

## Messiaen's *Visions de l'Amen* 101

*New to Messiaen? No problem. Here's everything you need to know about one of the masterpieces of the twentieth century*

For the photo competition: remember, you do not need to submit seven photos! If you can listen to the whole piece, that's excellent; but technically, you only need to listen to one movement to enter. And remember – the tracks are all available at the iTunes Store (the Osborne/Roscoe recording is the one to use).

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**Olivier Messiaen** (1908–92), was the most distinguished and influential French composer of his generation. He was able to combine huge technical expertise with direct musical expression that made him quickly accessible to a large public.

He was a passionate and devout Roman Catholic, and virtually everything he wrote relates to his faith. For over sixty years he was the regular church organist at l'Église de la Trinité in Paris. Friends said it was obvious he possessed a profound joy. He hated music that he felt wallowed in pain and suffering (though he had more than his fair share of hard times).

His musical language is quite distinctive. So we can't expect to hear the kind of song we might typically have on our playlist; he wants us to hear *new* sounds. Nor is this background music – he is asking you to give him your full attention.

Messiaen thinks in *visual* terms – he uses sounds to paint pictures, to evoke colorful images. When he was ten years old he gazed at the dazzling stained glass windows of Saint Chapelle in Paris, and the effect was life-changing. He wants to dazzle his listeners as Saint Chapelle's glass dazzled him.

### ***The piece***

*Visions de l'Amen* is a piece for two pianos. It was written in 1943, right in the middle of the second world war, when France was occupied by the Germans. Messiaen had been a prisoner of war, and this was the first thing he wrote after being released. One commentator called it “a defiant affirmation of faith in the face of man's inhumanity.”

The second piano has the big tunes, the main themes, and the first piano has most of the sparkling virtuosity. The first piano part was written for his pupil Yvonne Loriod whom he later married.

“Amen” has various meanings – but the commonest basic idea is that of “Let it be!” or affirmation. The overall mood of the work is celebration.

Now let's look at each movement in turn.

## **I. Amen de la Création (“Amen of Creation”)**

[CAPTION THAT WILL APPEAR UNDER THE WINNING PHOTO FOR THIS MOVEMENT]

And God said “Let there be light!” The “theme of creation” arises from the dark depths, steady, solemn and hymn-like. As the daylight gradually swells and expands, bell-like chords ring ever louder, glistening like precious stones turned in the sunlight.

NOTES:

This is basically an enormous crescendo. The second piano plays what is basically a hymn-tune, what Messiaen calls the “creation theme.” It is so low to begin with you can’t really make it out, but it slowly rises and becomes clearer and clearer. The first piano plays sparkling chords over and over again. Messiaen is envisioning the creation of light, and everything becoming clearer as the light grows. This ought to suggest some interesting photos.

## **II. Amen des étoiles, de la planète à l’anneau (“Amen of the stars, of the ringed planet”)**

[CAPTION THAT WILL APPEAR UNDER THE WINNING PHOTO FOR THIS MOVEMENT]

We join an unstoppable astronomical turbine, a ferocious, uncontrollable dance. The multi-ringed Saturn, other planets and ceaselessly spinning stars all shout their “Amen” of assent to the Creator.

NOTES:

This is Messiaen having fun. Most things in this movement come from a five-note motif you hear right at the beginning, and it almost has a blues-like feel to it. The dance grows and grows, and just as it reaches bursting point, he starts up the whole thing again (3’50” on the Osborne/Roscoe recording), with jazz-like offbeats.

He has in mind the stars and planets praising God. Obviously, photographing planets and stars may be a challenge for you. So what can you think of that would suggest a cosmic dance?

## **III. Amen de l’agonie de Jésus (“Amen of the Agony of Jesus”)**

[CAPTION THAT WILL APPEAR UNDER THE WINNING PHOTO FOR THIS MOVEMENT]

In the garden, sweating with blood, we hear Jesus’ agonised “Let it be” to his Father: “My Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink of it, thy will be done.” Christ bears the intensity of God’s verdict on the world’s wrongdoing. He cries out, laments, sighs, sweats blood. Only in this way can humanity be re-made.

