

SPIRIT PLACES 5/24/08

5/31/08 Best of All: On The Edge "Then to Jacaranda: its fifth season finale in Santa Monica's attractive First Presbyterian, where it will return after opening next season at The Broad Stage a mere nine blocks inland; the midpoint in its wonderfully imaginative celebration of the Messiaen centennial by recreating the whole musical world around that seminal composer. Things still in my head from this music-laden event : Debussy's Sacred and Profane Dances in their original setting for harp (Maria Casale) and five strings, an explosion of rich, lush harmony; the glorious racket of birdsong transformed in Messiaen's Colors of the Celestial City with Gloria Cheng, our local treasure, at the piano, and – music remarkable and most unfamiliar, Daniel-Lesur's Song of Songs for chorus a cappella, the harvest of darkest, ripest fruit set to music, sung by a small chorus under Grant Gershon to end the season not with a bang but a whisper."

– Alan Rich, SolveHeard.com

5/26/08 An Engaging Finale to Another Jacaranda Season: A smart program centering on Olivier Messiaen gives a multifaceted portrait. "Jacaranda, the illuminating and increasingly important Southland music series, bills itself as 'music at the edge of Santa Monica.' True enough, its focus courts edginess, if cautiously, and with a mandate on mixing challenging and ear-pleasing fare.

And quite literally, the concerts take place on the continental edge in the newly remodeled First Presbyterian Church on 2nd Street, a large stone's throw from the Pacific. With the series closing its fifth season Saturday, it has become apparent that Jacaranda has nudged its way from the fringes toward the middle of what's good in Los Angeles' classical music culture. It's a success story in progress.

Saturday's long and smartly programmed concert, part of the multi-concert centennial tribute to the late, great French composer Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992), proved to be a fine example of the shrewd, engaging Jacaranda approach. In this densely packed evening, with eight separate works spread out in style and vintage (though all from the 20th century), concertgoers got a composite, multi-angled portrait of Messiaen, his time and temperament, through his works and those of his colleagues, mentors and protégés.

Messiaen's star student, Pierre Boulez, provided the evening's stellar serialist moment. His 'Memorial' is a brief but action- and tension-packed work. Boulez's disarmingly meditative logic shines beneath the cool veneer.

Flutist Pamela Vlieg Martchev acquitted herself beautifully here in the spotlight, as she also did on the palatable Modernist wash of André Jolivet's 'Song of Linus,' the concert's opener. Another highlight, Stravinsky's 'Octet,' was full of requisite neoclassical bounce and sneaky deposits of sometimes Modernist/circus-y wit in the lining.

Centering all the varied musical tendrils, also including pieces by forebear Debussy and teacher Paul Dukas, were Messiaen's early choral work 'O Sacrum Convivium,' written as a twentysomething, and his dazzling 1963 'Colors of the Celestial City.' With a sound palette of brass, percussion and piano in the middle (the sharp, glorious Gloria Cheng), the work as played here had a bracing magnificence and sonic audacity, including imitations of the plangent Brazilian araponga bird.

Here is music, still vivid 40-plus years later, celebrating sound, space, nature and divinity, without sentimental aftertaste. This is music on the edge, but also very much in the middle.

– Josef Woodard, Los Angeles Times

VORTEX NEBULA 4/12/08

4/17/08 – **Light and Dark Fantastic** “‘On the Edge of Santa Monica’ and just plain on the edge: if ever a musical event fit that description, last weekend’s Jacaranda get-together surely did. Iannis Xenakis’ Nomos Alpha began it: Tim Loo’s solo cello howling helplessly into dark corners, beyond definition or resolution, music so beyond human management that a second solo cello must needs be called upon to untangle its principal in its final few measures. It was no disgrace for Tim Loo to enlist Erika Duke in this manner; the madness lay in the over-great expectations by Xenakis himself in projecting such intense but unperformable music. The intensity of the music would have justified the participations of half-a-dozen participants if necessary. Not much of Xenakis’ music invokes the sense of magic; this did. So, of course, did the evening’s final work, Stimmung, of which I have written often and with delight. Karlheinz Stockhausen’s “hippie campfire” (love that!) for voices intoning magic names ended the evening even more mysteriously, gloriously, on a heavenly set capped with a Sirius mockup and six singers robed in angelic white. You had to have been there.”

