

TURANGALÎLA INFO FOR DPO

Personal History (Mine)

I “discovered” Messiaen my first day of college. Freshman convocation ended with the university organist playing “Dieu parmi nous”, the last movement of Messiaen’s *Nativité du Seigneur* organ suite. Everyone filed out of the auditorium except for music nerds, who clustered around the organ console in awe as this amazing music filled the room. Then a couple of weeks later my Theory 101 prof (also my faculty advisor) gave a piano recital which included Messiaen’s *Quatre Études de Rythme*. I decided I had to hear more of this music, raided the Music Library stacks for scores and spent hours in the Record Library listening to pieces. That was my first exposure to *Quartet for the End of Time*, *Oiseaux Exotiques*, *et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum*, lots more organ and piano pieces, and, *Turangalîla*. A couple of months later I was one of twenty-or-so people who showed up at a dining hall to hear Peter Serkin (dressed in flannel shirt and blue jeans) play *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant Jésus*. By the end of that evening there was no doubt that I was a major Messiaen fan.

A couple of years later, in 1975, I was home for spring break when the Boston Symphony was playing *Turangalîla*. I went to the morning matinee performance, and it felt like the crowd was made up of all the “little old ladies” of Boston plus me. I expected that this audience—perhaps the most musically conservative audience of the BSO’s musically conservative subscribers—was going to *hate* the piece. But they *loved* it. They went nuts, and when Messiaen (himself a “little old man” at the time) came onstage for a bow, they cheered like he was a rock star. I learned two things that morning: (1) Don’t judge an audience by their age or hair color. (2) The power of *Turangalîla* to win over an audience.

Personal History (Messiaen’s)

Like the Bartók Concerto for Orchestra, Copland’s Third Symphony, Bernstein’s Serenade, Schoenberg’s *A Survivor from Warsaw*, and many other great 20th century pieces, *Turangalîla* was commissioned by Serge Koussevitzky. The instructions for the 1946 commission would have been music to any composer’s ears: write whatever you want, as long as you want, for whatever size orchestra you want.

Turangalîla is part of Messiaen’s “Tristan Trilogy”—three pieces with emotional connections to the Tristan and Isolde story: *Harawi*, a 1945 song cycle for soprano and piano; *Turangalîla*; and *Cinq Rechants*, a 1948 piece for chamber choir. Messiaen’s thing for Tristan and Isolde had roots in his difficult personal life, which perhaps felt a little like the *Tristan* story.

By the mid-1940s Messiaen had been married to composer and violinist Claire Delbos for 15 years, and there was already trouble. Claire’s mental health shaky. After suffering several miscarriages, she had successfully given birth but only after taking drugs that may have affected her adversely. She also suffered from severe post-partum depression following their son’s birth and she had stress raising him alone during the years that Olivier was interred in a German POW camp. The biographical sources are very circumspect about her mental condition, but I suspect it’s possible that she may have had something like to early-onset Alzheimer’s. Claire was eventually institutionalized, and died in a nursing home in 1959.

At the same time all that was going on, Messiaen met pianist/composer Yvonne Loriod, who was his composition student at the Paris Conservatory. As his life with his Claire was falling apart, Olivier was falling in love with Yvonne and started writing pieces specifically for her—*Visions de l’Amen* (1943), *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant Jésus* (1944), *Trois Petites Liturgies de la Présence Divine* (1944). The virtuoso solo piano part in *Turangalîla* was written with Loriod in mind and she played it around the world for many years. (That Boston

Symphony performance I saw 38 years after the premiere had Yvonne Loriod as the piano soloist and her sister Jeanne as the ondes martenot soloist.)

In a way, the whole piece was written for her. So far as anyone can tell, Olivier and Yvonne—both deeply devout Catholics—never “did anything” about their love while Claire Delbos was alive. They eventually did marry, but not until nearly three years after Claire’s death. But when Messiaen described *Turangalila* as “a love song”, it’s clear that he meant a song about his love for her. So in a way, it’s a musical sublimation of their romantic relationship. But it’s also his first direct and explicit musical expression of Messiaen’s love for Loriod. It’s also interesting that *Turangalila* is a rare secular Messiaen piece, perhaps because it’s motivation was more human love than divine love...

Basics About the Piece **(Messiaen’s own words are in *italics*.)**

“Turangalila” is a word of Messiaen’s own invention, derived from two Sanskrit words: “Turanga” (time, movement, rhythm) and “Lila” (play, love, creation/destruction, life/death). *The Turangalila Symphony is a love song. The Turangalila Symphony is a hymn to joy. Not to the respectable, calmly euphoric joy of some good man of the 17th century, but joy as it may be conceived by someone who has glimpsed it only in the midst of sadness: in other words, a joy that is superhuman, overflowing, blinding, unlimited.*

The piece has a symmetrical structure...

