

# Poèmes pour Mi (Poems for Mi)

## Olivier Messiaen

Born 101 years ago into an intellectual family, Olivier Messiaen was engulfed in a heady cultural environment from his earliest years. His father was a professor and English-French translator whose output included a complete annotated French translation of Shakespeare, and his mother was a poet. Messiaen showed an early aptitude for music, composing his first song at the age of 8; by the time he was 11 he was enrolled at the Paris Conservatoire, where he would earn *premiers prix* in four domains: organ, piano accompaniment, improvisation, and composition. His musical education there was of the highest order: his composition professors included Paul Dukas and Maurice Emmanuel (a specialist in Greek metrics), and his principal organ teacher was Marcel Dupré.

Upon leaving the Conservatoire in 1931, Messiaen was named organist at Paris's Église de la Trinité, where he would reign over the Cavallé-Coll instrument in the loft for the rest of his life. This tenure was interrupted only twice: once for military service (as a medical auxiliary in World War II, during which he spent time as a prisoner of war), and, later, when the organ was being rebuilt. Before World War II, he accepted posts on the faculties of the École Normale de Musique and the Schola Cantorum. In addition, he

helped establish the musical movement La Jeune France, which hoped to re-inject a spirit of humanism and spirituality into French music, which had stressed lighter, more cynical, even frivolous attitudes during the inter-war years.

In 1932 Messiaen married the violinist and composer Claire Delbos – his pet name for her was Mi – and in 1936, the year of his appointment at the Schola Cantorum, he composed the nine-song cycle *Poèmes pour Mi* as a celebration of their union and a paean to marriage in general. Messiaen was a fervent Roman Catholic – he was unwavering in his embrace of Catholicism as the motor of his being – so it should come as no surprise that this meditation would view marriage as a Catholic sacrament in addition to a sensuously physical bond.

The Messiaens spent the summer of 1936 at the house they had recently built in Petichet (in the Alps, near Grenoble), where the composer would do much of his creative work until the end of his life. The imagery of the Alpine landscape made its way into Messiaen's texts, especially in the second song, and the often rapturous tone of the cycle

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### In Short

**Born:** December 10, 1908, in Avignon, France

**Died:** April 28, 1992, in Paris

**Work composed:** 1936 in Petichet (Isère), France, to texts by the composer; orchestrated in 1937, in Paris

**World premiere:** April 28, 1937, in Paris, in its original setting for voice and piano, the composer as pianist, Marcelle Bunlet, soprano; in its orchestral version, in 1946 in Brussels, Franz André conducting the Belgian National Radio Orchestra, Marcelle Bunlet, soprano; Bunlet had already sung the orchestral setting of "Action de grâces" on June 4, 1937, in a concert of La Jeune France at the Église de la Trinité in Paris

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** these performances

**Estimated duration:** ca. 27 minutes

## From the Premiere

Messiaen's orchestrated version of "Action de grâces," the opening song of *Poèmes pour Mi*, was unveiled as a stand-alone item at a concert of La Jeune France on June 4, 1937. The event was described in *The New York Times* by the Paris-based critic Elen Foster:

Olivier Messiaen's "Action de grâces," sung by the exceptionally gifted Marcelle Bunlet, received a veritable ovation. Messiaen, already in complete possession of a style intensely personal and original in character, has achieved in this work what seems a veritable masterpiece. The song is one of a cycle entitled *Poèmes pour Mi*, originally conceived for voice and piano. The orchestral version serves to enhance the qualities inherent in the original score. Most effective is the use of the voice in unaccompanied phrases, thus alternating its discourse with that of the orchestra – a device of great dramatic intensity.

Messiaen's style ... contrives to transport the hearer into something which sounds like a new musical dimension.

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testifies to the young couple's happiness in this bucolic setting.

The after-story of Messiaen's marriage is not so happy, however. He and Claire were perforce separated when he was incarcerated in 1940–41 at a German prisoner-of-war camp in Silesia, and in 1943 Claire's health –

mental as well as physical – began a precipitous decline that would lead to her being institutionalized for the last six years of her life, which ended in 1959.

But that sad denouement was unimagined when Messiaen penned *Poèmes pour Mi* as a cycle for "grand soprano dramatique" and piano in 1936, and when he orchestrated the nine songs (divided into two books) to spectacular effect the following year. Apart from the opening song, in which chantlike declamations define a liturgical spirit, the orchestrations waited nearly a decade to be heard. By that time Messiaen must have experienced his ode to marriage with an increased sense of poignancy, though without the slightest diminishing of his Catholic faith.