– Alan Rich, LA Weekly

4/13/08 – **All Together Now** “Sometimes music is about that do-it-yourself attitude. Here in Los Angeles, one of the up and coming proprietors of just such a vision are the good folks who run the Jacaranda concert series out in Santa Monica. If there is something they want to hear and they don’t see enough of it around, by golly, they are going to do it for themselves and everyone else in the vicinity. Under-programmed 20th century composer? It’s yours. Atonal, jarring, or “difficult to listen to? At your service. Music too difficult to be played by mortals? You got it. They’re in the middle of two years of programming honoring the centenary of Olivier Messiaen under the moniker ‘The OM Century,’ and on Saturday they presented a show entitled ‘Vortex Nebula’ featuring works by two of Messiaen’s students – Iannis Xenakis and Karlheinz Stockhausen. And, while it may not have been perfect, it was a huge amount of fun and more interesting than anything else out there this weekend.

Things started off with Xenakis’ legendary Nomos Alpha for solo cello. Technically and intentionally unplayable, the work is more about the choices artists make in striving for an ideal than it is anything else. It is a wonder of 20th century technique, and Jacaranda called on the daring Timothy Loo to take on the challenge. And that he did in spades. He is human, though, and when faced with this task who you gonna call? Why Erika Duke-Kirkpatrick, of course, who helped out with the impossible note or two over the course of the otherwise solo piece. It was amazing playing to watch and a real treat to hear.

Following this feat of daring-do – the Jacaranda percussion ensemble amassed to perform the “Metal” movement from Xenakis’ Pleiades. Here all six musicians play the “sixxen” a marimba-like instrument designed specifically for this work consisting of large metal slabs and wood. The players hammered away at various and contrasting rhythms that built to a cacophony of gleaming vibration. It was an intense sound for the space and overwhelming in a pleasant way. I can’t recall the last time I saw people covering their ears due to the volume of sound at this sort of show before. It was seriously messed-up (in the good sense of the word) and fantastic.

What do you follow with on a program such as this? Stockhausen’s Stimmung, of course. The six member Concord Ensemble delivered a very high-quality and appropriately free-spirited version of this ‘60s psychedelic classic. The detail and clarity were phenomenal. If I had any criticism, it is that the piece is a somewhat delicate affair, given that it is in

many ways still a product of its time, and rests on a feeling of communal and spiritual elements. While one would think the First Presbyterian Church of Santa Monica would be ideal for this in its natural state, the performance here was hampered with a make shift Doctor Who set that was more distracting than helpful. The six singers, dressed in white dashiki-style clothing, were seated in a circle of chairs covered with a white parachute around a sort of large globe containing a bowl-shaped lamp that changed colors throughout. It reinforced the retro aspects of the piece, making it seem like some kind of relic. Being brave sometimes means you go a little over the line. But, all-in-all, Jacaranda can't be faulted for sticking its neck out, and once again delivered goods that may be hard to come by, at least in this neck of the woods.

– Brian, OutWestArts.blogspot.com

SPIRIT PLACES 3/22/08

3/27/08 On Closer Observation: Amen To That "My deep-purple words written under the spell of Olivier Messiaen's Visions de l'Amen in our last week's visitation were written under the spell of music of similar color at the last "Piano Spheres" concert; those who have teased me about them, and were not at the concert, have only themselves to blame. [3/20/08 -- What am I to do with this music? For the better part of an hour I am pinned against a wall of seductive flame, flayed alive with these violently twisted strands of human emotion, drawn seductively across willing flesh. This is music beautiful beyond human permissiveness. Its ingredients are pure; not a false note disturbs the serenity of its surface; its cadences are exactly well-placed, yet every step forward seems sinful, a violation of the most basic laws of beauty.]

Beyond their just deserts, they have been accorded a reprieve, since that astonishing work formed the major substance of last weekend's Jacaranda Concert "at the edge of Santa Monica" and if you missed it this time it's there on a New Albion disc by the same performers, the piano duo known as Double Edge. ...the Double Edge performance, on disc and at the First Presbyterian Church last Saturday, rank among my sublime experiences. Edmund Niemann and Nurit Tilles formed Double Edge in 1978. They have also played with Steve Reich's Musicians almost since the beginning of his time. It tells you the stature of the Jacaranda people that they brought Double Edge out here for their own Messiaen celebration, and also for a major William Bolcom work.

