

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)  
**LES CORPS GLORIEUX**  
*Sept Visions brèves de la Vie des Ressuscités pour Orgue*

**[THE GLORIFIED BODIES]**  
**[Seven Brief Visions of the Lives of the Resurrected for Organ]**

*Les Corps Glorieux* was completed on August 25, 1939 but was not performed publicly until April 25, 1945, when the composer premiered it at the Trocadéro in Paris. One of Olivier Messiaen's most mystical compositions, it is regarded by scholars as the culmination of his first period of composition. The composer described it in these words:

The work is subtitled: *Seven Brief Visions of the Life of the Resurrected*. The li[ves] of the resurrected [are] free, pure, luminous, highly colored... They possess four qualities: glory (completely luminous, they are their own light)—impassiveness (they no longer suffer and have even lost the possibility of suffering)—agility (they are able to pass through obstacles and to transport themselves a great distance in space at the speed of light)—subtlety (they are no longer bound to such earth necessities as sleep or hunger; they are spiritualized and perfectly pure).

The seven movements of *Les Corps Glorieux* vividly depict the life of resurrected bodies through dazzlingly colorful registrations. Though Messiaen's music can both look and sound like mere collections of notes, there are several motifs which bind this work together. Much of this piece is organized by the number three, one of the holiest numbers and an obvious reference to the Holy Trinity. There are also melodic motifs, like the Augmented Fourth, and rhythmic motifs, like the repeated-note mantra, which add continuity between certain movements. Finally, Messiaen makes extensive use of texture as motif, employing both monody and trio to draw connections between movements. The following program notes attempt to provide a roadmap for the listener: a guide for appreciation of the profound musical-spiritual evangelism of one of the most singular voices in the history of music.

## I. SUBLITÉ DES CORPS GLORIEUX [Subtlety of the Glorified Bodies]

‘Leur corps, semé corps animal, ressuscitera corps spiritual. Et ils seront purs comme les anges de Dieu dans le ciel’

- Saint-Paul, Ire Épître aux Corinthiens, XV, 44  
Évangile selon Saint-Matthieu, XXII, 30

[‘Sown as a physical body, it is raised up as a spiritual body. And they will be pure as the angels of God in heaven.’]

- St. Paul, first letter to the Corinthians 15:44  
Gospel according to St. Matthew 22:30

Developed in the earliest centuries of Christianity and doubtless influenced by Jewish and Greek orthodox musical traditions, plainsong—or the singing of sacred texts on a unison, melismatic, and rhythmically free melody— has endured as one of the purest and most refined styles in sacred music. The Gospel of Matthew depicts the resurrected bodies as virtuous and chaste; as pure. So, although monody is a most unusual texture for organ music, it is appropriate that Messiaen harkened back to the transparency of plainsong to depict the subtlety (or refinement) of the resurrected ones. The registration of three contrasting Cornets (a radiantly colored solo sound rich in overtones) further communicates his musical vision.

Instead of quoting an existing plainsong melody, which Messiaen does in some other works, this melody is completely original. According to the composer, “one will find as well a few short inflections which recall the antiphon *Salve Regina*, in tribute to the Holy Virgin, Queen of the glorified bodies.” The juxtaposition of this ancient style with untraditional intervals including augmented fourths, augmented thirds, diminished fifths, and augmented seconds brings an exotically modern quality to the traditional. Each melodic cadence concludes with a descending augmented fourth, which will become an intervallic motif binding the entire hour-long composition together.

These qualities give the movement a hypnotic effect, allowing us to enter mentally and spiritually into the mystical world of Olivier Messiaen and coaxing us into a private meditation on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and our own lives after death.

## II. LES EAUX DE LA GRÂCE [The Waters of Grace]

'L'Agneau, qui est au milieu du trône, conduira les élus aux sources de la vie.'

- Apocalypse, VII, 17

[‘For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall lead them unto springs of living water.]

