

Christopher Taylor

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The Moods of Messiaen, Interpreted in 20 Ways

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

Messiaen would surely have been delighted at the setting for a concert featuring his “Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus.” The piano was placed next to the crèche under the huge Christmas tree in the Medieval Sculpture Hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. En route to the space guests passed through a room featuring ornate Christian paintings and iconography.

A Roman Catholic, Messiaen would no doubt have been even more impressed with the performance of his mammoth work. A mere glance at the fiendishly difficult score can be panic inducing for many pianists; performing the two-hour piece in its entirety and from memory is a true feat of stamina. The pianist [Christopher Taylor](#) proved up to the task on Tuesday evening, offering a powerful interpretation notable both for its technical agility and introspection.

Messiaen wrote “Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus” (“Twenty Contemplations on the Baby Jesus”) as an expression of his faith. Composed in 1944 for Yvonne Loriod, his student and second wife, the suite of 20 pieces incorporates Messiaen’s trademarks, including fanciful birdcalls; Greek, Hindu and Balinese rhythms; shimmering cluster chords; glittering dissonances; and meditative interludes.

Mr. Taylor has [made a calling card of the work](#), which he first performed in its entirety at Columbia University over a decade ago. The technical difficulties seemed to pose no challenges, his virtuosity enabling a demonic force in some of the most daunting sections, like the complex fugue of No. 6, “Par Lui Tout a Été Fait” (“By Him Everything Was Made”), and the manic No. 10, “[Regard de l’Esprit de Joie](#)” (“View the Spirit of Joy”). His clarity in No. 10 was remarkable, cascades of runs and bell-like chords unfolding with dazzling energy. He vividly highlighted the wild, ominous character of No. 12, “La Parole Tout Puissante” (“The Omnipotent Word”).

Interspersed with the frenzy of the fast movements are mystical interludes like No. 11, “Première Communion de la Vierge” (“The Virgin’s First Communion”). Mr. Taylor beautifully conveyed the meditative mood of that excerpt and the other, gentler sections. Best of all was his poetic rendition of No. 15, “Le Baiser de l’Enfant Jésus” (“The Child Jesus’ Kiss”), whose serene opening leads to a kaleidoscopic, tumultuous outbursts.