Bolcom's 1971 Frescoes is, like most of his best works, a "jumble of half-remembrances" which poke at you delightfully – this time from an assortment of keyboards, in other works a variorum of other kinds of etceteras. In a sense the work set the tone for the entire program, which meandered agreeably past a couple of shorter Messiaen works – the evocative horn call from Canyons to the Stars and an early set of Variations that had the feature, unique for Messiaen, of letting us know at every moment exactly where we were in the music. One again the "Amen" Visions projected no such message, however. I cannot yet reach ground zero in its vastness; someday I will."

— Alan Rich, LA Weekly

3/24/08 Rapture requires 176 keys: The two-piano duo Double Edge captivates with the amens of Messiaen. "Easter eve. Spring's second day, and Purim's. The moon, coming off full, hangs over Santa Monica Bay. The weather is balmy. Night-blooming jasmine perfumes soft air. Lovers walk hand in hand. But all is not well in paradise. The homeless add their misery to the Palisades. Raymond Chandler would have had a wisecrack and a crime for such a scene. Instead, there is, a block from the shore, music

-- Jacaranda in flower with Messiaen. Santa Monica's new-music series, Jacaranda, at First Presbyterian Church, is besotted with the French composer. It began celebrating the coming 100th anniversary of his birth (Dec. 10) last year and will continue doing so for a while. Saturday night, "Visions de l'Amen" was the main work.

In this score for two pianos, Messiaen said amen to Creation; to the stars; to the agony of Jesus; to desire; to birds, saints and angels; to the Day of Judgment; and, yes, to paradise. Most of all, though, he exulted in ardent, unquenchable Desire -- the passions for life, love, nature and the divine, eroticism and spirituality all entwined.

"Visions de l'Amen" is a feast of glorious, peeling music for blighted times. Messiaen composed it in 1943, in Nazi-occupied Paris, for himself and a young pianist, Yvonne Loriod, who became his muse. He wrote with the fervent belief that the artist's role is to reveal ecstasy as the way of the world, no matter how bleak the temporal situation.

At the moment, these seven rapturous amens have our attention. On Saturday, Double Edge was the third duo to perform the score in our region during the last month.

Formed 30 years ago by Nurit Tilles and Edmund Niemann, Double Edge has long been on the cutting edge of the new-music scene. John Cage, Meredith Monk and Steve Reich have been among the many major composers who have sought out these excellent pianists. "Visions de l'Amen" is one of their specialties.

A joy of Jacaranda is in programming full of context. Double Edge began with "Frescoes," two long movements for two pianos by William Bolcom, written in 1971. A decade earlier, the American composer had studied with Messiaen, but he quickly moved on, with Scott Joplin, Broadway classics, rock and various aspects of classical music and jazz also capturing his insatiable fancy.

This too is music from a time of war. A Vietnam protest piece, "Frescos" has deep, dark, Messiaen-like bass rumblings that set the scene of each movement. The pianists occasionally go after each other, their grands in battle, taking pauses to lick their wounds in quiet music on harmonium and harpsichord, which sit beside the Steinways. Other music of all kinds enters the stream-of-consciousness fray. What Bolcom took away most from Messiaen was the idea that exuberance is the activist artist's secret weapon.

Also on the program's first half were the mystical solo horn movement from Messiaen's chamber orchestra epic, "From the Canyons to the Stars," and his fleshy Theme and Variations for violin and piano -- a sumptuous love letter written when he was 24 to his first wife. Richard Todd (horn), Sarah Thornblade (violin) and Vicki Ray (piano) were the engaging performers.

Double Edge's "Visions de l'Amen" had the duo's typically exciting hard edge. These are modernist players through and through. They attack the 45-minute score as ear-grabbing new music, as a swirling mass of spellbinding sonorities and as a funhouse of rhythmic invention. They do not deny the music its mysticism or eroticism, but they make no interpretive value judgments.

These pianists' exuberance is in their virtuosity. Double Edge raises the temperature in the room but steers clear of imposing escapist fantasies on the audience, leaving listeners their spiritual privacy. It was a tremendous performance.

