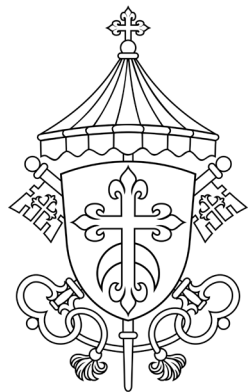


# ST MARY'S CATHEDRAL SYDNEY



## **An organ concert for Christmas**

Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> December 2020

4.00 p.m.

**SIMON NIEMIŃSKI**

*St Mary's Cathedral*

Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992)

***La Nativité du Seigneur***

*The Birth of the Saviour*

**M**essiaen's sound world is unique amongst all twentieth-century composers. This is not only evident through his innovative use of harmony, but perhaps more acutely through his subtle use of timbre. Much has been written of his use of birdsong, his so-called 'modes of limited transposition', Indian rhythms, rhythmic diminution and augmentation, but what is most important is the way all these aspects combine with Messiaen as a person, as a devout Roman Catholic. Organist of Sainte Trinité Church in Paris for over forty years, he was consumed by his faith and used the medium of composition not just as a means of depicting the events surrounding the birth of Christ, but to invoke in his listener a deep spiritual response. Messiaen's strong religious conviction is evident in all nine meditations and he wanted the listener to experience the same revelation he did. They are deeply personal responses which are meant to inspire, to invoke awe, splendour, wonder, fear and power and—above all—a sense of the divine.

## I

### ***La Vierge et l'Enfant*** *The Virgin and Child*

Conçu par une Vierge, un Enfant nous est né, un Fils nous a été donné. Sois transportée d'allégresse, fille de Sion! Voici que ton roi vient à toi, juste et humble.  
*(Isaiah 9:5; Zachariah 9:9)*

*Conceived of a Virgin, unto us a child is born, for unto us a Son is given. Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion, behold thy King cometh unto thee, He is just and lowly.*

This is in A-B-A form. The outer two sections are slow and reflective, while the middle section has a restless melody in the right hand accompanied by constantly moving chords in the left hand.

## II

### ***Les Bergers*** *The Shepherds*

Ayant vu l'Enfant couché dans une crèche, les bergers s'en retournèrent glorifiant et louant Dieu. *(Luke 2:20)*

*Having seen the child lying in the manger, the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God.*

The opening of this movement is slow, with the high-pitched right hand chords punctuating the texture; perhaps this represents the shepherds steadily returning to the manger. The second section is rustic with a rather jaunty melody.

## III

### ***Desseins éternels*** *Eternal purposes*

Dieu, dans son amour, nous a prédestinés à être ses fils adoptifs, par Jésus-Christ, à la louange de la gloire de sa grâce. *(Ephesians 1:5-6)*

*God in His love, has predestined us into the adoption of children by Jesus Christ unto Himself, to the praise and the glory of His grace.*

This is one of the slowest movements of the work. It uses the string stops in the left hand and the low, 32-foot stop in the pedals, forming a beautiful bed of sound, over the top of which a seamless melody floats.

## IV

### ***Le Verbe*** *The Word*

Le Seigneur m'a dit: Tu es mon Fils. De son sein, avant que l'aurore existât, il m'a engendré. Je suis l'image de la bonté de Dieu, je suis le Verbe de vie, dès le commencement.  
(*Psalm 2:7; Proverbs 9:22; 1 John 2*)

*The Lord hath said unto me: Thou art my Son. In His bosom, before the dawn existed, He begat me. I am the image of the goodness of God, I am the Word of life, that which was from the beginning.*

Right hand demisemiquavers create a whirlwind effect, before the Word of God is heard very clearly in the pedals. A central section contains an ostinato pattern in both hands, which builds up before the Word of God is heard again. The movement then concludes with a long, slow section, in which a beautiful, lyrical right hand melody is accompanied by the left hand and pedals.

## V

### ***Les Enfants de Dieu*** *The Children of God*

A tous ceux qui l'ont reçu, le Verbe a donné le pouvoir de devenir enfants de Dieu. Et Dieu a envoyé dans leur coeur l'Esprit de son Fils, lequel crie : Père! Père!  
(*John 1:2; Galatians 4:6*)

*But as many received Him, the Word gave them the power to become the Sons of God. And because ye are Sons, God hath sent forth the spirit of His Son into your hearts crying, Abba! Father!*

This movement begins with thick, moving chords which build up in both dynamic and tempo before a big climax, which could represent the Holy Spirit crying, 'Abba! Father!' This climax then subsides, before the movement concludes with some lush harmonies played on string and foundation stops.

