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Reviews

Messiaen's *Canyons...* in the Anza-Borrego Desert

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A certain indoor-outdoor dichotomy graces Olivier Messiaen's epic *Des canyons aux étoiles...* (*From the Canyons to the Stars...*). Commissioned by Alice Tully in tribute to the 1976 bicentennial, the composer cited the profound natural and spiritual influence of his time spent in Bryce Canyon and Zion National Park in 1972, but did not necessarily design the work, which premiered in 1974 at Tully Hall, for an outdoor setting.

Even so, a certain site-amplified ambient resonance can occur when the score—for a 40-piece chamber orchestra, two percussionists and piano soloist—is performed under the celestial stars of its title. Such was the case at its Southern California premiere at the 1985 Ojai Music Festival, with Kent Nagano conducting, Messiaen's wife Yvonne Loriod as pianist, and the composer in residence.



Steven Schick conducts Art of Élan in Messiaen's Des canyons aux étoiles *at Anza-Borrego desert*

It happened again for just one night, October 12, at La Casa del Zorro resort in the desert haven of Anza-Borrego, a vast expanse of arid land between San Diego and Palm Springs. Organized as a 20th-anniversary season kickoff for the San Diego-based ensemble Art of Élan—which expands or contracts in instrumentation to a score's dictates—this performance was spearheaded by percussionist, conductor, and contemporary music champion Steven Schick.

Also a frequent presence at the Ojai Music Festival, Schick is based in San Diego, where he teaches at the UC campus and leads its resident percussion ensemble red fish blue fish. He's been working with Art of Élan for more than a year to pull the Messiaen project together. It was a sold-out affair, despite the 90-minute drive from San Diego, and the 200-plus audience response ranged from tolerant to ecstatic, depending on contemporary music affinities.

Taking on the rigorous piano part was Conor Hanick, another Ojai Festival habitue, who met the challenge of the syncopated, atonal gusts of notes so characteristic of Messiaen's birdsong obsessions. Apart from meeting the technical demands, he lent a blend of objective ambivalence and invested passion, as notable in his tutti contributions as in the intricate, complexities of the solo piano movements "Le Cossyphe d'Heuglin" ("The white-browed robin-chat") and "Le Moqueur polyglotte" ("The mockingbird").

Unlike its Ojai settings in 1985 and again in 2001, there was no detectable natural birdsong in the night air of Anza-Borrego, although there were audible gusts of wind to blend with the score's wind machine. (There was also an occasional whiff of distant traffic, but the terrestrial surroundings and celestial ceiling mitigated its impact.)



Pianist Conor Hanick, horn soloist Danielle Ondarza

Similar to the sinewy solo bassoon opening of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring,* Messiaen's opus kicks off with a lilting melody on solo horn, played here by Danielle Ondarza. (She made a more muscular statement in the "Interstellaire Appel" ["Interstellar Call"] movement, aiming the horn's bell into the piano strings to achieve an added echo effect to her solo).

The structure of the 90-minute, 12-section piece is episodic and unpredictable, as if mirroring the non-linear, non-rectangular logic of nature itself. It all veers toward what, for Messiaen, is presumably a spiritual climax in the last movement *"*Zion Park et la Cité Céleste" (Zion Park and the Celestial City), with its sustained, shimmering final A major chord, described by the composer as representing a force "as immutable as eternity." That tonal resolution, evoking a calm celestial state, is a stark contrast to the earlier atonal wanderings.

Compared to Messiaen's other major, more popular work, the sensuous 1946 *Turangalila Symphony* for large orchestra, *Canyon to the Stars* is relatively abstract and prickly. Its' musical canvas is filled with airy spaces and abrupt bursts. Orchestral textures are often delivered in staccato statements, punctuated by an array of crisp percussion (with featured spotlights on Fiona Digney on xylorimbia and Andrew Watkins on glockenspiel) and periodically focused on the pianist as protagonist.

Despite fleeting moments of ensemble fuzziness, Schick delivered the work's thorny musical constellations to generally bold, well-articulated effect. The timing of this performance was fortunate. After a long dry spell, rain had been feared, up until the day of the concert, but dodged. The performance started at 6:30, maximizing the dramatic, diurnal shift from day to night.

Messiaen would have approved.



Photos by Gary Payne