— Mark Swed, Los Angeles Times

Diary Gallery Elegy 2/16/08

No reviews

IN CAPTIVITY 1/26/08

1/31/08 **The Church at The End Of Time** "As Paul on the road to Damascus, so am I on the high road of reconciliation to the music of Olivier Messiaen, and you're just gonna hear about it for one more week. Amazement abounded in Santa Monica's abundant rain last Saturday in the form, need I tell you, of the Jacaranda Concerts' latest chapter in its multi-year Messiaen bash. First Pres was jammed; everybody was there except Mark Swed, who was in Oregon where Peter Serkin's Tashi, the first group ever to play the Quartet for the End of Time popularly in the real world, was having at it in an anniversary event. They couldn't have played any better, with any more profound dedication, than Jacaranda's folks.

Patrick Scott's program notes for the Quartet -- detailing the prison-camp life out of which the music took shape, the early performance history and the inner lights that cast their glow upon every aspect of the music itself and from the emboldened soul of its creator -- constitute an enriching document. In themselves they demonstrate how this remarkable series stands apart from most other concert ventures: simply by maintaining this close identity between the music on each program and the genuine dedication and love of the people involved in it.

There is no better way, of course, to present the music of this extraordinary work, this series of audible vignettes in which Messiaen lays before us his deep personal vision -- "immaterial, spiritual, Catholic" -- at the heart of the Apocalypse. Angels and birds intertwine in announcing the "End of Time" and the "Eternity of Jesus"; they further unite in praise to the "Eternity of Jesus, "to "His Immortality"; these moments of praise are among the most poignant, the most painful in their meaningful beauty, of all sections of the quartet's eight movements. A solo for cello and piano (Timothy Loo and Gloria Cheng) transcended all in sheer radiance this time around.

Jacaranda's program, the usual gatherum, began with organist Mark Hilt's playing of Bach's ever-popular d-minor Toccata and Fugue and went on to three movements only from Berg's Lyric Suite followed by all of Ravel's Mother Goose for piano duet. The splendid Denali Quartet, Jacaranda's resident ensemble, nicely dispatched the Berg movements, with Elissa Johnston to sing the Baudelaire verses that may or may not belong to the sixth movement; Gloria Cheng and Mark Alan Hilt played Ravel's juvenilia like the grown-ups they are."

— Alan Rich, LA Weekly

1/31/08 **Artistic Instincts** "...aren't most good instincts in art about style and sensibility? The musicians of Jacaranda seemed to know that when, in their recent tribute to Olivier Messiaen at the First Presbyterian Church of Santa Monica, they invited soprano Elissa Johnston to intone -- as she grippingly did -- Baudelaire's "Fleurs du Mal" from the sixth movement of Berg's silken Lyric Suite, accompanied by the remarkable Denali Quartet."

— Donna Perlmutter, Los Angeles CITY BEAT

BRIGHT TOKENS 12/9/07

12/11/07 **More Messiaen in a worshipful setting:** As the composer's centennial year begins, Jacaranda focuses on his influences and acolytes. "Monday was the 99th anniversary of Olivier Messiaen's birth. An important centenary celebration has begun, a year of the hugely influential French composer, who died in 1992. And in the Southland this season and next, Messiaen Central is, curiously and not curiously, the First Presbyterian Church of Santa Monica.

Curiously, because Messiaen was, in his music and his life, an ecstatic, sensual, unwavering Catholic. And not curiously because First Presbyterian is home to the new music series Jacaranda. For Jacaranda, Messiaen is a universal musical god, and the series has set out to prove it, with its two-year imaginative examination of "The OM Century," which began in October and which will put the composer in context of his time and ours. On Sunday afternoon, the third program was devoted to composers of Messiaen's youth and some examples of his own first pieces and a couple of works of his followers. Messiaen could seem a *mélange* of contradictions. He devoutly played organ for Sunday-morning services in Paris while at the same time composing erotically explicit music.

He had a fondness for harmonies so lush they could be just this side of Hollywood, yet he also led the charge of the postwar European avant-garde in the late '40s and early '50s, both as a musical innovator of mathematically advanced serial music and as a hugely influential teacher of Boulez and Stockhausen. He could cast a mystical spell by mimicking the racket of an aviary.

But as Sunday's program for piano and cello, performed by Steven Vanhauwaert and Timothy Loo, nicely illustrated, Messiaen's roots were not that unusual. He was drawn to what was new and important in the Paris of his youth, namely Debussy and Ravel.

