

Messiaen Vingt Regards

Comparative Survey: October 2013

(25 complete versions compared, plus individual selections)



Most readers of these surveys will already know that Messiaen's *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* (Twenty Contemplations on the Christ Child) is considered one of the great contributions to the piano repertoire of the Twentieth Century. Admittedly, one must have a certain inclination towards, or tolerance for, philosophical and ontological mysticism to really embrace Messiaen. This mysticism may take the form of Messiaen's devout Catholic mysticism, or it may be esoteric Jewish Kabbalah mysticism, or it may be something along the lines of the many New Age schools of thought, or even the ancient Hindi beliefs regarding the cyclical nature of the Universe. But steadfast stoics and literal-minded folks are easily put off by just the titles of Messiaen's works.

Personally, I can't really put myself in the shoes of somebody who might not know of the music's motivating inspiration, because that is not how I discovered the music. Without the guiding syntactic structures of traditional compositional forms Messiaen's music must seem like a series of inexplicable and jarring juxtapositions of mood and texture. Once the motivation is understood, irrespective of one's own theological disposition, the music has a communicative power unlike any other. Some of this is easily enough intuited, some of it may be more problematic. Certainly, the later quasi-religious composers, such as Taverner, looked to simplify and ritualize religious experience, and have downplayed the ecstatic transcendence that is the hallmark of Messiaen.

It is for this somewhat apologist exposition that I wouldn't consider anything of Messiaen's as a candidate for art that represents the Zeitgeist of the Twentieth Century. For that I'd probably look at Copland's Piano Variations as representing the almost existentialistic take on the isolated and dehumanizing lost-in-the-concrete-jungle aspect of the modern world, or of the terror, suffering, and tender flower of hope of Prokofiev's Wartime Sonatas, or more recently, the

kaleidoscopic and trans-cultural impressions of Ligeti's Etudes. But Messiaen lived in a world of his own creation, and that unique perspective has only been dimly mirrored or echoed by any other creative forces (Andre Jolivet and Lionel Rogg come to mind). Although their music is very different, Messiaen and Scriabin, are both alike in that their creative worlds are so totally unique and almost isolated in their aesthetic aim. But there is also an underlying connection between these two composers, who both sought with great passion and creative drive the need to tap into the transcendent experience. Some listeners simply are not comfortable in letting loose their moorings to the real world; consequently, I've found that listeners who don't care for the phantasmagorical outpouring of late Scriabin, usually don't care for Messiaen either.

Compositionally, Messiaen's music incorporates several novel techniques, most of which would not be recognized by casual listeners, yet they do play an important function in the listening experience. For example, his manner of transforming thematic material by use of rhythmic diminution, wherein a melodic fragment of say a quarter note, half note and eighth note might be changed to an eighth note, quarter note and sixteenth, thus keeping the same relative ratios but now at a quicker rate of passing. The listener will recognize that it is the same melody, but now it has been transformed to speak faster. Another unique technique concerns his use of palindromic rhythms which are the same whether you read from left to right or right to left. These may be very complex non-retrograde structures which make it difficult for the listener to anticipate any rhythmic regularity. And that's the point; this is not toe-tapping music, and rarely is there ever any forwardly-propelled impetus derived from metric pulse. One final example of his unique technique would be his use of asymmetrical augmentation, where a group of three or more notes is expanded outwardly from the core, but where the upper interval and downward interval move away at different rates. This is what keeps the great sequential 'intensity builders' of *Par Lui tout a été fait* from being merely rote transpositions that the listener can easily anticipate (and quickly tire of). The listener recognizes the continuity of the thematic idea but unlike chromatic or diatonic transpositional sequence, the increased disparity of voices conveys increased tension. Conversely, this technique may be used in reverse for the opposite effect. I haven't really seen this technique used so effectively by any other composer.

Now, to play Devil's Advocate, I'll say that Messiaen's 2½ hour orgy of phantasmagoric theology and chattering birdcall is a bit of an indulgence. The same sense of over-indulgent immoderation afflicted the esoteric and transcendental outpourings of Sorabji; his *Opus Clavicembalisticum* is full of fascinating ideas, but it too could have benefitted from some degree of creative discipline, its density and sprawling effulgence (requiring a full four CDs to accommodate!) is just too much for either pianist or listener. I believe Messiaen could have easily tightened up the work, using all the best ideas and condensing the cycle down to 10 or 12 works. There is some duplication of ideas here, not to mention some, such as *Regard du temps* (No. 9), which are derivative of earlier works (in this case the opening movement of *Visions de l'Amen*).

Messiaen intended the work to be played as a complete cycle but there is not really an overarching 'story' that would demand that this be an essential requirement. Picking and choosing from among the twenty is not like taking bleeding chunks of music out of a long but continuously evolving work such as an opera by Wagner. Each of the twenty *Regards* can stand well enough alone. I believe a grouping of three or four, maybe even a half dozen is more effective in a concert setting so that something else with different moods and colors can be put on the program. It is for this same reason that I thoroughly enjoy the CDs I have by Hirsch, Hewitt, Banfield, Crossley and Feltsman, which give us a good contrasting selection of works from the cycle. The advantage here is that the pianist can pick and choose the numbers for which they have a special affinity,

and they can concentrate their interpretive and technical refinements to really perfecting those pieces. In addition to complete sets, I've also recommended some of these compilation discs in the Recommended Recordings section.

One positive aspect of the internet (especially YouTube) is that now more piano students and music lovers are familiar with this seminal work. More than ever students and concert artists are programming more Messiaen. There was a time (especially outside his native France) when this was not the case. Back in the Seventies, at least at the two music schools I attended, I was pretty much the only student who had even heard of Messiaen. I discovered his music because I took a year to study organ and the organ professor introduced me to this composer. I learned to play a couple of the easier works, *Le banquet céleste* and *Apparition de l'Eglise éternelle*. After that year, I then learned some of the non-virtuosic numbers from *Vingt Regards*, Nos. 3, 7, 11, 13, and 14, and the *Etudes Iles de feu*, and this music was considered ultra-exotic by fellow students.

What surprised me even more was that in 80's and 90's I developed a friendship with two composers, one of whom had received his degree in composition in the 60's from Berkeley, and the other his degree in composition in the early 80's from the Mannes School in New York, and neither had any knowledge of Messiaen or any of his music. In both cases I lent them my scores, piano music, organ music, chamber music, and some recordings and they spent several months immersing themselves into the sound world of this unique composer.

I could understand pianists not being familiar with Messiaen, because most spend their time on 'bread and butter' repertoire such as Beethoven, Chopin and Liszt. But I was really puzzled that somebody who received a degree in composition would have been totally oblivious to Messiaen. I know for a fact at the two music schools I attended that faculty and student recitals centered around the efforts of the school theory and composition teachers and the local composer-in-residence, and the only "outside" contemporary music we heard was at Symphony Hall. So I enquired about my friend's experiences in school. In each case, the type of music they studied and were exposed to centered around the methodology of the composition teachers and advisors. For my friend who studied on the West Coast, the teacher had a strong interest in the Russian school, Prokofiev and Shostakovich, and the well-known American composers were taught as a matter of school curriculum. My friend who studied in New York was exposed to the East Coast-based composers such as Barber, Crumb, Rorem, Menin, Muczynski, and Rzewski, and later, on his own developed an interest in the pastoral-lyrical British composers such as Britten, Alywn and Maxwell-Davies. I was surprised at this very narrow areas of focus, which seemed to disregard major developments in the international music world. I mean, if I were taking a degree in literature I'd of course apply special attention to the area of my specialized major (English, French, German literature, etc.), but I'd certainly have a comprehensive first-hand knowledge of all the great writers. As I said, nowadays, such limited focus would be unheard of, because information is so much more readily available.

