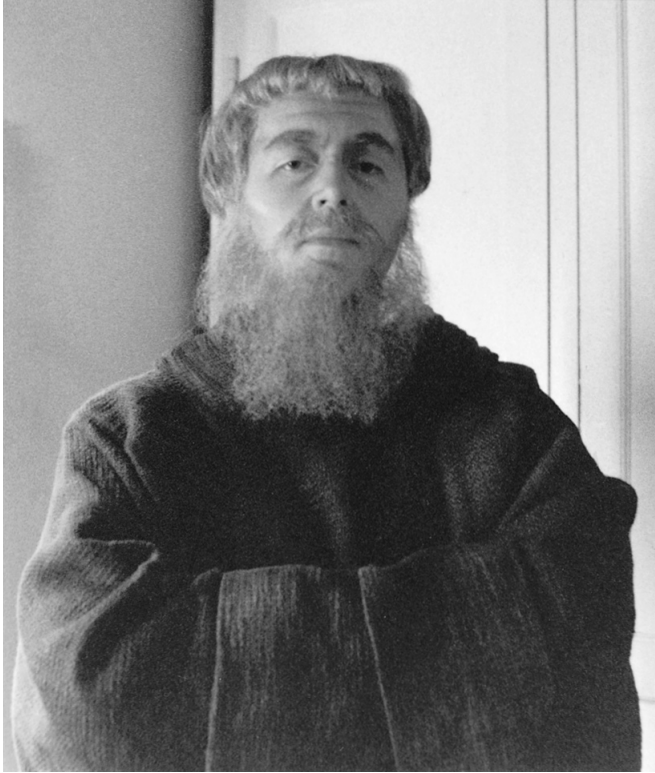

Recollections on Singing Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise*

R O B E R T G R E N I E R

I N a record store I recently saw a newly released recording of Olivier Messiaen's opera, *Saint François d'Assise*. This brought to mind a variety of recollections associated with the first production of the opera, in which I was privileged to participate. With this new recording comes the fact that the work has a life independent of any association I had with it, just as it should be. Finding it released in me a host of memories whose character is mostly anecdotal, coming, as it does, some fifteen years after the events themselves.

For four years (1980–84), I was a member of the Troupe de l'Opéra de Paris—who were the house singers called upon to sing roles not given to the luminaries that graced the stage of the Opéra. In the case of *Saint François*, it was decided that many of the roles would be sung by house singers, with three central roles being given to great artists: St. Francis was sung by José van Dam, the Angel by Christiane Eda-Pierre, and the Leper by Kenneth Riegel. Jean-Phillipe Courtis and I were cast to sing the role of Frère Bernard, which I performed twice in the Palais Garnier. Of the eight scenes in the opera, Frère Bernard appears in four, the most important being that of act 2, scene 4, where the Angel and Frère Bernard share the stage. Once cast, we were given vocal scores to begin studying our parts. These scores were unlike anything I had seen before. Their physical dimensions were far larger than normal, due, in part, to the fact that they were manuscript copies, and that the “piano reduction” required at least four and five staves to contain all the parts and cues that were found in the orchestral score. Each scene came as a separate book of varying thickness. I needed an extra bag to carry my scores. The understudy of van Dam, who was a sturdy young baritone, eventually complained to me of experiencing back problems after carrying all eight scenes to and from rehearsals in a backpack.



The author in costume as Frère Bernard, in his dressing room, for the Paris Opéra production of Messiaen's Saint François d'Assise. (Photo from author's private collection.)

We were all expected to work with Messiaen and his wife, Yvonne Loriod, at their apartment in Paris. Schedules were arranged, and I went twice to be coached. Not exactly knowing the part of the city where they lived, I got lost and arrived late for my first rehearsal. Despite my tardiness, I was greeted courteously and we got to work, Madame Loriod at the keyboard playing her own piano reduction. This was reassuring since the piano score was quite forbidding, and I decided to focus my attention on the vocal part. The rehearsal went well, with Messiaen explaining to me his choice of the Philemon, or monk bird from New Caledonia, as the source of the thematic material associated with the character I was playing. I recall how enthusiastically he related to me his trip to the island and how, after the exceptionally long plane ride, he and his wife felt rejuvenated upon landing and experiencing its tropical beauty.