Messiaen's first published score -- Eight Preludes, written when he was 19 -- showed him entranced by the colors of Ravel's piano music and the dazzling technique of Debussy's. Vanhauwaert, a Belgian pianist who is in the graduate program at USC, played four of the preludes after having floated through three glittery numbers from Ravel's *Mirrors* and three of Debussy's technically arresting *Etudes*. Lineages were further revealed by including Liszt's *Fountains of the Villa d'Este*, since this flamboyantly watery 19th century piano writing led pretty directly to Ravel.

Still, for all he learned from the examples of Debussy and Ravel, Messiaen's personality was already unmistakable in the teenage Preludes. His infatuation with birds is present in "The Dove." "Ecstatic Song in a Sad Landscape" was the start of a career of ecstatic songs, though more typically in happy heaven. "The Implacable Sounds of a Dream" was the beginning of a Romantic dreaminess that never left him no matter how advanced his music became. "A Reflection in the Wind" is Debussyan but also the music of an implacable naturalist.

Vanhauwaert is a cool customer at the keyboard. First Presbyterian doesn't have quite as good or large a piano as he needed for music of such vibrant sonorities, but his impressive clarity and sense of structure -- to say nothing of a monster technique -- provided an often startling immediacy to all his sure fingers touched. A more rapturous player and cellist of the Denali Quartet, Loo joined Vanhauwaert for Debussy's neo-classical Cello Sonata and an early short, sweet Vocalise-Etude, its melody a taffy confection. The fire and ice of cello and piano seemed just about right.

Where all Messiaen's influences led to, and what it meant for his followers, was the program's tease. Vanhauwaert ended with the first of Messiaen's Rhythmic *Etudes*,

"Island of Fire I," from 1950, the work in which the French composer began experimenting with new ways of structuring music that inspired Boulez and Stockhausen.

At the opposite end of the afternoon and the opposite extreme, Vanhauwaert began the program with Step by Step, a strange piece from 1985 by a Belgian student of Messiaen, Karel Goeyvaerts. The harmonies here had a Messiaen tinge, but the structure reflected the process of rhythmic additions and subtractions common in the early work of Philip Glass and Steve Reich.

Toru Takemitsu's Litany -- written in 1950, lost, and then written anew in 1989 -- was the other example of Messiaen's wide influence. His French harmony and color could be equally at home in Japan. "The OM Century" was really the OM world."

— Mark Swed, Los Angeles Times

DIANA'S QUIVER 11/10/07

11/15/07 **Maximum Force: Messianic Zeal** "I missed the first of this season's Jacaranda concerts through sheer stupidity – the Philip Glass opera in San Francisco. Last weekend's concert held enough satisfaction for two events. The series' connoisseur programmers, Patrick Scott and Mark Alan Hilt, are engaged in a multi-year celebration around the 100th birthday (1908) of Olivier Messiaen in the broadest sense. This time the program was all-Debussy, music by the composer furthest out of the ordinary world at his time and, therefore, closest in spirit to Messiaen's. Later programs in 2007/08 will venture as far afield in search of Messiaen-influencers as Bach and Liszt, not to mention Tchaikovsky, Xenakis and Stockhausen.

The Debussy program included familiar treasures – the shimmering wonderment of the G minor String Quartet, one of the earliest works, and the Violin Sonata, the very last – and some music less well-known. Outstanding among the latter were two sets of Songs of Bilitis, songs to poetry of Pierre Louÿs, lines to be sung with rapture, and wonderment, mostly, at the miracle of the female body – one set for singer and piano, another for reciter with flutes, harps and celesta rolling forth sounds one might expect to hear among Heaven's angels.

Over the years Jacaranda has gathered a steady performers' group with its own nicely interlocking style. Chief among them is the Denali Quartet, founded by cellist Timothy Loo with violinists Sarah Thornblade and Joel Pargman and violist Alma Lisa Fernandez: a spirited ensemble that has braved the rigors of Ben Johnston's just-intonation harmonies and the craggy rhythms of the totality of Revueltas in one sitting. Splendid pianists come through the ranks, including ophthalmologist-turned-virtuoso Scott Dunn and Gloria Cheng and Vicki Ray from the PianoSpheres roster.

It's not too soon to talk about a "Jacaranda style." It has to do with taste: the personal values of a couple of highly educated music lovers, which happen to interlock with a considerable audience who find common cause, and who also welcome a reasonable alternative to I-10 on a Saturday night.

— Alan Rich, LA Weekly

Train of Thought 10/20/2008

No reviews