

Robert Spano Leads the Orchestra of St. Luke's

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Placing Messiaen between two Bach works may seem like a bold move, but in all actuality, the two composers are brethren in their pursuit of the divine in music. For their final program of 2011 at Carnegie Hall, the Orchestra of St. Luke's presented Messiaen's *Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine* between Bach's Third Brandenburg Concerto and his setting of the *Magnificat*. A daring and difficult program was presented with ease, with conductor Robert Spano leading the OSL, along with the Atlanta Symphony Chamber Chorus.

Messiaen's *Trois liturgies*—a mammoth work for women's choir, string orchestra, solo piano, and percussion—is a milestone in the composer's output. Written during World War II, the work presents Messiaen's first use of birdsong and the ondes martenot (an electronic instrument with a ghostly tone much like the theremin), two elements that would become synonymous with later compositions. Drawing texts from multiple sources, among them the Bible and the letters of St. Thomas Aquinas, Messiaen floats the female choir high above the orchestral textures, and at times the pacing of the work feels like suspended animation. Alternating between these moments are fiercely rhythmic passages that call to mind the later *Turangalila* Symphony. Given the transparent textures in Messiaen's compositions, there is no room for uneven playing, and both the orchestra and choir rose to the challenge in spectacular fashion. The first movement's central section combined solo violin, piano, the ondes martenot, vibraphone and percussion underneath the women's choir, echoing the Eastern sounds of the Balinese gamelan—a set of colors that Messiaen adored. The precise playing of the violin and percussion section were vital elements in this effective performance, with Spano's clear and concise patterns at the helm. The final moments of the

piece were breathtaking as the rhythmic motion seemingly evaporated into thin air, with a spacious chorale and decaying dynamics creating a sense of infinity and ascension that only the deeply religious French composer could seem to conjure.

After such crystalline textures, it was comforting to hear the boldly triumphant figurations of Bach's *Magnificat*. The composer's only setting of Mary's song of praise in response to the Immaculate Conception, Bach's 12-movement work is a series of miniatures that range from tranquil pastoral arias to driving fugal moments for the orchestra and choir.

The Chamber Choir was in top form throughout, with even the swiftest vocal passages receiving clear articulation and dedication to the text. The four vocal soloists were consistent enough, with Susanna Phillips' lone aria beautifully phrased as it weaved in and out of an accompanying line from the rich oboe d'amore (expressively performed by OSL principal oboe Stephen Taylor). Another highlight came in the tenor and mezzo-soprano's duo, the *Et misericordia* movement depicting the Lord "casting his mercies from generation to generation." Nicholas Phan and Sasha Cooke blended their timbres together well against a backdrop of muted strings and solo flutes. Their phrasing was lush and, at times, hypnotic.

Phan didn't fare as well in his solo aria, however, which sounded forced and over-articulated when compared to his movement with the mezzo. Often spitting the text, his eager treatment of the text sounded pompous against the effervescent playing of the strings behind him. The chorus' final three movements were each presented well, with the female sections showing great sensitivity in the *Suscepit Israel* movement that ultimately recalled the Messiaen heard in the first half. It was in that moment that the programming of these religious works—spanning more than 200 years in time—not only made musical sense but was a chillingly effective presentation of religious devotion.