- I. Introduction
- II. Love Song 1
- III. Turangalila 1
- IV. Love Song 2
- V. Joy of the Blood of the Stars
- VI. Garden of the Sleep of Love
- VII. Turangalila 2
- VIII. Development of Love
- IX. Turangalila 2
- X. Finale

...in which symmetrical pairs of movements are mirrored by their “opposites”...

Introduction/Finale

Love Songs/Turangalilas

...and the central pair (Joy.../Garden...) make up the heart of the whole piece. The Joy of the Blood of the Stars depicts the lovers flying through space in an ecstatic dance of joy. The Garden of the Sleep of Love depicts them entwined, asleep in each others arms in a beautiful garden, surrounded by singing birds.

The *Turangalila* orchestra has two solo instruments—piano and ondes martenot. The percussion section is divided into two groups. The pitched percussion instruments (Celesta, Keyboard Glockenspiel, Vibraphone, Chimes) mostly play with the solo piano, creating a pseudo-gamelan ensemble and are placed downstage near the piano to facilitate that ensemble. The unpitched percussion instruments are positioned in their usual upstage position and often play complex webs of rhythmic counterpoint derived from Messiaen’s long study of rhythms in Indian (South Asian) and Greek music.

The piece is built on four cyclic themes:

“STATUE THEME”

♩ = 50

I: 2 after #2

“FLOWER THEME”

♩ = 56

I: #9

“LOVE THEME”

♩ = 58

II: #5

“THEME OF CHORDS”

I: #12

Each cyclic theme gets slightly different treatment. The Statue Theme usually remains essentially unchanged (like a statue), except in Movement V, where it is drastically sped up to become the first phrase of the main melody. Each appearance of the Flower Theme is identical. At first, the Love Theme is more a feeling than an actual theme, but becomes progressively longer, slower, and more elaborate as it appears in successive movements. It is finally revealed as an extended melody in Movement VI, which then recurs in Movement VIII, and becomes the *fff* climax of Movement X (#34—#36). The Theme of Chords isn't so much a theme, as something like a serial composer's tone row: a set of notes from which Messiaen could generate chords, melodies, and counterpoints.

Many of the movements are organized using Messiaen's own take on "moment form", where a piece doesn't gradually develop in a conventional classical/romantic manner, but is based on discrete musical ideas (moments) that recur in unpredictable patterns. This is perhaps most jarring in the "Love Song" movements, whose fragmented nature might seem at odds with their titles. But maybe not so much if you think of wild, crazy, delirious, I'm-so-in-love-my-mind-is-going-at-a-million-miles-an-hour-and-I-think-my-head-is-gonna-explode love...

The Ondes Martenot

Turangalila is, perhaps, the pinnacle of the repertoire for Ondes Martenot, an electronic instrument invented in 1928 by Maurice Martenot. A cellist, Martenot had also worked as a radio operator, and the Ondes Martenot is the result of these two interests. From the radio side comes the instrument's electronics, which can generate many different varieties of sine waves. From the cello side comes the instrument's singing quality and its ability to play with vibrato and to glide between notes. The Ondes Martenot is a purely melodic instrument—it can play only one note at a time. Notes are played with the right hand (either on a piano-type keyboard or a ring-on-a-wire mechanism that allows glissandos from anywhere on the instrument's range to anywhere else). Attacks and dynamics are controlled by the left hand, via a button which allows the player to create dynamics from barely audible to louder-than-the-entire-orchestra and attacks from gentle to hard and percussive.

ONDES MARTENOT



Movement by Movement **(Mostly in Messiaen's Own Words)**

I. Introduction: *The first two cyclic themes are heard: the Statue Theme: in the trombones, fortissimo, the Flower Theme in the clarinets, pianissimo. After a solo piano cadenza comes the body of the movement, which superimposes rhythmic ostinatos in the woodwinds and strings, a gamelan, and a fourth level where the brass and piano [and maracas] alternate and answer each other.*

II. Love Song 1: *Refrain form... The refrain alternates two elements completely contrasted in tempo, nuance, and feeling. The first element is a motif in the trumpets [and strings], quick, loud and passionate. The second element is a motif in the ondes and strings, slow, soft, and gentle. At #40 Messiaen takes the first step towards a what eventually becomes the "Big Love Tune".*

III. Turangalîla 1: The three Turangalîla movements are unpredictable in character and are meant to serve as darker, more sinister mirror images of the love-themed movements ("joy perceived in the midst of sadness"). They are often built of several different musical ideas which appear singly, and then are gradually combined and superimposed. In this movement, there are three main ideas: (1) the opening melody in the clarinet and ondes; (2) the menacing melody in the trombones, bassoons, and basses, accompanied by the piano-plus pitched-percussion "gamelan"; (3) a legato duet for flute and oboe accompanied by unpitched percussion. Messiaen's description of this movement gets rather bogged down in describing all the elaborate rhythmic canons and retrogrades that are going on, and I'll spare you all that...