Probably the most surprising moment came when he asked me if I thought that his vocal writing was good. I assured him it was; that it all lay in a com-

fortable part of the voice. I could only speculate what could have happened if I had responded otherwise. French culture would, no doubt, have survived my critique! Upon reflection, it struck me that Messiaen's opera is not principally about the voice; above all, the work poses some very profound questions concerning the spiritual quest of a saint. It is essential that these ideas be clearly unimpeded by an extravagant vocalism with its attendant and potentially distracting sensualism. To that end, the vocal writing tends to avoid the extremes of the range; it is mostly syllabic, preserving the normal cadence of speech, even as the composer quotes liberally from his ornithological anthology. The exception to this is the contorted vocal writing for the Leper, clearly a response to the physical and spiritual torment of this character. The listener's natural response to his vocal expression is one of repulsion consistent with how the character's physical appearance is perceived, by us and by St. Francis, for whom the Leper represented a challenge to faith. In general, Messiaen's vocal writing in his opera seems closer to the discourse one hears among reasonable men.

Half jokingly I asked Messiaen if his *Saint François* was, in some way, a response to Poulenc's *Dialogues*. He did not get my point. I was referring to the fact that, while in his opera the male voice is predominant, Poulenc's score clearly favors the female voice. In a later conversation with some other artists, I mentioned this same point. One person remarked that Messiaen could have availed himself of the stories of St. Claire, St. Francis's spiritual companion, if he wished to introduce more female voices into the score. The point is a valid one. However, the introduction of any of the legends of St. Claire could have complicated the plot, which is episodically constructed with each scene focusing on one specific issue. *Saint François*, like *Dialogues*, is less a story about people than a story about people who are focused on their souls. What we see on stage are bodies, but these are the necessary receptacles for an action that is spiritual in nature. St. Francis himself is on an heroic quest to greater self-understanding, or, more exactly, greater self-overcoming.

As in Poulenc's *Dialogues*, there is no love scene in this opera, and yet Messiaen's *Saint François* is essentially erotic in that there is an intense longing for God throughout. If the sensualism is not to be found in the human voice, it is clearly present in the truly vast orchestral and choral resources Messiaen employs. Indeed, all the singers were astonished, if not intimidated, by the huge orchestra that was required. The pit of the Opéra housed the strings and an enormous array of percussion instruments; on either side of the stage, with us, were rows of musicians. I counted seven flutes, four oboes, seven clarinets, and a quartet of bassoons. On the other side of the stage were found six French horns as well as a number of keyboard instruments: xylophone, marimba, glockenspiel, xylorimba, and vibraphone, perched on boards that covered a portion of the pit. As if that weren't enough, five of the Opéra's balconies lodged the two Ondes Martenot (a third was in the pit), as well as

the tubas, trombones, and trumpets. I will never forget the day we were rehearsing what the French call an "Italienne," when the singers sit on stage and sing with the orchestra. After a moment's delay, I was summoned to sing my phrase. Unsure of the pitch, I called out in French, "Si bémol" (B flat), whereupon a veritable shower of B flats of every imaginable sonority came at me from all directions. It was at that moment that I first realized the power associated with conducting.