This brings me to a not insignificant consideration, and doubtless many of you readers have experienced the same thing: the distinction between music lover and music player. Ideally, one would expect that a music player would also be a music lover, but this is not always the case. In the mid-nineties I was invited to be a judge at a regional piano competition for students. I remember talking to some of the fellow jurors who had Masters and Doctorate degrees in music pedagogy or piano performance, and being, well, literally dumbfounded by the level of ignorance I encountered. I remember a brief four-minute conversation with one recent doctoral graduate from Peabody who had no idea what I meant when I talked of the interpretive musical schism

created in this country between Furtwängler and Toscanini. I mean, that was the dividing line of musical conception for several decades, and performing artists, conductors and record collectors still talk about it. My point is that there is a huge gulf of practical knowledge between music lovers who have the curiosity to listen to recordings, read books and magazines about music, and those pianists who are only concerned with what they are playing, or how well their students 'show' at competitions.

I know piano professors who only own but a few recordings, and actually feel they are wasting time listening to somebody else play instead of fine-honing their fifth-finger technique to play *Feux-follets*. In all my time in music school, I only encountered one other student who collected records and had the curiosity to go to the school library and spend afternoons discovering something new. I still stay in contact with him (he's now head of a music department at a University). But, really, that's a sad statistical reality. The difference between then and now is that now so much is available for free, so it is easy to indulge idle curiosity, and sometimes something will stick. Back then, aside from the library, one had to make a conscious effort to seek out knowledge by spending money to buy books, scores, records and of course some sort of decent playback equipment. Music was so important to me that I chose to drive a beat-up car so that I could spend all my money on scores and records. I never understood how my fellow piano students could content themselves with whatever few pieces of music they were assigned and have no further curiosity. I had read the complete volumes of Tovey as a junior in high school, and spent my senior year in high school working on Schenkerian methodology. Nobody said I had to, but there was a driving urgency to explore and understand. This is why I feel comfortable talking with record collectors; for many, as with me, music is a religion.

Well, it's time to roll up our sleeves and dig into the riches contained within the 177 pages of *Vingt Regards*. Herewith is my brief commentary on each of the Twenty Contemplations (in each case I've used the most idiomatic translation of *Regard*, which, depending on context, can mean regard, contemplation, consideration, gaze, aspect, or perspective):

1. ***Regard du Père*** (Contemplation of the God Father)

Slow moving chords "extremely slow and mysterious" ascend upward from the deepest register to the luminous repeated octaves. The first requirement here is a piano with tremendous sustain. Second, the three layers should be differentiated, the deep, murky bass tones providing the unknowable measure of time, the middle chords representing the outreach of the God creator, and the repeated octaves, softer, a lingering halo of the immutable energy. Austbo fails to differentiate and plays all three layers at the same dynamic level. Batagov is best in terms of sustain, truly slow tempo, and differentiation of texture. Despite the dry studio acoustic, Serkin works magic by utilizing the exceptional middle register sustain of his New York Steinway, especially evident in the two passages where the left hand chimes a C-sharp octave which sustains against the repeated right hand octaves in the higher register. For me this is a pianistic version of Messiaen's *Apparition de l'Eglise eternelle*, so I'm rather surprised by Loriod's quick timing (Loriod is 4:59 while Batgov is 9:09); other performances endorsed by the composer are much slower than Loriod. If you take Messiaen's metronome markings literally the timing (without any ritard at the end) would clock out at 7:36, by which measure Groslot at 7:45 comes closest.

2. ***Regard de l'Etoile*** (Gaze of the Stars)

A typical problem here is that pianists are too vigorous on the first *forte* figuration, going for that startling effect of sudden loudness after the ethereal evaporation of the first number. But it's only marked *forte*, while the following tri-tone carillons are *fortissimo*, and many pianists get this backwards. Listen to Troup to hear the proper differentiation. The other thing is that the piano must have good sustain on the barren unisons which have the hands playing the same notes but four octaves apart. I

also want to hear orchestral color here and much prefer a Steinway or Bösendorfer over the more register-homogenous Yamaha or Fazioli, but that may be a matter of subjective taste. What I find most objectionable are pianists who employ a forward-lurching rubato on the grace notes (Ogdon, Karkkainen, Loriod). That kind of inflection doesn't make sense given the *lento* tempo and the symbolism of Christ carrying the burden of the cross. If you imagine Christ staggering and stumbling under the weight of the cross the motion is going to be labored, not some quick Charlie Chaplin move.

3. *L'Echange* (The Exchange)

The first time I heard this number I didn't need to know anything at all about the theological symbolism to enjoy the use of Messiaen's juxtaposition of unchanging patterns, seemingly stalwart and unruffled, against the ever insistent and increasingly vociferous reactions. Boulez cites this as an example of Messiaen's compositional laziness in just throwing together some contrasting ideas to create an artificially contrived tempest in a teapot. But compositionally, I see and hear a lot going on: the descending thirds utilize all the notes of the 12-tone scale, and they remain unchanged throughout the work. The underpinning bass foundation employs what Messiaen called "Asymmetrical Augmentation" so that the gestural patterns remain recognized while they are ever expanding both high and low. The upper treble figurations also retain a basic gestural shape though the actual intervallic relationships change while the concluding thirds continue to rise higher and higher. Understanding Messiaen's theological symbolism simply puts one of many possible interpretations on the table. For the composer the descending thirds represented the unchanging and immutable outreach of God, like Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel with the outstretched hand of God. The gesture contains all the material substance that ever was and will ever be. The changing permutations represent mankind, ever bickering and whining. Pianistically, a common fault is that the descending thirds are not sounding evenly, or in some cases ever-so-slightly broken. When I first learned this piece I discovered that keeping the thirds consistently articulated required a more vertical attack (as opposed to the more intuitive horizontal wrist rotation), and having heard the effect both ways, I'm more sensitive than many listeners to this problem. Even so, it surprises me that any concert pianists attempting to make a commercial recording of these works would have not worked out such a detail. Serkin is very precise and with crystalline clarity. Interpretively, I encountered numerous problems in the survey. Many versions had insufficient differentiation of the layered textures between low bass and the upper reaches of the treble. The repeating triplet chords in the middle register are like a fixed fulcrum point in the work, always the same notes, and always starting softer than the preceding bass octaves but with a slight crescendo towards the end. One pianist ignored the crescendo mark each time, while another accelerated *molto agitato*. These should be rock steady and unwavering in timing. The concluding double octaves *con summo forte* should also be rock steady, but MacGregor rushes ahead with unchecked adrenalin (even so I like her version because it is one of the spookiest I heard; a real head trip). Ogdon was just off the deep end on this one, with clipped phrasing, and manic scrambling. Loriod, in contrast, does nothing wrong, but seems about as engaged as reading a newspaper while walking on a treadmill. In between the manic Ogdon and dispassionate Loriod there were many good versions, the best being those that make my final recommendations, and the MacGregor.

4. *Regard de la Vierge* (Contemplation of the Virgin)

I'll confess that sometimes I'm not always in the mood for the full 2½ hour experience of all twenty selections. Sometimes, after the first three numbers, I'm anxious to get to the 'meat and potatoes' of No. 6 and I skip over Nos. 4 and 5. Now, after the survey, I've had No. 4 stuck in my head for days, and I've cued up that selection several times. Now, maybe this has happened to other music lovers out there, but one particular interpretation made the music come alive for me, and thereafter, I was able to go back and listen to other versions that had been sort of ho-hum before, but where my mind now fills in the particular nuance that captivates me. This is a nuance of degree, obscured in some, more apparent in others, but it took Angela Hewitt's particular inflection for the light to come on. This is yet another potent argument for having multiple versions of every significant masterwork, because sometimes it is a very fine line between passive listening and responding with full engagement. These

nuances are very hard to describe, and given that what I'm talking about here is not related to compositional structure or textural delineation, but are really matters of interpretive inflection, the nuances that click for me may not be the same ones that click for somebody else.