- Revelation 7:17

In contrast with the vocal inspiration of the first movement, movement two is treated orchestrally. Three distinct orchestral timbres are heard simultaneously and in the same register, giving a “strange ‘liquid’ character to the music,” according to the composer. The Cornet from the first movement is heard again, this time taking the form of a solo reed instrument like a bassoon. Moving in perpetual sixteenth notes, this voice is sandwiched between the pedal playing a flute solo and the right hand which takes the part of a lush string chorus. The right hand is the only voice marked *expressif* and is played on the gambe and voix celeste: a special registration which Messiaen often uses to symbolize love. According to Jon Gillock, the right hand is “the voice of Jesus coming from within the waters.”

While other movements in this piece have a definite beginning and end, *Les eaux de la grâce* epitomizes Messiaen’s view of eternity. Like an ancient river, these waters of grace are moving eternally from the beginning of time to the end of time. At the moment the performer begins to play, we become aware that these waters are present. As the movement draws to a close, Messiaen indicates a *rallentando*. This gradual slowing-down is not the river slowing down but rather our dreamy vision of the waters fading from view.

### III. L'ANGE AUX PARFUMS [The Angel with the Incense]

'La fumée des parfums, formée des prières des saints, monta de la main de l'ange devant Dieu'

- Apocalypse, VIII, 4

[And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the Angel's hand.]

- Revelation 8:4

Harkening back to the first movement, *L'Ange aux parfums* begins with a monody played "by the angel" on the clarinet. Her theme is always two measures long, but the measures are of varying lengths (sometimes two beats, sometimes three, four, or five). Employing the idea of Hindu ragas, the second measure always contains five repeated notes, like a mantra. This repeated-note motif figures prominently in later movements. What follows this solo opening is, by Messiaen's account "a polymodal and polyrhythmic transition." Three of Messiaen's modes of limited transposition are heard in the three different woodwind choruses: right hand, left hand, and pedal. Further, the rhythm of the left hand is the retrograde (or reverse) of the rhythm in the right hand.

The third section of this movement vividly depicts the burning incense that the angel is carrying. The opening melody of the movement is heard in two-voice counterpoint employing canon and inversion. The highly unusual registration of 16' and 2' in the right hand and 8' in the left hand creates a musical cloud of smoke which floats in the room like incense. A compacted version of the "polymodal and polyrhythmic transition" follows and we hear again the haunting mantra from the opening of the movement. With one last swing of the thurible, the room is again filled with incense as the smoke rises and disappears like a dream.

#### IV. COMBAT DE LA MORT ET LA VIE [Combat of Death and Life]

'La mort et la vie ont engagé un stupéfiant combat; l'Auteur de la vie, après être mort, vit et règne; et il dit: Mon Père, je suis ressuscité, je suis encore avec toi.'

- Missel, Séquence et Introit de Pâques

[Death and Life have engaged in a stupendous battle: The Author of Life, who died, now lives and reigns. And he says: My Father, I am risen, I am still with Thee.]

- Mass for Easter Day, Sequence and Introit

Olivier Messiaen described this movement as “a long prayer in two parts.” The first part is his depiction of the combat; it is “agitated and boisterous.” The movement opens in monody with the principle theme stated in the very bottom register of the organ and once again employing the augmented-fourth motif. The battle is then depicted by the riotous alternation of chords between the left and the right hands. The principal theme is then heard again, this time in canon and followed by cacophonous alternating chords. The opening theme is heard once more in trio texture before launching into a tidal wave of chords falling and rising in contrary motion over the principal theme in the pedal. The sufferings of the Passion of Christ are heard in the full-organ shrieks using the fragmented principal theme. “A great silence implies the death and Resurrection.”

The second section of this two-part prayer is Messiaen’s depiction of Christ’s resurrected life. Messiaen aims to depict the most secretive moment of the life of Christ: the moment of Resurrection. An account of this moment is not given in the Gospels – we know only of the “quaking of the earth, sudden light, the angel who rolls the stone from the entrance [of the tomb], multiple appearances of the resurrected Jesus in different places.” Messiaen uses the lowest pedal stops on the organ to illustrate the shaking of the earth while two contrasting flute stops engage in an “infinitely serene dialogue.”

## V. FORCE ET AGILITÉ DES CORPS GLORIEUX [Strength and Agility of the Glorified Bodies]

Leur corps, semé dans la faiblesse, ressuscitera plein de force.

- Saint-Paul, 1re Épître aux Corinthiens, XV, 43

[Their bodies are sown in weakness; they are raised in power.]

