès absolument formidable!!!!'

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