



Western  
Music

Don Wright Faculty of Music

## VISIONS DE L'AMEN

Monday, February 24, 2020

12:30 p.m., von Kuster Hall

Tina Yanchus and James Hibbard, *pianos*

### Visions de L'Amen (1943, Paris)

*Pour deux Pianos*

Olivier Messiaen

(1908-1992)

Notes on 'Visions de L'Amen' by the composer:

Here, bringing to life the creatures who say Amen by the fact alone that they exist, I have tried to express the varied richness of Amen in 7 musical visions.

"Amen" assumes four different meanings:

- Amen, let it be! the act of creation
- Amen, I submit, I accept. Thy will be done!
- Amen, the wish, the desire, let it be, that you give yourself to me and I to you
- Amen, *it is*, all is fixed forever, consummated in Paradise

#### I Amen of the Creation

Amen, let it be! "God says: 'Let there be light', and there was light" (Genesis). The 1<sup>st</sup> piano plays a double-rhythm in imitation of a carillon, on non-retrogradable rhythms, augmented or diminished with each repetition. The 2<sup>nd</sup> piano states the 'Creation theme', which is the principal theme of the whole work: broad and solemn chords. The whole piece is a crescendo. It begins with an absolute pianissimo, in the mystery of that primeval nebula which already contains the light, all the bells that shimmer in this light - light and therefore life.

#### II Amen of the stars, of the ringed planet

Brutal and savage dance. The stars, the suns, and Saturn, the planet of multi-coloured rings spiral violently. "God calls them and they say: 'Amen, we are here'" (Book of Baruch). – The 2<sup>nd</sup> piano states the theme of the dance of the planets. First development: under a polymodal spiraling by the 1<sup>st</sup> piano, the 2<sup>nd</sup> piano varies the rhythm and changes the register by sudden leaps of the first 5 notes of the theme. Second development: the beginning of the theme, by elimination, contrary and similar motion. The third development layers together: in the 1<sup>st</sup> piano: the beginning of the theme in rhythmic pedal; in the 2<sup>nd</sup> piano: the beginning of the theme with register changes. Then a varied repetition of the dance of the planets. All these blended movements evoke the life of the planets and the astonishing rainbow which colours the spinning rings of Saturn.

### III Amen of the agony of Jesus

Jesus suffers and cries: "Father, if this cup may not pass unless I drink of it, then Thy will be done, and not Mine" (Gospel according to Saint Matthew). He accepts, that Thy will be done, Amen. – Jesus is alone in the Garden of Olives, face to face with his agony. Three musical motifs: 1) the Father's curse on the sin of the world which Jesus symbolizes at this moment; 2) a cry, a group of notes both rhythmic and expressive: "anacrusis-emphasis-resolution"; 3) an agonizing lamentation on 4 notes, in contrasted rhythms. – Then, an evocation of the theme of the Creation. A long silence, interrupted by some pulsations evokes the suffering of the hour; unspeakable suffering, which expresses somewhat the perspiration of blood.

### IV Amen of Desire

Two themes of desire. The first, slow, ecstatic, yearning for a profound tenderness: already the calm fragrance of Paradise. The second, extremely passionate; the soul here is drawn in by a terrible love that expresses itself in a carnal fashion (see the "Song of Songs"); but there is nothing carnal here, only an outburst of the thirst for Love. – A great calming of the 1<sup>st</sup> theme to end. The two principal voices seem to merge one into the other, and there is nothing left but the harmonious silence of Heaven.

### V Amen of the Angels, the Saints, the song of the birds

Song of the purity of the Saints: Amen. Ardent vocalization of the birds: Amen. "Angels prostrate themselves before the Throne: Amen". (Apocalypse of Saint John).

First the song of the angels and the saints, plain, and pure. Then "center" on the song of birds, giving rise to a more brilliant piano writing. These are the actual songs of nightingales, blackbirds, finches, warblers, and their wild and happy mixture. Repetition of the song of the Saints, with a canon in non-retrogradable rhythms, in three tiers. Brief coda on the birds.

### VI Amen of the Judgement

Three icy notes like a summoning to judgement. In truth, I say to you, Amen. "Get thee behind me, Satan!" (Gospel according to Saint Matthew). The damned are fixed in their state. The piece is intentionally harsh and brief.

### VII Amen of the Consummation

Consummation, Paradise. Life of the glorious bodies in carillons of light. "From light to light", (Book of Proverbs). Amen – The 2<sup>nd</sup> piano restates in chords the Creation theme and expands it into a long hymn of glory. The 1<sup>st</sup> piano surrounds the 2<sup>nd</sup> (in extremely weighty and extremely shrill registers together) with a constant carillon of chords and brilliant rhythms, sparkling, in rhythmic canons more and more compact: precious stones of the Apocalypse that ring, shock, dance, colour and perfume the light of Life.

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