

philharmonia orchestra

MESSIAEN AND THE ORGAN

Olivier Glandaz, Organ Curator, Church of La Trinité, Paris: *(in French)*

La Trinité was started in 1854 or 1855. An advisory panel for the building made an appeal for the installation of an organ – for a large instrument. The original plan was to have 36 stops – a modest size – and Cavaillé-Coll, after some reflection, pushed the instrument up to 46 stops, and Messiaen was appointed here when he was 22 years old. It was Widor – Charles-Marie Widor – who said to the Curé, ‘You know... young Messiaen: I think he’s very good. You should take him.’ And the Curé said, ‘Good. I agree.’ In the archives you can see that the Curé said ‘We have a young organist, full of promise.’

Peter Hill, Messiaen biographer:

We are in the organ loft at the church of La Trinité in central Paris, where Messiaen was organist from 1931 until his death in 1992, so for over 60 years he was the organist here. It’s an enormous church, not only a central Parisian church but possibly the most central church in Paris.

Nigel Simeone, Messiaen biographer:

I’m sure that it wasn’t necessarily the most glamorous of Parisian churches, it’s not Notre-Dame, it’s not Saint-Sulpice. So I think there was a very lovely devotion to this place that has nothing to do with glass or architecture: it’s a much deeper thing, it was his Parish Church.

Peter Hill:

The irony in a way is that Messiaen used this great romantic organ for his most modern experiments. For Messiaen this was a great sonic paint box if you like, and he would come here and experiment with the extraordinary sounds that he could conjure out of this amazing instrument.

Olivier Glandaz:

So, it was at this midday Mass that Messiaen improvised and played the pieces that he had composed. This was the Mass where he could go crazy – the midday Mass.

Nigel Simeone:

Here, more than anywhere, more even than I think sitting in private at the piano at home, he would try out the boldest things.

Peter Hill:

And we know that when he wrote works for organ he would write the composition, he would write the notes as it were, and then he would come and experiment for hours, often weeks on end. It was a fantastic resource for him and I’m sure enormously influenced the colours that he put not only into his organ music but also into his orchestral works as well.

Olivier Glandaz:

The first time I met Messiaen was in 1977, and I was with my teacher, Jacques Picaud, at the firm Becheut-Debierre, which was the great French organ builder at the time. I started with Picaud, but sadly he died in 1981. At the end of Jacques Picaud's funeral, Grunenwald and Messiaen were there, and I was very upset. And Messiaen said to me: learn, make progress, work very hard! And I'll help you. Messiaen said: I'll give you my organ to look after – I'll put it in your hands – but work, work hard! That's how it started. That was the beginning of things here.

Nigel Simeone:

This is all part of Messiaen's rather joyous approach to religion. It was never miserable. He hated talking about suffering. He couldn't bear to write music that was about suffering. He wanted to talk about joy, he wanted to talk about the almost ecstatic aspects of religion, and I think you find that coming through very clearly, not just in his organ music but also in much else. But it was here in this very place where a lot of those experiments were first tried out.

Peter Hill:

There are extraordinary tapes of Messiaen improvising, and sometimes he really let himself go on this huge instrument: I mean all its power was brought into play, and at the end you can hear the congregation rising to its feet and bursting into applause – that doesn't happen very often at the end of church services.