- First letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians 15:43

Also monodic, but this time with orchestral inspiration, movement five focuses on the latter half of its scriptural inscription: the strength and agility of resurrected bodies. As Messiaen conceived it: “The resources of passing through walls and of immediate transport in space could be summarized as a powerful dynamism. Vehement and solid, supple and strong: such are the resurrected.”

The musical theme of the piece is divided into three parts. The first part of the theme is the “rocket” which acts as a fanfare to announce the beginning of each thematic statement and calls to mind the effortless movement of the resurrected. The second is a melodic quote from movement III (*L’Ange aux parfums*) which represents the suppleness and elasticity of resurrected bodies and “bring[s] the glorified bodies closer to the angels.” The third section of the theme is the repeated-note mantra from movement III which portrays the raw force and power of the resurrected. The movement is constructed by elaborating on each of these parts through repetition and elongation. The fifth movement ends with a powerful brass fanfare before the resurrected disappear in a brilliant and hushed flit of color.

## **JOIE ET CLARTÉ DES CORPS GLORIEUX [Joy and Brightness of the Glorified Bodies]**

Alors les justes resplendiront comme le soleil dans le royaume de leur Père.

- Évangile selon Saint-Matthieu, XIII, 43

[Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.]

- Gospel according to St. Matthew 13:43

Messiaen indicates that “brightness or glory is the first quality of the glorified bodies. Each resurrected one has his own light, his singular illumination.” Messiaen expresses this brightness through a variety in timbre. The refrain is a sort of improvised concerto for trumpet and orchestra. Messiaen, who had synesthesia in which he saw sound as colors, described the opening chords of the refrain as “spicy, with reflections of gold and flame.” A solo trumpet plays a rhythmically and melodically free passage over these chords giving the impression of improvisation. Between these solo passages, the “orchestra” interjects with their brilliant chords, played in the Cretian rhythm: long-short-long.

The couplets between the refrains are a dialogue between three different orchestral colors. While the tempo is slower, the melodic and rhythmic freedom is retained. Following the second couplet, a coda on the refrain closes the movement. Similar to the end of movement V, the solo trumpet disappears in a blaze of glory.

## VII. LE MYSTÈRE DE LA SAINTE TRINITÉ [The mystery of the Holy Trinity]

'O Père tout-puissant, qui, avec votre Fils unique et le Saint-Esprit, êtes un seul Dieu! Non dans l'unité d'une seule personne, mais dans la Trinité d'une seule substance.'

- Missel, Préface de la Sainte Trinité

['O Father, who, with thine only begotten Son and the Holy Spirit, art one sole God! Not in the unity of one sole person, but in the Trinity of one sole substance.]

- Mass for Trinity Sunday, Preface

Devoted to the Holy Trinity, this final movement places a heavy emphasis on the number three. The piece is written in trio texture with one voice in each hand and a third voice in the pedals. The middle voice, played on a solo flute, represents the Son. This voice is, once again, inspired by Gregorian chant and is in the form of a traditional Kyrie.

*Kyrie eleison. Kyrie eleison. Kyrie eleison.  
Christe eleison. Christe eleison. Christe eleison.  
Kyrie eleison. Kyrie eleison. Kyrie eleison.*

There are nine invocations of the main theme, which is the algebraic product of three and three. Surrounding this haunting Kyrie are the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Father is heard in the pedals on the very lowest stops of the organ while the Holy Spirit is heard in the right hand on the very highest stops of the organ. This highly mystical registration, according to Messiaen, "surrounds the middle voice with a double halo of mystery, projecting it forward."

As the piece draws to an end, we encounter once again Messiaen's musical depiction of eternity: a sound without beginning or end. In essence, this movement has been sounding since the beginning of time and will continue until the end of time; we are simply allowed to hear it at this time and place. In the last hour, we have contemplated the greatest mysteries of life and death. Following a climax at the highest note of the movement, the tension and sonority quickly fade. It is not the end of the piece but, as mortals, we can go no further. The Holy Spirit and the resurrected bodies continue their procession into eternity as the music fades to silence.

### Bibliography:

Gillock, Jon. *Performing Messiaen's Organ Music*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2010.