

philharmonia orchestra

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My parents listened to a lot of classical music – things like Rossini, Beethoven, Bruckner – so I kind of grew up understanding that classical music sounded like this. At the very moment that I heard *Turangalila*, it was an amazing shock. It was one of those moments when a completely new landscape opens up in front of you, because nothing was like it should have been. First of all the sound, which is so different from any other kind of music; but also the way the music behaves, the way the phrases go together, the way he builds his forms which is so different from the kind of German principles we know. It's completely alien to the sort of German, central-European idea of symphonic development and the dialectic form such as in Beethoven or Brahms. So it's so unique. I'll never forget the day or the moment when I heard this for the first time.

It really is a very extraordinary mix of all kinds of things, because one hand there is the love music element and the kind of post-*Tristan and Isolde* kind of feel almost, and he writes the sweetest most tender love music, but then also there is a fair amount of violence in this music. Also there are parts of it, more specifically the *Turangalilas* (there are three *Turangalilas*): they are based on very precise rhythmic patterns that come from Indian music theory, and these Indian rhythmic patterns actually became very important in Messiaen's work, but the three *Turangalilas* are austere, ritualistic, almost cold in expression, and very fascinating because they are not obvious in a way.

There is the love music, and then there is this austere music, and then there is the third category, the third character in this piece, which is the dance, most pronounced in the fifth movement and also in the last movement.

And then there is a fourth character which is always present in Messiaen, and that is the zen-like existence. Time stops, the harmony moves very slowly, and on top of some kind of a cloud or cushion of harmony little stylised birds move around. In *Turangalila* the birds are played by the piano and some woodwind instruments – the flute, the clarinet, and the oboe – and this is completely unique in Western classical music, this kind of expression, because it doesn't go anywhere. We are so conditioned to have the starting point and then the end point and there is this kind of progression from point A to point B, and the material keeps changing and it develops, and there is this kind of whole mass of things that happens to the material. But in Messiaen's case it just is, it exists, and this is so very alien to us. This music has such an amazingly strong identity: you hear one note and you know it's Messiaen. It's almost like Berlioz – he has got the same kind of absolute identity, in his madness and his sort of 'tunnel vision' and his idiosyncrasies; you always know it's him, and this is of course a sign of a master.