For me, there are two make-or-break issues. The first is for limpidity of tone and suppleness of line. By that I mean a smooth, non-percussive legato tone where the chords are not rendered vertically, but flow horizontally in a very liquid manner. Rigidity, clunkiness, or pedal smear are killers (Aimard). Several pianists try to hide vertical playing by voicing prominently to the top to project a sense of melodic contour. But this doesn't work. The chords themselves must be melodic; it's the degree of flow and connectivity that gives the desired maternal tenderness. Forcing the melodic projection only gives the repeating motif an incessant, needling and whiny quality (Osborne). Any melodic voicing should be reserved for the fourth page where the increased melodic activity is clearly separate from the chords, and indicated as such by the tenuto marks. Other pianists are simply hampered by pianos that are not ideal, either with insufficient sustain (Beroff) or with whining overtones from poorly voiced hammers (Besette). The second issue concerns the degree of tenuto on the sixteenth note before the drop to the resting dotted quarter. This slurred drop would in most cases be treated like a sigh motive, but Messiaen indicates that the resting tone should be less soft than the preceding sixteenth. Hewitt gets it just right so that it finally made sense to me.

5. ***Regard du Fils sur le Fils*** (Contemplation of the Son towards the Son)

Here is a case where close microphones and a dry studio acoustic make it impossible to conjure the proper sense of mystical remoteness. This is why I respond more favorably to Batagov and Troup. Serkin's playing is fine as ever and would probably be most effective in a good concert hall, but RCA's New York studio with microphones up close and personal make it hard for the listener to transport themselves away from hammers and strings. Without getting into esoteric theological interpretation of the Trinity, Messiaen attempts to portray the profound paradox of the divine and human elements of Christ considering each other in the upper two staves while on the third stave, deep in the bass is the immutable theme of God. This is why I use the word 'remote' because there is no active drama here, only contemplation that spans from the unchanging divine source to the dichotomy of existence at multiple levels. One needs to back away from the 'here and present' to even glimpse the vast mystery of existence. Without a theological subtext, listeners will still intuit a sense of mystery and of time standing still, but not if their heads are inside the piano.

6. ***Par Lui tout a été fait*** (By Him everything was made)

The most difficult of the twenty, and one of the most technically challenging works of the Twentieth Century. Most pianists did fairly well simply because they've spent the most time working on this one (I can't say the same for some of the YouTube postings I heard which were terrible). It all boils down to whether all the dramatic flourishes and extreme contrasts sound like some crazed Czerny exercises turned upside down, or if the effects are truly hair-raising as intended. My top pick is Batagov even though coming right out of the starting gate he lags a bit behind the pack in terms of energetic articulation. Others are more vigorous and go for the jugular right away. This is where a closer microphone can actually give a more direct sense of vividness and intensity, and Serkin, Beroff and Zehn all have this advantage. Among these, Beroff and Zehn, while assured and rhythmically vigorous, have lightweight pianos with not much heft, and this lack of bass sonority has them coming up short in the later "Victorious Theme of God." Serkin's New York Steinway is full of color and dynamic punch but the recording balance is skewed toward the treble, where the upper reaches of the treble threaten to break glass at anything even approaching realistic playback levels, while the very lowest octave is somewhat undernourished. How this plays out is that the dramatic treble chords preceding the *Victorieux* are indeed hair-raising, with Serkin giving 100% on these biting dissonant chords, with each more dissonant and more intense dynamic accent piling on goose bumps on top of goose bumps. But then the chordal apotheosis of the Theme of God, and what should be turbulent, rumbling fistfuls of chords in the bass, are less loud, less sonorous, and rather anti-climactic. With Batagov, the rumbling

bass chords seem to shake the firmament and the spine-tingling Victory chords herald the arrival of the Almighty. Rajna and Bellheim also get the balance right. Loriod's earlier recording from 1956 shows that she had the chops needed, but the dated, pre-stereo recording just can't convey the sonority and dynamic range of the best modern recordings. Osborne is too cool and collected to unleash any cosmic fury, while Ogdon is just a surge of untamed adrenalin from start to finish. MacGregor doesn't seem to have the stamina to really take command at the climatic moments. Muraro no doubt has the strength but he has a tendency to dissipate energy by taking too long to anchor points of arrival. This is especially evident in the later version on DVD where one can see how he is always conscious of energy expenditure and adjusting his body weight to a centered Zen-balance. I've seen piano teaching and athletic coaching that subscribes to this body-centered technique, and it works for some kinds of music where you might want to keep adrenalin from distorting the line, but here, there is just no composed way to play these extreme passages and have them register their full impact. With the pianist's strength reserved for the really key moments, so that they can truly throw every fiber of energy at it, the effect can be overwhelming. Without all the theological sub-text I can't imagine what listeners might imagine of these sensory-overwhelming effects, perhaps as an erupting volcano or exploding super-nova!

7. ***Regard de la Croix*** (Gaze of the Cross)

This is one I enjoyed more as a student than I do now (it was the first Messiaen I learned). I still find it effective in the mood that it creates, but I find the greater range of colors and textural variation of other numbers to be more captivating. I suppose the most severe criticism I might impose upon it would be that its structure is a bit simplistic in its hymn-like chords and constant, unvaried rhythm. But, when done right it can still be a valuable and irreplaceable member of the canon of twenty. The problem is that most pianists do not give sufficient differentiation to the slurred chords, which represents Christ staggering under the burden of the cross. Instead they seem to be looking at the over-arching phrase mark and figuring that the entire line must be played *legatissimo*. However, without sufficient emphasis on the slurring, the music is stripped down to that unvaried and simplistic structure that just seems to plod along without interest. The only pianist that really comes close to how I hear it is MacGregor with good slurs, nice balance of chordal voicing, and in the grace notes seven measures before the end, she emphasizes the bottom note which mimics the slurring theme. Serkin doesn't do too bad considering the dry acoustics, and voices the chords nicely, but for me he blows it at the end when he plays the five measures of repeating octave patterns with a dry, detached and un-pedaled touch. Batagov is much better, in part because of the more ambient acoustic, but also because he plays those five measures the right way: a slow crescendo from mysterious *pianissimo* to pulsar-blasting *fortissimo*. But for this one, from start to finish, MacGregor gets top prize.

8. ***Regard des Hauteurs*** (The aspect of the Heavens)

Written almost exclusively in the upper register of the piano to mimic various birdcalls, this can often sound like clattery, chattery nonsense unless it's done right. A common problem is that the counterpoint in the two registers of the treble are insufficiently differentiated. Another is aggressively hard hammers, or ringing duplex harmonics. In other words, the pianist must have sensitive ears and sculpt the line with color and nuance. MacGregor does this best for a really standout performance. Right from the start the evocative *pianissimo* fluttering texture seems to emerge out of nothingness and the first entry of the birdcall is like the first still-sleepy birdcalls of a new dawn. She is crisp and clean but never percussive, and what a great ending! Osborne, Beroff, Loriod and even Serkin (despite the dry acoustics) are also good, though MacGregor shows the full potential of every detail. I hate to say it because I've never seen her play live, but I think she is much more persuasive in the more poetic and delicate numbers requiring sensitivity than in the more overtly virtuosic numbers. I would suggest to her that she program a short set that displays her best skills that makes for the most persuasive presentation of Messiaen's communicative power (see also my comments on her superb No.11 below).

9. ***Regard du Temps*** (The aspect of Time)

I have two textbooks which cite this particular number as a fine example of how Messiaen juxtaposes heart and head (emotion and intellect): the dense and compact chordal figures in the middle of the piano followed by empty and expressionless fifths and tritones spread over three staves (representing the Trinity). I have to admit, this is not one of my favorites, and I have certainly never used it to demonstrate to students what Messiaen is all about. Given that I'm a tough sell on this, and hey, they can't all be our favorites, it takes a really special performance to captivate my attention and make me sink into the mood and psychology of this work. If I had to guess going into the survey which recordings would likely be my favorite here, I probably would have nominated Batagov and Troup, because the same generous level of ambiance that works for the opening number would also seem to work well for this ethereal pianissimo chords at the extreme top and bottom of the keyboard. But alas, Batagov proved to be good but not great, and Troup was too quirky and fidgety with the rhythms. What finally sold it for me was the fine voicing and rhythmic inflection of Rajna and Osborne. Those two were so good I hit the pause button afterward so I could savor the moment.

