

# philharmonia orchestra

## **Olivier Messiaen**

### ***Turangalîla-Symphonie***

I. *Introduction*

II. *Chant d'amour 1*

III. *Turangalîla 1*

IV. *Chant d'amour 2*

V. *Joie du sang des étoiles*

VI. *Jardin du sommeil d'amour*

VII. *Turangalîla 2*

VIII. *Développement de l'amour*

IX. *Turangalîla 3*

X. *Final*

### **'The whole work is a song of love.'**

The *Turangalîla-Symphonie* was Messiaen's first major international commission. In October 1945, he started planning a large-scale symphonic work which had been requested by Serge Koussevitzky for the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Messiaen made good progress during the following year, and by early 1947 orchestral parts for three movements had been copied out: the composer felt it was important to hear how his spectacular but very unusual orchestration was going to sound in the concert hall before finishing such an ambitious project. Meanwhile, he continued to plan the structure of the larger work. At the end of 1947 he still had to settle on its final form, but already he was contemplating a work on a vast scale, in nine or ten movements. On 14 and 15 February 1948, André Cluytens conducted the Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, with Yvonne Loriod and Ginette Martenot as the piano and ondes martenot soloists, in the three pieces which had been copied out in 1947, calling them *Trois Tâla*. The programme note made no mention of the fact that these were part of a larger work (they became movements III, IV and V); moreover, that larger work was not yet finished: Messiaen completed the *Turangalîla-Symphonie* nine months later, on 28 November 1948.

1949 was an exceptionally difficult year in Messiaen's private life, and an extraordinarily busy one as a composer. His first wife, Claire Delbos ('Mi') had been in a fragile state of mental health for several years, and in January 1949 she went into hospital for a routine operation. The medical procedures went wrong and Claire was left with amnesia (she never recovered her memory, and died in a nursing home in 1959). Messiaen visited his wife daily, then had to arrange for her convalescence with friends and relatives as he embarked – with a heavy heart – on a crowded year of concerts and teaching commitments, many of them abroad.

Messiaen's first visit to America was that summer. During July 1949 he taught a composition course at Tanglewood, but he also had the opportunity to play through his new symphony to Koussevitzky and Leonard Bernstein, who was to conduct it (Messiaen also found the time to compose the brilliant piano piece, *Cantéodjayâ*). After two months away from home, Messiaen returned to France at the end of August and set off for a few precious days in the countryside with Claire and their son Pascal. In November he crossed the Atlantic again, arriving in New York on 16 November, just in time to hear Stokowski conduct the *Trois Petites Liturgies de la Présence Divine* at Carnegie Hall. The last ten days of November were spent in Boston, with intensive rehearsals for the forthcoming performances of *Turangalîla*. During the rehearsal period, Yvonne Loriod wrote to Felix Aprahamian in London: 'We haven't written to each other for ages! I have an excuse: I am in the U.S.A. for a long tour. We are putting on [...] the first performance of *Turangalîla* by Olivier Messiaen, for piano and large orchestra, with Ondes. A sublime, powerful work, lasting one and a half hours!'

Messiaen declared that 'the whole work is a song of love'. It is one of a trilogy of compositions written in 1945–9 based on the theme of the legend of Tristan and Yseult (the others are the song-cycle *Harawi* and the *Cinq Rechants*). The programme notes written by Messiaen himself for the première may be deceptively dry, but they give simple descriptions of the ten movements, and the use of recurring themes:

I. *Introduction*: Here are heard the first two cyclic themes – the first, in heavy thirds on the trombones; the second, in tender arabesques, on the clarinets.

II. *Chant d'amour 1*: This movement is a refrain, evoking two violently contrasted aspects of love: passionately carnal love, and tender and idealistic love.

III. *Turangalila 1*: A nostalgic theme on the ondes martenot; a weightier theme on the trombones; slow song-like melody for the oboe. Rhythmic play on three planes for the maracas, wood-block and bass drum.

IV. *Chant d'amour 2*: A scherzo with two trios. In the restatement, the scherzo and two trios appear simultaneously, making a musical scaffolding in three tiers.