NOTES:

We are in Gethsemane. Various themes correspond to different elements of Jesus' agony, but don't worry about trying to identify them all. Note the mournful tone, the harsh tension sighing and crying, the extreme dissonance.

Towards the end, everything suddenly falls silent. (From around 6'10"). The single repeated bass notes represent Jesus' drops of sweat like blood. Then we hear the *creation* theme from the first movement again; Messiaen believed that in Christ, human nature was being *re-created*; this is a new Genesis.

The possibilities for photographers here are surely enormous.

#### **IV. Amen du désir ("Amen of Desire")**

[CAPTION THAT WILL APPEAR UNDER THE WINNING PHOTO FOR THIS MOVEMENT]

Divine love evokes an "Amen" from the soul: a desire for communion with God. We hear the profound tenderness and tranquility of the harmonious paradise which beckons, and the intense and passionate human yearning for that glorious fulfillment.

NOTES:

This is probably the most immediately appealing of all the movements. The opening passage, which re-appears in the middle, and comes at the end in a slightly different form, is warm, sensuous, gorgeous – and very satisfying to play.

The in-between music (at 2'07" and at 6.50") is erotic – heaving, yearning, rising to a massive climax – though Messiaen did not think of this as sexual desire as much as the thirst for communion with God. The second time the erotic music starts up (6'50") it sounds as if the one piano is trying to undermine the other. But soon they get their act together, and well.....you'll get the idea.

Photography? Plenty to go on here.

#### **V. Amen des anges, des saints, du chant des oiseaux ("Amen of the Angels, of the Saints, of Bird Song")**

[CAPTION THAT WILL APPEAR UNDER THE WINNING PHOTO FOR THIS MOVEMENT]

Transparent and effortless, the angels and saints offer their "Amen" of praise to God in pure song. Nightingales, blackbirds, finches and warblers, join the ecstatic vocal chorus of unselfconscious adoration.

NOTES:

This is full of charm. It starts with a chant, moves through a hymn, and includes evocations of bird-song (at, e.g., 1'08"). Messiaen had fascination for birds – believing them to have a privileged place in creation's praise. It is hard to hear this music without smiling.

Photography? Lots of possibilities occur to me here.

## **VI. Amen du jugement (“Amen of Judgement”)**

[CAPTION THAT WILL APPEAR UNDER THE WINNING PHOTO FOR THIS MOVEMENT]  
God’s “Let it be” takes the form of judgement. The severity of the verdict on those who spurn God’s love is played out with rhythmic austerity, transparency and total clarity.

NOTES:

This is the shortest of the movements. Messiaen brings out the harsher side of judgement – through the repetition of hammer-like chords. Notice there is nothing lyrical or song-like here.

Photography? Well, perhaps what comes to mind is a kind of metallic edginess; steel sparking with steel. See what you think.

## **VII. Amen de la consommation (“Amen of Consummation”)**

[CAPTION THAT WILL APPEAR UNDER THE WINNING PHOTO FOR THIS MOVEMENT]  
The dazzling culmination of the created world promised in Christ – God’s final “Let it be,” in which all things find their dance-like fulfillment. The “theme of creation” returns, and is transformed in wave upon wave of childlike joy, with spirals of bells joining a cosmic crescendo of ever more vibrant and virtuosic color.

NOTES:

Here he’s having fun again, on a huge scale. The creation theme returns, and is repeated at various pitches. (You’ll know this tune well by the end.) We are in the midst of the new creation, and he conveys the impression of infinite expansion and possibility. On top of the creation theme, the first piano seems to be playing with sound, as an infant might try to play at the top of the piano while someone else plays lower down. The ending is spectacular, and the movement as a whole lends itself wonderfully to visual interpretation.

Enjoy!