10. ***Regard de l'esprit de Joie*** (The Expression of the Spirit of Joy)

Well, this was the one my teacher always wanted me to play for a recital but given that my interest in Messiaen was more for the mystical element, I was just never attracted to the barbaric rhythmic character of the opening. It was for that reason that I never played any Bartok. Serkin, in fact, makes the opening pages sound like some long-lost pagan dance of Bartok. Many versions in the survey devolved into sheer manic noise making, others were so disjointed as to sound goofy, others were stiff, stoic and colorless, and some got bogged down by the complex left hand chordal passages. Hewitt and Rajna both warrant high praise by avoiding all the aforementioned pitfalls, but the one version that I found literally stunning was by Crossley. What makes Crossley so amazing is that the jubilant canto is not merely pounded out amongst the complex chords, but it is dynamically contoured, rising in ecstatic release toward the top of the line. It literally soars out of the piano like you could never imagine possible. For me, this was the singular most memorable moment in the survey. I wonder why he has not given us more Messiaen?

11. ***Première communion de la Vierge*** (First communion of the Blessed Virgin)

This is one of my favorites, and one that I would certainly choose to program in between two more vigorous selections for a compelling sampling of Messiaen's expressive range. We all react differently to the intensity of moods and intellectual stimulation of musical discourse, but for me this is an example of perfectly contrasted and complimentary juxtaposition. There is also perfect contrast within each of the separate mood groups. The basic outline is, of course, the intimate and rapt communion of the Virgin Mary (or, for the non-theologians: the quiet awe-struck wonder one has in gazing up into a desert-clear night ablaze with glistening and twinkling diamond-like stars), as contrasted with the ecstatic heart-fluttering excitement of the louder, syncopated chords with their middle-Eastern color. But a closer look reveals many more layers of contrasting colors and expressive nuance within each of these groups. The quiet group is composed of slow moving, pianissimo chords, and not that we need to know, but this represents the quiet, ever-abiding presence of the God-creator (or for the non-theologians: the star-stuff of which we are made, connecting us to the very origin of time and matter, and which also connects us to everything passing through us to the end of time and matter); in between these slow moving chords we have gossamer, barely-there 64th-note ripples in the space-time continuum (or for the theologians: the halo of divinity), and a tender reminiscence of an earlier piece Messiaen wrote about the Nativity. The quicker moving Magnificat section (what Messiaen called a "Canticle of Joy") conveys the Virgin's barely-contained joy and exhalation at the Divinity within, her heartbeat quickened to cascades of long-swirling miasma, and later the muted heartbeats of the child within. I don't know how anyone could play this with a completely sober disposition, for me the unbounded joy produces an almost out-of-body transcendence. Well, to be honest, it's easier to let go to the music when listening than when one is concentrating on hitting all the right notes, but you get the point.

In terms of the survey, very small differences in inflection could have a big impact on the mood created, and the level of communicativeness between pianist and listener. Disconnects were all too common and the result of the most minor nuances imaginable, but at the core is an issue I've written about which I call *Empathetic Connectivity* (see my essay **Listener Psychology: How we Perceive Music**). These are the very subtle connections between phrases which tell us that the ups and downs of intensity in the narrative make sense. Bellheim, for example, sculpts the left-hand chords most beautifully but the shimmering right-hand figurations are too bristly and nervous, when they should be limpid and unfettered by human physiology. In this case, the juxtaposition seems contrived, and at least for this listener, I don't buy into the narrative. Far better is MacGregor who takes the shimmering notes a fraction of a second slower so that they can be played with perfect limpidity of tone. Another typical disconnect occurs in the Magnificat section where pianists too eagerly and aggressively poke at the accents, rushing the cadences where there should instead be a sense of one momentarily unable to draw breath. Another caveat I have is for the cascading flourishes of joyous *miasmata*, some poker-faced pianists play these at the same dynamic level from start to finish when a swirling gesture with arms extended in soaring rapture is what is called for. You really cannot be an emotionless ascetic and play Messiaen. One must also have patience and not merely count long notes, but feel them. Bellheim again creates a disconnect at the very end by playing each of the final measures in strict time, with no tapering of release into the silence; for me, most perfunctory, and not in the spirit of true communion. This matter of patience, of feeling the natural push and pull of the line is where I feel Feltsman excels beyond all others. Although the live recording has a few coughs in the most inopportune times, this is not enough to disrupt the amazing connectivity that Feltsman establishes. Part of the secret is that he often uses a subtle agogic delay between the third beat and the harmonic resolution to the downbeat for a most profound sense of delayed gratification (and hence a subconscious yet compelling sense of inner longing). His miasmatic cascades are also completely organic, hovering at the tops like an object thrown into air, accelerating to the bottom and then back up again, I feel my head sway and my mind riding the roller coaster right along with him. Even Crossley who is also another top contender here, is just not as soaring as Feltsman on those free-falling flourishes of ecstatic release.

Finally, the issue of acoustic character plays a big role in creating just the right Gestalt; not too distant that we lose the rapt intimacy of the communion, but not so close that we hear hammers and strings instead of shimmering halos. For this reason I felt Batagov's distant recording was less than ideal (though the playing was good), and Serkin's was too close and "anatomical." My top picks here: Feltsman, or for those sensitive to audience noise, Crossley and MacGregor. Hirsch, Loriod, Banfield and Muraro were also good; everybody else had some kind of disconnect or problem with the acoustic interface.

12. ***La Parole toute-puissante*** (The all-powerful Word)

I suppose one could think of this as the musical evil twin of No.8 (the Heavens). Whereas No. 8 is all light and transparent, written almost entirely in the upper half of the keyboard where it hovers in the highest two octaves, this one is all heavy and murky and dwells in the depths of the firmament, written almost entirely below middle C and with a strong gravitational pull toward the very lowest bass notes. Musically of kindred spirit to some of Bartok's most savage writing, Messiaen has a very simple monadic idea played entirely *fortissimo* over percussive tone clusters in the extreme bass. The non-retrogradable rhythms are configured in a recurring 3-5-8-5-3 ostinato. To be honest, my response on this one is more about the piano and acoustics than for subtleties of interpretive inflection. I don't know about you, but, so that the music doesn't devolve into a muddy shapeless mess of noise, I want a piano that allows as much differentiation of register as possible, and a pianist who knows how to balance these sonorities to utmost effect. The piano cannot be too clangorous and plangent in harmonic character, nor can it be too woolly and ill-defined, and of course, the heavy accents should sound without distortion. Loriod's later recording on a dull piano sounds like a bunch of angry elephants stomping about. My three favorites all used medium- or lighter-weight pianos so that rhythmic alacrity was not sacrificed: Rajna, Zehn and Beroff.

13. **Nöel** (Christmas Bells)

This piece begins with the joyous clamor of ringing bells in the upper register and gong-like tone clusters at the very bottom of the keyboard. I remember coming home from college on Christmas break and playing this on the home piano. My Dad, who was more used to hearing me play Beethoven and Liszt, came into the music room and asked with an incredulous expression whether our piano was in so bad a need of tuning. I don't know, maybe you had to be there, but I still find that response most humorous. One could easily imagine the opening peeling bells being written in diatonic tonality, but then it wouldn't be Messiaen. As Messiaen has said: "The whole piece demands of the pianist a variety of attacks imitating other instruments: timbres of bells and of tam-tam, xylophone and marimba, clarinets and flutes, and... the rhythm of kettle-drums at the close." But far from being a mere noise maker (as No. 12 often threatens to be) there are many contrasted moods and ideas here, and I find that balance and inflection of rubato make a big difference. Two of my pet peeves, and maybe they won't be everybody's, are grace notes that are rendered slow and made to sound like they are awkward for the pianist to play (when they should slide smoothly and effortlessly into the primary chord), and pianists who accelerate on the repeated xylophone notes (thereby detracting from the emphasis on the growing dynamic level, or emergent 'blossoming forth' of the idea). In terms of the survey, I found some, like Banfield and Serkin who convey a more secular and pianistic conception, while others explore the more mysterious and spiritual levels of the music. However, this pull to the contemplative side can go too far, as with Austbo, who lacks sufficient exuberance in the joyful outbursts. Other problems are for lazy rhythms that kind of soften the sharp angularity of some textures (Troup) or lack color and insufficient differentiation of textures and registers (Hill). Still others are bangy and disjointed, or in the case of Ogdon, just too un-centered and spastic. I would have liked MacGregor better except for her odd agogic hesitations at the start of each of the descending chordal figurations in the irregular 27-count measures. I have three favorites, each really quite different, but each avoiding the problems I've just discussed. They are: Pöntinen who is the most colorful in terms of variety of touch and tone and delineation of textures (helped in no small measure by the well-voiced piano and the superb recording quality); Banfield who is wonderfully articulate and with masterly voice-leading; and Batagov, who is somewhat left-of-field with his slow and emphatic tempo, but captivating nonetheless for the terror conveyed in the fierce low bass clusters, and mood creation which suspends time on the human scale and conveys a more mystic, cosmic canvas.