V. *Joie du sang des étoiles*: This is the climax of sensual passion expressed in a long and frenzied dance of joy. The development contains a reversible rhythmic canon between trumpets and trombones, while the piano adds its vehement brilliance to the movement's wild clamour.

VI. *Jardin du sommeil d'amour*: Here appears the third cyclic theme: that of love. It is a long slow melody for ondes martenot and the strings, decorated by the vibraphone, the glockenspiel and the bird-song of the piano. Tender, idealistic and ethereal love.

VII. *Turangalila 2*: Rhythmic pattern for the percussion, together with 'rhythmic chromaticism' of the time-values.

VIII. *Développement de l'amour*: This movement develops the three cyclic themes.

IX. *Turangalila 3*: A rhythmic mode, using a 'rhythmic chromaticism' of 17 note-values: it uses five percussion instruments, wood-block, cymbal, maracas, tambourin provençal and tam-tam. Each percussive sound is reinforced by a string chord which is a realisation of its particular resonance, thus uniting the quantitative and phonetic lines.

X. *Final*: Here are two themes: (1) a joyful fanfare of trumpets and horns; (2) the 'love' theme. The coda is based on the love-theme.

The première of the *Turangalila-Symphonie* took place in Symphony Hall, Boston, on Friday 2 December 1949, with Yvonne Loriod as the piano soloist, Ginette Martenot as the ondes martenot soloist (Maurice Martenot, the instrument's inventor, also came on the trip) and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, conducted by the thirty-one year-old Leonard Bernstein. The concert was repeated the following evening. The reaction of critics at the work's first performances was a mixture of bafflement, hostility and, just occasionally, admiration. In the *Boston Globe*, Cyrus Durgin described it as 'the longest and most futile music within memory',

while Warren Story Smith in the *Boston Post* deserves some sort of notoriety for the prediction which ended his review: 'Will we hear all this again, save for this evening's performance? I doubt it.' Rudolph Elie, writing for the *Boston Herald*, found some things to admire, but was troubled by Messiaen's melodies: 'The clue to the possible fundamental emptiness of this work, is the appalling melodic tawdriness of the three big cyclical themes heard throughout. [...] The first is a motto of six notes Gershwin would have thought better of; the second might make the grade as a tune for Dorothy Lamour in a sarong, and the third, a dance of joy, might be ascribed to Hindu Hillbillies, if there be such.'

After critical assaults like these, it is refreshing to read what the man who had commissioned *Turangalila* made of it. In the *Christian Science Monitor*, Harold Rogers quoted Koussevitzky himself: "Today will be a big day in music," Serge Koussevitzky said while preparing to attend the concert in Symphony Hall yesterday afternoon. [...] And Dr. Koussevitzky was right. It was a red-letter day, a new page in the history of modern music. But whether future musicologists will refer to *Turangalila* as the dividing line of our century remains to be seen. Koussevitzky, however, is convinced that *Turangalila* is the first milestone to appear on the musical horizon since Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps*. Time may confirm what he perceives.

Following the two Boston performances, the same musicians gave the symphony's New York première in Carnegie Hall on 10 December. One New York review was a widely-syndicated article by W.G. Rogers, an Arts correspondent for Associated Press who began by quoting some audience reactions and went on to a much more positive verdict on the work, and its lasting importance:

"I wouldn't give a nickel for the whole blamed thing," said an angry Carnegie Hall employee who had to stay through it. "If only it was bad enough to start a riot," a member of the audience complained. Most of the audience, however, clearly found it good enough for generous applause. [...] To this listener, the symphony seemed like one of the most radical extensions of orchestral range, color and expressivity contrived by any modern composer.

The work's first European performance took place at the Aix-en-Provence Festival, in the Théâtre de la Cour de Archevêché, on Tuesday 25 July 1950, with Loriod, Martenot and the Orchestre National de la Radiodiffusion Française, conducted by Roger Désormière. The score was published in 1953 and *Turangalila* went on to receive many hundreds of concert performances – one of the first of these was at the Royal Festival Hall on 12 April 1954,

conducted by Walter Goehr – and numerous recordings. Six decades on, it remains one of the most astonishing and emotionally-charged classics of the twentieth century.

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