IV. Love Song 2: Another present-lots-of-different-motifs-then-stack-them-up movement. Most important is the new transformation of the love theme, in a big romantic gesture first played at #5. That passage, which comes back eight times in the movement, is a good place to reference Messiaen's synesthesia. He identified musical sounds with colors. Though he said this was more an intellectual feeling than the serious synesthesia that some people (David Hockney, Van Gogh, Kanye, Tori Amos) have, Messiaen could get very literal when describing it. In Volume VII of his *Treatise on Rhythm, Color, and Ornithology* he describes the color of this passage (#5) as "large vertical bands alternating cobalt blue and green mixed with dark blue, with occasional bindings of saffron red-orange and a few silvery tendrils".

V. Joy of the Blood of the Stars: *This is a long, frenetic dance of joy. In order to understand the qualities of excess in the movement, one must remember that the union of true lovers is, for them, a transformation, and a transformation on a cosmic scale. The movement is based on just one theme, which is a variant of the Statue Theme.*

VI. Garden of the Sleep of Love: *This movement is in total contrast with its predecessor. The two lovers are enclosed in love's sleep. A landscape comes out of them. The garden around them is called Tristan; the garden around them is called Isolde. It is a garden full of shadow and light, of new plants and flowers, of bright and melodious birds... Time flows forgotten. The lovers are outside time. Let us not wake them. A single expansive phrase on the "Love Theme" occupies the whole movement. It is confided to the ondes and muted strings. The solo piano introduces bird songs: a nightingale, a blackbird, a garden warbler, but stylized, idealized.*

VII. Turangalîla 2: This is the "horror movie" movement ... where the antagonists are the ondes martenot on one side and the trombones and tuba on the other. Gentle, expressive voice of the ondes, going down, full of pity, into the depths. Thick, muddy voices of the trombones and tuba in close position, rising slowly, like monstrous dinosaurs... This recalls the double terror of the pendulum knife slowly getting nearer the heart of the prisoner while the wall of red-hot iron closes in on him, and the unspeakable, indescribable depth of the

torture pit in Edgar Allan Poe's celebrated story "The Pit and the Pendulum". I did briefly consider holding over this movement for Sunday on the PhilharMonster program, but thought better of it...

VIII. Development of Love: *This terrible title can be understood in two ways: ...a constantly growing passion, multiplying itself to the infinite ... and ... also the musical development. In a work of ten movements a few partial developments would not suffice. There had to be a whole movement of development and this is it. Messiaen works all four cyclic themes into this movement, with the Love Theme and its feeling gradually growing stronger until it all but takes over at #42. The final tam-tam stroke stirs echoing vibrations in the caves of oracles: one hears resonances from the languages of the beyond, and the Statue Theme peers over the abyss...*

IX. Turangalila 3: *In this strange movement Messiaen uses just two main ideas: (1) an exotic melody and (2) a complicated five-part percussion counterpoint. We hear these elements separately, then together, then with superimposed elaborations in the solo piano and ondes. One really fascinating feature is at #5, where Messiaen "doubles" each percussion instrument with solo strings (wood block with two 1st violins, suspended cymbal with four 2nd violins, maracas with three violas, tabor with two cellos, and tam-tam with two basses). These dense chords of the solo strings (taken from the Theme of Chords) provide a soft, mysterious background resonance to the percussion instruments, whose sound predominates.*

X. Finale: *The first theme is a fanfare for trumpets and horns [and everybody else, too]; the second is the Love Theme. In the big tutti on the Love Theme...the woodwinds, brass, and strings mutually reinforce each other and the power of the brass gains in feeling from the extra-terrestrial voice of the ondes in the extreme treble, communicating to the whole orchestra its light and its tears of joy. The melody stops and rests in suspense, in a state of luminous expectation, and this great gesture towards an end that does not exist (Glory and Joy are without end) inspires the coda, a brilliant, vehement statement of the first theme.*