14. **Regard des Anges** (Gaze of the Angels)

I remember playing this when I was trying out some pianos at an exhibition of Bösendorfer pianos at a cloister in Salzburg, and the director came over to me and asked if I could instead play some Mozart or Schubert because I was "scaring" some of the Brothers. I was initially put off by the rather demeaning request, but in a way it was a compliment to both the piano and my playing that the triple-forte, terrifying, apocalyptic bass trombones actually scared somebody. Messiaen talks about the terrifying imagery to be evoked; "Fiery flames... and powerful blasts by immense trombones." In the survey I was decidedly underwhelmed by a majority of renderings which were not heavy enough (and certainly not terrifying enough) with the trombones. Of course, some pianists, such as Ogdon and Muraro, convey a wide-eyed feverishness from start to finish which then fails to differentiate the contrasting moods. Other problems were the opening flurry of interlocking figurations being too blurry when we want to hear the mad fluttering of angle wings, or insufficient articulation in the canonic counterpoint, or the biting dissonant treble chords (opposite the trombones) being too stiff and robotic. I'm also not too taken by pianists who take the coda too cautiously and without sufficient delirium (MacGregor), or those who interpret the non-legato indication to mean light and pizzicato, like the sneak-attack of the tip-toeing panda bear. Serkin plays the coda with an odd loping lurch which sounds like a stumbling, braying donkey. With all this in mind, the pianists who allowed me to enjoy the music and not get stuck on annoying quirks were: Rajna and Batagov, foremost, and then Austbo.

15. ***Le Baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus*** (The kiss of the Baby Jesus)

This is a sort of modern update on Chopin's Berceuse. Like the Chopin, there is the gently rolling rhythm and the delicate textures with ever more florid elaborations in the right hand. I've always enjoyed this, though I did think that Messiaen might have tightened up its indulgent expansiveness which always struck me as redolent of a hazy, slow-motion, opium-infused euphoria. But in the survey, there were two versions that I thoroughly enjoyed without having to unduly reduce my mental and physical metabolism; they were Evan Hirsch and Angela Hewitt. What was their secret? Well, to a large degree the way the piano is voiced helps them achieve a remarkable legato with the piano's innate sustain filling in the gaps between long notes that normally fade away more and break the illusion that we are hearing something besides transient notes caused by hammers striking strings. But, the fact is, it takes a great deal of mastery and control of voicing of the fingers and movement of the hand to even take advantage of a fine piano's capability. And the microphones must be just right so that intimate shades of pianissimo are captured but without the undue distractions of the piano mechanism. In other words, three things must conspire together, like the planets all aligning together: the talents of the piano technician, the performing artist, and the recording engineer. A few other versions hit two out of the three, but only Hewitt and Hirsch got all three perfectly. I'm really anxious to hear more Messiaen from Hewitt, but meanwhile this single CD sampler is a real gem in my Messiaen collection. Hirsch was previously unknown to me, but his disc is also of a consistently high caliber.

16. ***Regard des Prophètes, des Bergers et des Mages*** (Gaze of the Prophets, Shepherds,

and Wise Men) Based on the number of YouTube postings this has become one of the most popular selections from the set. I thoroughly enjoy hearing it played on a fine piano, but I've never done more than casually play through it because none of the pianos I've ever owned or had access to have had quite the right sound that I want to hear. You see, I have little patience for pianists who have no sensitivity to the tone they produce, or somehow hear something in their heads that none of the rest of us hear, and I hold the same high standard for myself. If I can't produce the right sound, I'm not interested in just playing notes. Someday I may very well look into having a piano with interchangeable actions with different regulation and hammer voicing optimized for different kinds of music. I know many people are oblivious to the matter of tone color, and when I go all critical they probably shake their heads and wonder what I'm talking about. At issue here are the eight measure episodes Messiaen writes with simple, single tones, and as he indicates, *Hautbois, un peu criard*, to be imitative of plaintive, even squalling cry of a Near-Eastern oboe. These are not the refined orchestral oboes we usually hear, but the rustic shepherd's pipe that one may still hear around the bazaars in Istanbul. On the piano, the tone should have a reedy harmonic overtone, but not too bright or else you emphasize the percussive nature of the piano. This crying theme becomes a more vehement wail, and its presence should always be clearly heard even amongst all the complex writing that ensues. Some passages sound to me like a Yiddish klezmer band got a gig playing at a swirling dervish, but I don't mean that in an absurdist way, because the sense of manic and obsessive focus here is most serious. Batagov does well to convey a hypnotic, trance-like litany of wailing intensity, and Bellheim, while less intense, also conveys the proper mood and keeps all the textures well-delineated. MacGregor's rushing rubato on the shepherd's pipe is completely unidiomatic, and her canonic passages are rather messy. Even so, I could at least listen to that as a serious artistic attempt, whereas the one version which I consider completely off the mark is that of Peter Serkin (in an otherwise impressive set); here the shepherd's pipe is way too fast, and the canon sounds ludicrous at this tempo. If you ever had the perverse desire to wonder what a hybrid cross of Messiaen and Conlon Nancarrow would be like, Serkin is spot on.

17. ***Regard du Silence*** (The Contemplation of Silence)

The opening section seems problematic for the piano because it neither sings nor projects and requires tremendous sustain or else it is all dissolves into a vaporous ether. It might be more effective on an organ. However, the rest of the piece is superbly suited for the instrument. Obviously, the better the piano, the more convincing the illusion that the pianist can create. Crossley was so good I have an entirely new appreciation for the potential of this piece. Unfortunately, none of the complete sets I

recommend offer standout versions of this number to compare with Crossley, but they aren't bad. Among complete sets, the best was by Thomas Rajna, which I have on the old Saga LPs, and will continue to try and track down in its elusive, out-of-print CD incarnation.

18. ***Regard de l'Onction terrible*** (His terrifying Majesty become flesh in Christ)

I'm sorry, but this one annoys me to no end, and would be the first I jettison if I were to pare down the set of twenty. Maybe I'm the only one to respond this way, but maybe not, because most critics don't admit to not liking the music they review (although even composers had changed opinions of their works and favored certain children among their creations), but to me it just sounds like the worst parody of Hollywood horror film music. I've read all the textbooks on Messiaen, all the liner notes, and heard 25 versions of it, and still the light has not come on for me. Maybe I need to be struck by a bolt of lightning from the Almighty, as evidently this is intended to evoke the Apocalyptic image of Christ riding through the clouds on horseback brandishing lightning bolts. In terms of the survey, it was simply a matter of which pianist's version I could best tolerate. Since I have nothing really positive to say, I'll leave it to each reader to explore this music themselves and form their own opinions. All of the versions I end up recommending have representative interpretations of this piece.

19. ***Je dors, mais mon coeur veille*** (I sleep, but my heart keeps vigil)

This is a lovely work, a 'song of songs' about which Messiaen describes a joy so palpable and transforming that one could literally die of joy. The music enfolds one like a tender embrace, a warming blanket of maternal love, but I think the image of slumber is more apt than of actually dying. But each listener will have his/her own reaction. In terms of the survey, Evan Hirsch was a real standout, beautifully rendered, and with rapt tenderness. Among complete sets, Bellheim was also sensitively nuanced, and with a lovely recorded piano sound.