## VI

### ***Les Anges*** *The Angels*

L'armée céleste louait Dieu et disait: Gloire à Dieu au plus haut des cieux! (*Luke 2:13-14*)

*And there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: glory to God in the highest.*

This is one of the most evocative movements of the work, in which the angels can be imagined. The final section is a stream of constant semiquavers, which eventually flutter off into the distance.

## VII

### ***Jésus accepte la souffrance*** *Jesus accepts sorrow*

Le Christ a dit à son Père en entrant dans le monde: Vous n'avez agréé ni holocaustes, ni sacrifices pour le péché, mais vous m'avez formé un corps. Me voici! (*Hebrews 10:5, 7*)

*Wherefore when He cometh into the world He said unto His Father: Sacrifice and offering you wouldst not, but a body hast Thou prepared me. Lo, I come!*

The suffering of Christ is clearly depicted by thick chords on the trumpet stop and a deep, unsettling motif in the pedals. Even the quiet interludes sound uneasy. This is followed by a passage of rising and falling chords, before the trumpet chords return. The movement ends with an awe-inspiring climax, perhaps representing Christ's eventual triumph over suffering.

## VIII

### ***Les Mages***

#### *The Magi*

Les mages partirent, et l'étoile allait devant eux. (*Matthew 2:9*)

*The wise men departed, and the star went before them.*

This is a highly effective depiction of the wise men steadily travelling along the road, following the star, signalled by the unerring melody played by the pedals which floats above the texture. The constant motion of this music gives the impression of the wise men endlessly journeying, with their minds focused on the star. Twice the music pauses, as if the travellers have taken a rest, only to resume its motion as before.

## IX

### ***Dieu parmi nous***

#### *God among us*

Paroles du communiant, de la Vierge, de l'Eglise toute entière: Celui qui m'a créée a reposé dans ma tente, le Verbe s'est fait chair et il a habité en moi. Mon âme glorifie le Seigneur, mon esprit a tressailli d'allégresse en Dieu mon Sauveur. (*Ecclesiasticus 24:8; John 1:14; Luke 1:46-47*)

*Words of the communicant, the Virgin and of the whole church: He who created me has rested in my house, the Word was made flesh and it has dwelt in me. My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour.*

The God theme is heard powerfully at the outset in the pedals. Descending chords are interspersed with joyous rhythms played in unison. There is a restless central section which eventually gives way to a climax of the descending chord sequence. Then follows an inversion of the God theme, before great joy breaks free in the form of an exuberant toccata in which the God theme is heard in both the pedals and the top of the right hand. The work eventually concludes with the pedals playing the bottom four notes of the God theme, settling on an exuberant E major chord, as the Incarnation of God is finally made manifest.

**S**IMON NIEMIŃSKI was born in London and studied at the Royal College of Music, at Pembroke College, Cambridge (where he was Organ Scholar) and then as Organ Scholar of York Minster. He is currently Assistant Director of Music at St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney. Before this, he held posts successively at both of Edinburgh's St Mary's Cathedrals: Master of the Music at St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral and subsequently Organist at St Mary's Metropolitan Cathedral. He was also Director of Music at The Robin Chapel of The Thistle Foundation in Edinburgh.

His work has taken him around the UK and abroad, both in concert and over the airwaves, from BBC Radio's *The Organist Entertains* programme to Choral Evensong, and *Pipedreams* in the USA. His recordings have helped to revive the music of unjustly neglected composers; his first CD, for example was of Eugène Reuchsel's *Promenades en Provence* ("This is a splendid release... There is a lot of poetry here." – *The American Record Guide*; "Simon Niemiński's playing is utterly convincing and at one stroke establishes him as a recording artist of the first rank." – *Organists' Review*.) An interest in transcriptions has resulted in more recordings, including Elgar's *Enigma Variations* ("Romantic organ playing at its best" – *The Organ*.) Two of Simon's recent recordings are the première of Giles Swayne's monumental *Stations of the Cross*, and another of rare works by Sir Charles Villiers Stanford. His latest disc is of Eugène Reuchsel's *La Vie du Christ* and *Bouquet de France*, recorded at The High Kirk of St Giles in Edinburgh.

Simon's recent live engagements have included recitals at York Minster and Durham Cathedral, Notre Dame in Paris, a Royal Canadian College of Organists annual convention, twice at the International Organ Festival in Japan, and at Sydney and Adelaide Town Halls. He has also performed with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, the Northern Sinfonia, the Scottish National Jazz Orchestra, the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and accompanied the BBC Singers.

[www.niemin.ski](http://www.niemin.ski)



We are grateful to The Dean for his support  
and for making the cathedral available for this concert.

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