

## MUSIC REVIEW

## L.A. Phil flies into Messiaen's awe

By MARK SWED  
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After a couple of intense weeks in the city, the Los Angeles Philharmonic — having completed its performances in its Concrete Frequency festival on Sunday — clearly could use a month in the country. It got a day. But what a day!

Tuesday night, in Messiaen's "From the Canyons to the Stars" at Walt Disney Concert Hall, birds sang and the glorious heavens opened. Esa-Pekka Salonen conducted the Philharmonic's New Music Group (43 players who sounded like 103). Marino Formenti was the exhilarating, superhuman piano soloist. The performance was, in every respect, fabulous.

The Messiaen year — the mystical, hugely influential French composer's 100th birthday is Dec. 10 — has begun here with special pertinence. A brief break from Los Angeles (and another city or two) was, in fact, what inspired Messiaen to compose one of his most astonishing scores.

In April 1972, he and his wife, Yvonne Loriod, performed his two-piano "Vision de l'Amen" in Pasadena. After a short trip back to Paris and then to Washington, D.C., they flew to Utah to spend several days in early May in national parks before returning to L.A. for a Philharmonic performance.

In his diary, Messiaen, a bird fancier, noted the different species he saw (and, more important, heard), along with the colors and chasms of the canyons. At 5:20 one morning, he spotted a pygmy owl. Twelve hours later, he was transfixed by Bryce Canyon's "rocks reaching into the sky."

And that is "From the Canyons to the Stars," a breathtaking 90-minute, three-part,



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**SOLOIST:** Marino Formenti's piano was the über-bird of Messiaen's "From the Canyons to the Stars."

12-movement celebration of birds, boulders, stars and the divine force behind them. Messiaen used a large chamber orchestra full of exotic instruments, including a wind machine. He also asked standard instruments to play in eccentric ways, such as a trumpeter wa-wa-ing into the mouthpiece. Horn, xyloimba and glockenspiel are stage-front.

The music is ravishing in color and made with a mission. Messiaen, who died in 1992, lived his life blissfully awestruck. He was a shameless sensualist (with an almost Hollywoodish flair for purple harmonies), an important musical intellectual (who was responsible for helping bring the mathematically complex rhythms of Indian music into Western composition), a fetishist (especially when it came to the avian world), a synesthetic composer (who associated color with sound) and an unapologetically devout Catholic (who put God into nearly everything he wrote).

In "From the Canyons to the Stars," Messiaen does it all. From first note to last, it evokes

wonder. The solo horn (flawlessly, expressively played by William Lane) represents human suffering; massed horns bring us celestial joy, as the piece journeys from sad isolation to the celebration of massed angels. The strings create eerie harmonics that call to mind the unreal landscape of Utah's canyons.

The birds, of course, never shut up. Many instruments, and particularly the winds, mimic a huge and wild variety of chirping.

The piano, though, is the über-bird. Formenti, who took on this assignment with less than three weeks' notice after the originally scheduled Andreas Haefliger bowed out, seemed to be the manifestation of Messiaen. Utilizing his characteristically enormous and thrilling range of sound, he gave the exceptionally difficult birdsong imitations an almost unbelievable vividness.

Also characteristic of this Italian pianist based in Vienna, he lunged at the piano dramatically. Here it felt as though he not so much made the bird sounds as captured them with

reflexes as fast as those of anything with wings.

Salonen recorded "From the Canyons to the Stars" with the London Sinfonietta and pianist Paul Crossley 20 years ago. The excellent performance seemed a remarkable achievement by a conductor in the year he turned 30, and the CDs still hold up as a clear-headed, accurate reproduction of Messiaen's score. But Tuesday's performance added new dimensions. Clarity remains more than ever a hallmark of Salonen's Messiaen, and the details of sound in Disney were a special treat; I wonder if the piece has ever had an acoustic that suited it better. (It had its premiere in the acoustically undistinguished Alice Tully Hall, the chamber venue of Lincoln Center in New York.)

While maintaining exceptional rhythmic control of intricate music (and keeping the tempos brisk), Salonen somehow found time to make even the smallest moments wondrously expressive. The orchestra, challenged as it may have been, what with the evening's preparation in the midst of Concrete Frequency, thrives on hard work. I can't imagine another major orchestra anywhere that could put together a performance of this caliber in two or three days. Nor can I imagine a major orchestra anywhere with a more appreciative audience for such long, stimulating music. The sizable, attentive crowd couldn't stop cheering at the end.

Messiaen may not have convinced all of his admirers of the afterlife he so firmly believed in. But for 90 minutes Tuesday, I found it difficult to doubt that he wasn't somewhere beaming, his smile reaching from the canyons to the stars.

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