20. ***Regard de l'Église d'Amour*** (Contemplation of the Church of Love)

A good strong finish for the set. So many moods on a long journey from terrifying cosmic fury to transformative absolute love. And, along with No. 6 and 10, without doubt one of the most difficult of the set. In terms of those less successful ventures, the technical obstacles which abound are too numerous to expound upon at any length. Typical problems concern lack of stamina and inability to provide a convincingly larger-than-life sonority, Aimard in particular was too lightweight and scampering about with detached bass notes and clipped phrasing, likewise with Austbo and MacGregor who just don't summon forth the feverish intensity required. Beroff was too dry and pointillistic. Hill was a chore to sit through, a most sober and joyless account; Osborne a bit better but also emotionally reticent. Bessette too lean in the lower registers, and like cardboard in the upper register. Some are just too stalwart and fail to convey the sense of rapture on the final pages. Among versions that inspired, the usual names of the top contenders emerged again as favorites here: Batagov, the most mystic and transcendent, Belleheim, the most lovely, Serkin the most spine-tingling and virtuosic. But two others are also worth mentioning: an early filmed concert of Katsaris from 1979 now on DVD, is a strongly individual conception, all the technical difficulties effortlessly tossed off with his eyes closed, and with a wonderful sense of euphoria on the final pages (however, the split screen visual effects are most annoying!), the other was by Robert Groslot, who may be less strong on the difficult contrary motion passages, but who nevertheless creates a compelling mood that has tremendous cumulative power. And what a great ending, not only for this piece but for the entire experience of the set. The final declamatory chords and joyous birdcall, its final exclamation ringing across the resonant sonority of time itself, and the concluding gesture, a descending flourish representing God's gavel in pronouncement of His final judgment: "It is done, and it is good!" Amen!

After listening to 25 complete cycles at over two hours a pop (that's a full week just in listening) a few thoughts come to the fore. First is that many versions had engaging moments here and there but that, really, only two versions stood out as being so compelling that I was completely captivated from beginning to end. And both of those versions are currently unavailable!

The second thought is that I had a distinct impression of some versions conveying a more mystical sense of ecstasy and transcendence while others seem to have a more objective secularized approach which focused on pianistic figurations and compositional textures. It is likely that listeners will respond with a marked preference for one or the other approach. This sense of gestalt was derived primarily from the type of acoustic—dry, medium, or reverberant—but choice of piano, microphone placement, and the pianist's use of pedal and degree of articulacy also impact the overall listening experience. Therefore I decided to make my final recommendations for recordings based on a three-prong approach: Dry, Medium and Reverberant.

As it happens there were two clear standouts for both the dry and the reverberant recordings. For those who like a vivid presentation of the piano recorded in a controlled, non-reverberant studio with microphones near the rim of the piano, Peter Serkin's version is as good as it gets (Beroff being a rather distant second choice). The type of playback system one has will play a considerable role in how enjoyable this recording will be. On my planar speakers (Eminent Technology) the Serkin was quite engaging, yet on my more forward dynamic speakers (Monitor Audio with ribbon tweeters) the sound was too aggressive, and glassy on the top end. For those who like a more mystic Messiaen, with blended sonorities forming sonoral gestures rather than individualized notes, none comes close to Batagov, which despite the backed off microphones is still hugely (cosmically) dynamic. This recording provided a very realistic concert perspective on my planar speakers, and was also good on the dynamic speakers. But based on my own experience observing reaction from students and fellow music lovers, I'd say either of those extreme perspectives will probably appeal to a limited number of listeners, about 10% each at either end. The great majority of listeners, the 80% in the middle, will want something in the middle, with just enough air to take the edge off the percussive attack of treble notes, but not so much that textures are blended together. Finding a good overall pick in this category was more problematic, because unlike the other two categories, there were no clear standouts. Therefore, I'll take you through the process by which I made my final recommendation, derived from sheer statistics as much as anything else.

As I listened through all the recordings listed in the discography I made a list of the top contenders for each selection and then re-listened to all the top contenders again to determine the overall best performance for each number. Opera buffs like to create 'Dream Cast' lists for all their favorite operas. If I were to do that for *Vingt Regards*, I'd need the contributions of ten different pianists to get a compilation of what I consider the best rendition for each of the twenty selections (as defined in the analysis section above). The trouble with such a compilation is that the actual listening experience would not be pleasant, with the jarring juxtaposition of different acoustics—dry studio recordings, reverberant church acoustics—one moment the listening perspective up close by the rim of the piano, the next backed off to some distance like sitting in the audience, then of course, the different harmonic characteristics of the various pianos: Yamaha, Steinway, Bechstein, Bösendorfer, Fazioli, and various unidentified makes. But let's look at the data and see if certain names emerge as consistent top contenders.

Here are the original results from the listening evaluation with the top three picks for each selection, the overall best in bold, and then the second and third choices:

1. **Batagov.** (Bellheim, Hirsch)
2. **Rajna.** (Troup, Bellheim)
3. **Batagov.** (Bellheim, Rajna)
4. **Hewitt.** (Zehn, Rajna)
5. **Batagov.** (Rajna, Troup)
6. **Batagov.** (Rajna, Serkin)
7. **MacGregor.** (Troup, Batagov)
8. **MacGregor.** (Osborne, Beroff)
9. **Rajna.** (Bellheim, Osborne)
10. **Crossley.** (Rajna, Hewitt)
11. **Feltsman.** (MacGregor, Crossley)
12. **Rajna.** (Zehn, Beroff)
13. **Pöntinen.** (Banfield, Batagov)
14. **Rajna.** (Batagov, Austbo)
15. **Hirsch.** (Hewitt, Batagov)
16. **Bellheim.** (Batagov, Austbo)
17. **Crossley.** (Zehn, Rajna)
18. **Batagov.** (Bellheim, Rajna)
19. **Hirsch.** (Bellheim, Batagov)
20. **Groslot.** (Batagov, Serkin)

Making a tabulation from the above stats, we see that the two leaders are Batagov (with 12 entries) and Rajna (with 10 entries), and both of those recordings are out of print. I've seen a few selection by Batagov posted on YouTube, but none for Rajna. As for the Batagov, even though it is the statistical leader, I know for a fact that some listeners don't respond well to the distant recorded perspective and the reverberant acoustic, so I'll consider that as my top recommendation for that category, but not for the overall reference recording. The Rajna is a nice medium acoustic recording which would doubtless become my Reference pick should the CD or digital downloads become available. In the meantime I had to look further at the tabulations to see which other versions I would recommend.

Bellheim was next in line with six entries, then a cluster of names each having three entries—Crossley, Hewitt, Hirsch, MacGregor and Zehn—and two names which each had two entries, Serkin and Troup. Of course, these numbers can be analyzed in many different ways (the so-called 'creative accounting') to factor in awarding more points to first-pick names and less points to second and third picks, or even from a musical point of view, we could assign varying values to individual selections, for example we might ask ourselves whether the slight and one-dimensional No. 12 really deserves a vote of equal weight to the more pivotal (and indeed masterful) No. 6?? Lastly, the above table only lists the top three names, if we were to extend that to the top five picks then we would see that Serkin's name would then emerge with a statistically high average. And then, if any pianist's name appears as the last-place worst rendering, is that cause for automatic dismissal? What about consideration for good pianos as opposed to terrible and almost un-listenable pianos? How do we meaningfully narrow the search criteria?

If we disregard any top picks that are not part of an integral set, then we can eliminate five of those names, because the idea is to find the best overall choice for the complete work. I've made a special category of recommendations so that we don't completely throw away the fine contributions of individual numbers by Hewitt, Hirsch and Crossley, but right now, we're

focusing on integral sets. If we then eliminate Batagov and Serkin because they are being recommended as best for the dry and reverberant recordings, we can then concentrate on those recordings that will likely appeal to the most listeners. Following this same logic, we can also eliminate Beroff as a second place runner in the dry acoustics category, and Troup as a second place runner for the more reverberant recordings (though with microphones much closer than with Batagov). I like the sound of the Troup recording a lot, but statistically his name didn't show up that often among the top contenders. Furthermore, if we eliminate those names that only appear once on any top three listing (Zehn, Groslot), then the field of final contenders is narrowed to a reasonable size. Lastly, we might as well eliminate Rajna because, although I understand a CD transfer was made at some point, I have been unable to find it for sale anywhere on Amazon or through my usual sources in Britain or the U.S. Those Saga LPs are like priceless possessions to me!