The vast orchestra consisted of a remarkably disciplined group of musicians who executed their parts with enthusiasm. If we singers complained about carrying our heavy vocal scores to rehearsals, these took a back seat to the enormous orchestral scores. I believe it was the score for scene 6 that most impressed us, since it came in its own suitcase. I still recall the conductors, Seiji Ozawa and his alternate Kent Nagano, hauling this giant score on to the conductor's stand and smiling at us, as if the exertion just to place this enormous book at its correct spot was a major accomplishment. No doubt the discipline of the orchestra pleased the composer, although I do recall one rough moment in the general rehearsals where he stood up and severely chastised the chorus for some misdeed or other. But generally he remained calm, while deeply engaged in the activity associated with mounting this giant work. It took nearly six hours to perform, with the necessary intermissions. The composer did get flustered one day when he was informed that television crews needed ten complete piano-vocal scores to follow the action during the video recording. His voice was quite high-pitched, and he departed from the room in some haste, as if to stomp out a fire. While my admiration for the orchestra was great, one occasion did trouble me on stage, when I was singing act 2, scene 4. It was quite clear to me that the accompaniment was beginning to wander off track, as I felt the orchestral support buckling underneath me. All I could do was watch the conductor cue me as he restored some order to the scene. Of course there was always the prompter, who, in a very clear voice (indeed, so clear and prominent that it threatened the production of the original live recording), kept me and the others onstage on track.

The opportunity of doing this opera allowed me to become briefly acquainted with Messiaen. He was very gracious and open at his home, a rather small and neatly kept apartment. What struck me was that nearly everything I saw was in various hues of red: curtains, bedspreads, etc. I noticed a small display cabinet filled with wonderful Hellenic artifacts and some small figurines. Apart from this collection of classical treasures, nowhere was the impression given of luxury. Everything bespoke a modesty of means, despite the intense colors that reigned in the apartment. I was told that Messiaen, while no doubt earning a comfortable living, had given much of his income away to help others. Attentive to the fact that singers are always hungry, Madame Loriord had provided some light refreshments. It was all quite nice and in some ways unremarkable, until it came time for me to leave. I

announced that I was on my way to Saint-Germain des Près to hear a performance of Mozart's Requiem, and I was astounded when Messiaen told me that he had never heard it. Surely, this was the last thing I would have expected to hear from such a musician. When I expressed my surprise, he repeated that he had never heard the Requiem. I am sure he merely intended to say that he had never attended a performance of this work. I suggested that maybe he should accompany me to the concert. Regretfully, he declined. (I was so astonished by his admission that I remember discussing it with some of my musician friends, who were equally surprised.)

Madame Loriod, like her husband, exhibited a firm character. While in the opera house, she would sit (with her many scores) in the very back and attend to all the business swirling around her. Frequently, I would sit with her as I watched the proceedings. Once I asked if she would rather be doing something else, to which she quickly responded that after ten years of working on this score with her husband, she was not about to go anywhere else until the opera was successfully mounted. The enormity of Messiaen's achievement with this opera is difficult to describe. It was said that the role of St. Francis was longer than that of Hans Sachs in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, considered the longest baritone role in the repertoire. I still recall Messiaen approaching van Dam after a performance and inquiring if he was all right after six hours, nearly all of it onstage. Van Dam responded in the affirmative, but I still see the concern on Messiaen's face as well as the exhaustion evident in the body language of van Dam.

Messiaen appears to have tried to avoid writing *Saint François*. He related to me that on several occasions he was asked to compose an opera. He was assured that, with resources of the state to support him, he could realize his artistic ambitions. He relented only after President Georges Pompidou asked him in the Elysée Palace during a public function. At that point Messiaen saw it as a call from France itself, not to be turned down.

Public reaction to the opera was mixed. At the dress rehearsal, the final scene of the opera, with its radiant fanfares and opulent sonorities, was enthusiastically greeted by the invited audience. Messiaen sat in his chair until several of us encouraged him to get up and acknowledge the applause. As he slowly rose to greet the public, his body language suggested to me great fatigue. During the first public performance there was booing from the audience at the end of act 1. This seemed rude to me, though I had to remind myself that few people at that time had any conception of what this opera was about. My disappointment mounted when I spoke to the minister of culture from Quebec, who expressed to me his evident displeasure in Messiaen's creation. It was clear to me that Messiaen's courage was not appreciated: What an uncompromising story he was telling us! Such hard, difficult questions! We must all ask ourselves, as does St. Francis repeatedly in the first scene of the opera: "Où est la joie parfaite?" Our quest for happiness in this life is at the center of Messiaen's work.



