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Pianist Christopher Taylor's performance at SMU was a religious experience

By SCOTT CANTRELL 9/25/08
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How can a mere critic do justice to what happened Wednesday evening in Caruth Auditorium?

With Olivier Messiaen's massive 1944 piano cycle *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus* (20 Gazes on the Infant Jesus) the only thing on the program, Southern Methodist University's concert hall was barely a third full. With intermission, Christopher Taylor's performance lasted two-and-a-half hours.

But at the end, after sitting through music demanding serious concentration, people were walking out literally in tears, barely able to speak. Piano professors were wide-eyed in amazement.

Mr. Taylor's virtuosity in the "Gaze of the Spirit of Joy" movement was breathtaking and apparently effortless. The range of volume and

color seemed almost beyond a mere piano's – and mere pianist's – possibilities. (A newly rebuilt Steinway sounded beautifully balanced and finished.)

In lesser hands, the late French composer's super tricky rhythms – all those added fractions of beats, all those musical renderings of bird songs – can sound calculated and awkward. With Mr. Taylor, remembered around here as the bronze medalist in the 1993 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, they felt as natural as heartbeats and breaths.

Music that can seem arbitrary in its alternation of low rumble and high tinkle, fast and slow, loud and soft, sounded organic and inevitable. (It is elaborately organized, as Messiaen's own commentaries show.)

Overall, what so struck this listener

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Christopher Taylor
Messiaen: Vingt Regards
in Dallas, continued...

was Mr. Taylor's complete identification with the music, which he played from memory. In a kind of musical transubstantiation, he became these vignettes, by turns solemn, awesome, ferocious, playful and meltingly tender.

This is music of ecstasy, of awe and wonder, full of striking allusions. In "Noel," pianistic bells and birds join in celebration. In "First Communion of the Virgin," Messiaen imagined light glistening off stalactites, then the pulsings of the baby Jesus' heart. "Gaze of the Angels" evokes "a powerful blast of trombones" and "the song of birds who feast upon blue."

Binding all together – shades of Wagner – are three recurring motifs. (It's a pity Mr. Taylor didn't demonstrate them before starting the performance.) Most haunting is the Theme of the Father, four solemn, tolling chords. In "The Kiss of the Infant Jesus," what magic Messiaen works by reharmonizing the last chord, as in the Incarnation humanizing the Father.

Presented by SMU's Perkins School of Theology and Voices of Change, a prelude to a two-day Messiaen centenary symposium, this was an experience to leave us mortals, as the hymn says, "lost in wonder, love and praise." Quite as Messiaen would have wished.