After all those considerations I was left with a list with some holes in it, as seven numbers had no top contenders to recommend. Therefore, I've put the name of the next best performance in parenthesis. That leaves us with a modified list which looks like this:

1. Bellheim.
2. Bellheim, Muraro
3. Bellheim, MacGregor
4. (Bellheim)
5. (Muraro)
6. Bellheim
7. MacGregor
8. MacGregor, Osborne
9. Bellheim, Osborne
10. (Osborne)
11. MacGregor
12. (Austbo)
13. (Muraro)
14. Austbo
15. (Muraro)
16. Bellheim, Austbo
17. (Bellheim)
18. Bellheim
19. Bellheim
20. Bellheim

Breaking down the numbers: Bellheim's name appears eleven times, making him the overall winner (Muraro and MacGregor with four each, Austbo and Osborne with three each). Such an overwhelming statistical advantage is hard to dispute, though, while I could let Muraro and Osborne go, I did feel a special affinity for the rapt communicativeness MacGregor achieved in some selections, especially No. 11 (*Communion of the Blessed Virgin*). Now, that brings up another point: most listeners have favorites from among the twenty, and maybe even a few that they don't care much about. Naturally, they will want a recording that does best with their favorites, and they will weigh their overall appraisal accordingly. As an example, I find No. 6 far more interesting than No. 12, so all things being equal I'd give the nod to the performance that does better with No. 6 than with No. 12. I also have a fondness for those numbers I've learned and/or performed myself: Nos. 3, 7, 11, 13, and 14. Obviously, it is impossible to know which numbers might be favorites of each reader, so the raw data listed above may help guide those who know which numbers they favor.

The good news is that Bellheim's statistical victory is also backed up by the finest sounding recording of the bunch, with a finely-voiced piano and microphones that give a good, solid image of the piano in a pleasant medium acoustic. I'm confident that most listeners, irrespective of the type of playback equipment they have, will thoroughly enjoy Bellheim's traversal of the twenty. So that's how I arrived at my choices for top recommendations. Now a brief look at some of the versions which have received positive press elsewhere, but which didn't make my final cut.

Many critics continue to recommend Loriod, almost pro-forma out of deference to her relationship with the composer. There are two versions: the first, a pre-stereo recording from 1956, sounds much better in the digital re-master on Ades than it ever did on the original Westminster recordings or the MHS re-issues. The later, 1973 recording on Erato has less tape hiss and the character of the piano is quite different: the tone is warmer, much smoother and less percussive than the earlier recording, and with a very fulsome bass, to the point of being skewed to bass dominance and an almost organ-like sonority. Perhaps this reflects Messiaen's own preference as he was actively involved in the oversight of the production. To my ears, the sound is decidedly dull and lacking in both articulation and micro-dynamic inflection. I make this assessment based on the 1993 re-master; I haven't heard the latest re-issue on Apex (which has probably not been further re-mastered). All things considered, I'd go for the earlier recording on the Ades CD, which while relatively lean-sounding, still conveys some dynamic energy and sparkle in the more brilliant passages.

I conducted careful A-B comparisons of the two versions for each number, not so much to decide which was best, but to determine the range of interpretive variance. Timings are often identical or within a few seconds of each other, the only notable exceptions being for Nos. 18 and 20 which in both cases were tightened up (shorter timings) in the later re-make, for example, No. 20 ran 14:05 in the first recording, and was a less expansive 12:56 in the re-make. If for nothing else, it is probably a wise idea for students to listen to these recordings in order to get an idea for overall tempos, and to avoid any glaring misinterpretations of rhythm (surprisingly, there were many such incidents in the various recordings I surveyed, though not in any of the version I recommend). The earlier performance had slightly more virtuosic panache in the more extreme passages, but Loriod keeps things moving in the later version, with little concession to physical stamina or technique in her later years.

In either case, what most critics fail to mention (I've only encountered a similar dissenting voice in one other critic) is that Loriod is more faithful pianist than artistic interpreter. From beginning to end, especially in the re-make, there is a conscious dearth of any interpretive inflection; many numbers sounding like a treadmill transcription with zero flexibility in the phrasing of long lines. This, combined with the overall macro-approach with no micro-dynamic inflection, and in the later re-make a rather blunted tone which rounds off rhythmic contours, I didn't find either version a tempting consideration for top contention. Not only have other pianists made the music come alive more, but more modern recordings also give us a more vivid sound-world to immerse ourselves into.

As a final commentary on Loriod and the so-called "composer-authorized version" look at the many varied performances which Messiaen gave his seal of approval to, and indeed, the many recordings in this survey made by Loriod's students. And they are all so different! Frankly, I don't believe Messiaen had a singular conception in mind, especially as concerns the expressive arch (dynamically or in tempo) of long lines or sequences. That he gave his approval to so many different interpretations merely means that he found something that he enjoyed about it, and was

displaying a sense of grateful humility that young artists are interested in his creations. Therefore, I don't consider Loriod's version "definitive" by any measure, her version must stand along with the others strictly on the basis of how successfully it brings *alive* the composer's ideas.

Crossley, who worked closely with both Loriod and the composer himself, provided some of the most stunning performances I've heard. This surprised me, because I never cared for his agogic-laden Debussy recordings. But his Messiaen is superlative in both color, nuance and jaw-dropping virtuosity (No. 10!). Too bad his CD program gives us only four of the twenty.

I didn't respond at all to Aimard's *Vingt Regards*, though some critics who feel safe in recommending versions of Loriod's students toss his name out. For me, Aimard, is an uneven artist. His Ligeti Etudes are superb and ended up being my Reference Recording in that survey. His Beethoven concerti occasionally had some good ideas but didn't always seem quite idiomatic. His Messiaen is hampered to some degree by the jangly and overly-resonant 'room acoustics' of the recording and a piano that that seems dull and lacking harmonic color (especially in the top and bottom registers). Even with a better recording, the conceptions seem to mimic the same cautious and self-conscious safety-zone that Loriod inhabits. Not for me.

Going far from the safety zone into the outer orbits of phantasmagoric mania is John Ogdon. Some British music lovers continue to hold a fondness for this recording, but honestly, anybody with an objective ear can tell that Ogdon clearly goes over the top. I don't believe he was yet on his lithium prescriptions when this recording was made, so what we have here is perhaps an early indication of his looming mental condition in combination with his typical unrestrained over-exuberance. He goes way off the deep end in *L'exchange*, and *l'Eglise d'amour*, and with his prodigious technique he dispatches the super-virtuosic No. 6 (*Par Lui tout a été fait*) in an astounding 9:06 which would have been even shorter had he not suddenly slowed down on the two final pages. But such a manic flurry of notes is just key-razy. Elsewhere, his playing simply lacks nuance; everything is pedal to the metal.

Well, such is the process of these comparative surveys, some good, some bad, and a lot of so-so. Anybody who makes it to the short list of Recommended Recordings in such a massive and transcendental work as this deserves the highest possible kudos. If you don't own or have access to the score, it is worth exploring some of the postings on YouTube which have been synced to the music. This should give you an idea of some of the really incredible complexity involved. Once you settle on a version that you enjoy, turn the lights out, turn on the star-gazer lamp or bring out the old lava lamp and be swept away into the cosmos.