*José van Dam in the title role of Messiaen's Saint François d'Assise, Paris Opéra 1983.
(Photo from author's private collection.)*

Such important documents as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and, more recently, the American Declaration of Independence are attempts to respond to this human need. Aristotle denies the possibility of happiness to anyone, for disaster could befall an individual at any time. The authors of the Declaration of Independence wisely express this desire for happiness in terms of a pursuit and not necessarily an attainment. As St. Francis comes to a greater understanding of the answer, one is made to realize that suffering is not independent from hap-

piness, and his embracing of suffering is a very non-modern answer to this question. It is, in fact, a disturbing response. Messiaen's score provides a beautiful framework in which these issues are developed and pursued.

Two scenes of the opera are particularly memorable for me in that they represent, alternately, great joy and great suffering. The first is act 2, scene 2, called "The Sermon to the Birds." What greater confluence could be imagined than a scene in which Messiaen could display his vast knowledge of ornithology and his Christian faith at the same time? The sweep of the music, full of natural exuberance and the joy of confidence in one's faith, makes this scene a highlight. St. Francis utters this memorable line: "Everything beautiful should lead to freedom, the freedom of glory," and with uncommon, even transcendent, wisdom, he begins to preach to the birds. The beauty of which Messiaen makes St. Francis speak has its origins in the unknowable beauty of God, of which we, as all things, are but a fleeting reflection. With this one amazingly beautiful scene, Messiaen links the celestial and terrestrial orders of creation into an harmonious whole, letting the greatest singers on the planet, the birds, lead the way.

The first scene of act 3 is without a doubt the most powerful. St. Francis receives the stigmata, seeking to feel both the pain of Christ's suffering and the love "that allowed you to accept such a Passion for us sinners." Messiaen produced a score of uncompromising power here. The music even possesses a certain brute force evocative of the pounding of hammers on nails. St. Francis receives the answer to his quest: he is accorded joy through the acceptance of suffering. Messiaen explores the mystery that is at the heart of our existence and exposes in this most dreadful moment a harsh reality from which most of us would do anything to escape.

While the onstage drama of *Saint François* unfolded, the artists led a decidedly less exalted existence offstage. We all received little gifts from the composer, deposited on our dressing room tables; I received some foie gras and one of his *cartes de visite*. Those who received one of these cards were astounded by the information on it, for it constituted a mini-biography. We were informed that Olivier Messiaen was a composer of music, a rhythmician, and the recipient of a great many honorary doctorates and awards, any one of which would constitute the accomplishment of a lesser mortal's lifetime. On another occasion, I acquired a photo of Ozawa, Messiaen, and the stage director, Sandro Sequi, that was made available for the press. Messiaen very graciously signed and dedicated the photo: "A Robert, très amicalement et un grand merci." Unfortunately, I only had a pencil and thus got a faint impression of his hand on the bottom of the glossy photo. Nevertheless, I brought the photo, along with the *carte de visite*, to a framer on the Boulevard de Montparnasse, who undertook to preserve these two mementos of my experience. On the other side of the *carte*, Messiaen had written his name quite clearly. I thought that I would never see this signature again, considering that it was about to be permanently framed. Consider my joy when, on receiving it back from the framer, I discov-

ered he had cut a small window in the back so that the signature could be seen through a transparent shield.

In sum, these written recollections are very much an expression of my gratitude, not yet ended, for my encounter with the music and thought of Olivier Messiaen. Like a great teacher whose words continue to resonate with you, after the physical presence is no longer there, all I needed for it to be reinitiated was that casual encounter in a record shop.