© Graham Reid 2014. All Rights Reserved

Comparative Survey: Reviewer's Discography

<u>Artist</u>	<u>Label</u>	<u>Selections</u>
Ader, Alice	ADDA	1 - 20
Aimard, Pierre-Laurent	Warner	1 - 20
Austbø, Håkon	Naxos	1 - 20
Banfield, Volker	Wergo	10, 11, 13, 16, 17
Batagov, Anton	Melodiya	1 - 20
Bellheim, Markus	Neos	1 - 20
Beroff, Michel	EMI	1 - 20
Bessette, Louise	Atma	1 - 20
Chauveau, Melisande	Forlane	1 - 20
Crossley, Paul	Decca	10, 11, 13, 17
Feltsman, Vladimir	CBS	11, 13, 16
Groslot, Robert	Fidelio	1 - 20
Hewitt, Angela	Hyperion	4, 10, 15
Hill, Peter	Unicorn	1 - 20
Hind, Rolf	United	1, 6, 16
Hirsch, Evan		1, 4, 10, 11, 14, 15, 19
Karkkainen, Jaana	Alba	1 - 20
Katsaris, Cyprien	Piano 21 DVD	20
Kim, Paul	Centaur	1 - 20
Knapik, Eugen	Dux	1 - 20
Kodama, Momo	Triton	1 - 20
Loriod, Yvonne (1956)	Ades	1 - 20
Loriod, Yvonne (1973)	Erato	1 - 20
MacGregor, Joanna	Collins	1 - 20
Muraro, Roger (1990)	MCA	1 - 20
Muraro, Roger (DVD)		1 - 20
Ogdon, John	Decca	1 - 20
Osborne, Steven	Hyperion	1 - 20
Pöntinen, Roland	BIS	13, 15
Rajna, Thomas	Saga	1 - 20
Serkin, Peter	RCA	1 - 20
Taylor, Christopher	Philips	10
Troup, Malcolm	Continuum	1 - 20
Zehn, Martin	Arte Nova	1 - 20

Recommended Recordings

Piano Enthusiast Reference Recording

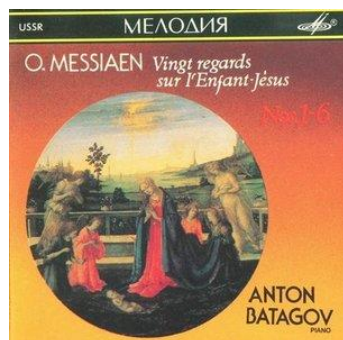


Markus Bellheim. Neos

Bellheim gives us one of the most satisfying sets ever recorded. Standards of technical mastery and interpretive insight are of a consistently high standard. It helps that the pianist has superb recorded sound both in terms of the well-voiced piano, which combines a rich and fulsome bass with great textural clarity amidst varied complex textures, and the recording engineers who have placed the microphones just right to capture color and delicate nuance without sacrificing the all-important aspect of breathing room to allow the massive sonorities to unfold without congestion. Those who

already know and love the *Vingt Regards* will want several versions in order to experience the mystical wonders from more than one perspective, and Bellheim fits right in with the very top list of must-have interpreters. Those who are just venturing forth into the world of Messiaen could choose no finer a guide than Bellheim. While some seem to be best with the more intimate and poetic numbers, and others the more overtly virtuosic, Bellheim strikes that perfect balance more often than any other interpreter.

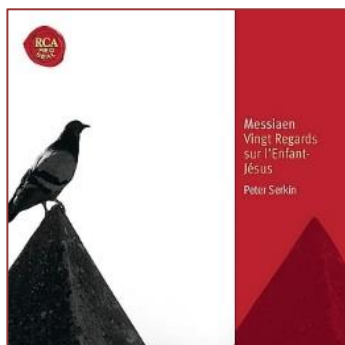
Other Noteworthy Performances



Anton Batagov. Melodiya

Those who favor their Messiaen on the mystic side are in for a truly mind-bending experience with Batagov. The highly reverberant acoustic, much like how one would hear Messiaen's organ works, gives the music an air of other-worldliness. Listeners tend to either love or hate the highly reverberant acoustic, but if that doesn't bother you, there is really no other version quite as mesmerizing as Batagov's. Just because the microphones are backed away from the piano doesn't mean you won't experience the full range of dynamics, so be careful when setting the volume on the first go round because those cosmically cataclysmic

moments, such as the firmament-shaking bass chords in *Par Lui tout a été fait*, have tremendous power. It also helps that Batagov has a piano with exceptional sustain, this allows him to take slow tempos without loss of harmonic foundation. We hear all these advantages—the masterly balance of voices from Batagov, the long sustain of the piano, and the transporting acoustics—from the first opening moments which immediately put us in another time and place. The original CDs that I have are spread across three discs, and individual numbers do not always have their own tracks, both inconveniences which should be addressed if we are ever lucky enough to see a re-issue of this currently out-of-print recording. In the meantime, check for used copies, or scout around on YouTube as there are postings every now and then.



Peter Serkin. RCA

The original LPs from 1969 having been long out-of-print, collectors rejoiced when this was finally re-issued on CD. The sound is now better than it ever was on LP, revealing much more vibrancy, color and dynamics than expected. In terms of sound reproduction the only limitations stem from the original recording conditions which reflect a rather analytic studio dryness, a close-up perspective from the microphones, and a frequency tilt that gives startling dynamic energy to the upper treble but somewhat undernourished low bass response. For those that prefer a palpable sense of connection with the pianist, and

thrive on the energy of his grab-you-by-the-jugular approach, this is a recording without equal. Of course interpretively Serkin was always near the top cluster of names in the comparative survey, the only miscalculation being for an overly speedy and manic No. 14. Elsewhere, the virtuosity is stunning, in some cases, such as in *L'Esprit de joie*, simply jaw-dropping. This represents the polar opposite of Batagov's mystical approach, the emphasis here being on compositional texture, percussive effect, and vibrant, colorful harmonic sheen.



Thomas Rajna. Saga (Amarantha)

Consider this one as a worthy quest for collectors. As good as the Bellheim is for an overall reference pick, this might be a strong challenger if the digital transfer to CD is done right. I base my review on a set of reissued Saga LPs from 1969, but I understand that at some point a re-master was available on CD from the South African label, Amarantha. I have not yet been able to determine where I can buy a copy, as all my usual sources in Britain and the U.S. (including Amazon) have come up dry. Like Batagov, Rajna came up with the highest percentage of top-picks in the comparative survey, but unlike the Batagov recording, this one is recorded closer and in a less reverberant acoustic and will

probably be more to the typical listener's liking. I have never seen a posting on YouTube, but if you ever see it, do give it a listen, as I consider it to strike very close to an ideal interpretive balance, far more so than many of the other lauded versions out there which really can't compare. A quick internet search revealed that Rajna took a posting as music professor in South Africa, and has had some of his original compositions published and recorded.

Special Mention

(Single Disc Samplers of Messiaen's Music)



Angela Hewitt. Hyperion

If you only have one CD of Messiaen in your collection, this should be the one. A thoroughly enjoyable program from start to finish, Hewitt plays everything with superb musical characterization and the recording engineers have captured every detail beautifully. The Eight Preludes can sometimes sound derivative of late Debussy, but Hewitt gives us tone poems that are thoroughly in the unique sound world of Messiaen. Her *Île de feu Etudes* are stunning, each layer given a distinctive, almost orchestral tonal quality, full of energy and bristling articulacy, they are really more compelling than I ever imagined they could be. The three selections from the *Vingt Regards* are well chosen to offer a contrasting glimpse of the kind of sounds and textures that Messiaen uses, and all three rank among the top versions in the survey. Everything on this disc is of the highest A+ standard. The only down side is that after listening to just a single disc there is a greedy desire to hear more, but since Hewitt has only given us the one disc, you'll just have to hit the repeat button.



Paul Crossley. L'Oiseau-Lyre

As far as I know this is currently only available as an MP3 download, but it is certainly worth trying to track down. Crossley gives four choice selections from the *Vingt Regards*: *Première communion de la Vierge*, *Noël*, *Regard du silence*, and the best rendering I've heard of *l'Esprit de joie*, which soars with a sense of ecstatic transcendence that was for this listener, the single most memorable moment in the comparative survey. We also hear top notch versions of some seldom heard piano works including the delightful *Rondeau*. The piano is well-recorded, detailed but warm and never fatiguing.