**Instrumentation:** three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, orchestral bells, triangle, cymbals, suspended cymbal, tam-tam, tambourine, snare drum, bass drum, and strings (variously disposed in the course of the nine songs), in addition to the solo soprano.

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## The New York Philharmonic Connection

The New York Philharmonic first performed Olivier Messiaen's music in 1947, when Leopold Stokowski conducted both *L'Ascension* and *Hymne au Saint-Sacrement*. The Orchestra has since performed 11 of his works, including tonight's Philharmonic premiere of *Poèmes pour Mi*. Leonard Bernstein conducted the world premiere of the composer's sumptuous *Turangalila-symphonie* with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1949, and the Philharmonic has programmed that work twice: once in 1988, conducted by Zubin Mehta, and again in 2000, conducted by Hans Vonk.

Among the Orchestra's Music Directors, Mehta showed the greatest devotion to Messiaen. He led five of the composer's compositions, and to him fell the honor of conducting the 1992 premiere of *Éclairs sur l'Au-delà*, commissioned to celebrate the Orchestra's 150th anniversary and unveiled six months after the composer's death.



Messiaen (right) and Zubin Mehta in 1978

# Text and Translation

## Poèmes pour Mi (Poems for Mi)

### I. Action de grâces

*Le ciel,  
Et l'eau qui suit les variations  
des nuages,  
Et la terre, et les montagnes qui attendent  
toujours,  
Et la lumière qui transforme.  
Et un oeil près de mon oeil, une pensée  
près de ma pensée,  
Et un visage qui sourit et pleure avec  
le mien,  
Et deux pieds derrière mes pieds  
Comme la vague à la vague est unie.  
Et une âme,  
Invisible, pleine d'amour et d'immortalité,  
Et un vêtement de chair et d'os qui germera  
pour la résurrection,  
Et la Vérité, et l'Esprit, et la grâce avec son  
héritage de lumière.  
Tout cela, vous me l'avez donné.  
Et vous, vous êtes encore donné vous-même,  
Dans l'obéissance et dans le sang de votre Croix,  
Et dans un Pain plus doux que la fraîcheur  
des étoiles,  
Mon Dieu.  
Alleluia!*

### II. Paysage

*Le lac comme un gros bijou bleu.  
La route pleine de chagrins et de fondrières,  
Mes pieds qui hésitent dans la poussière,  
Le lac comme un gros bijou bleu.  
Et la voilà, verte et bleue comme le  
paysage!  
Entre le blé et le soleil je vois son visage:  
Elle sourit, la main sur les yeux.  
Le lac comme un gros bijou bleu.*

### I. Thanksgiving

The sky,  
And the water that follows the whims of  
the clouds,  
And the earth, and the mountains that wait  
eternally,  
And the light that shifts.  
And an eye near my eye, a thought near  
my thought,  
And a face that smiles and weeps along  
with mine,  
And two feet behind my feet  
As wave is linked to wave.  
And a soul,  
Invisible, filled with love and immortality,  
And a garment of flesh and of bone that will  
take form for the resurrection,  
And the Truth, and the Spirit, and grace with  
its heritage of light.  
You have given me all that.  
And you, you have even given yourself,  
In obedience and in the blood of your Cross,  
And in Bread sweeter still than the coolness  
of the stars,  
My God.  
Hallelujah!

### II. Landscape

The lake like a big blue jewel.  
The road full of grief and potholes,  
My feet that hesitate in the dust,  
The lake like a big blue jewel.  
And there she was, green and blue as the  
landscape!  
Between the wheat and the sun I saw her face:  
She smiled, hand covering her eyes.  
The lake like a big blue jewel.

### III. La Maison

*Cette maison nous allons la quitter:  
Je la vois dans ton oeil.  
Nous quitterons nos corps aussi:  
Je les vois dans ton oeil.  
Toutes ces images de douleur qui  
s'impriment dans ton oeil,  
Ton oeil ne les retrouveras plus:  
Quand nous contemplerons la Vérité,  
Dans des corps purs, jeunes,  
éternellement lumineux.*

### IV. Épouvante

*ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ho!  
N'enfouis pas tes souvenirs dans la terre, tu  
ne les retrouverais plus.  
Ne tire pas, ne froisse pas, ne déchire pas.*

*Des lambeaux sanglants te suivraient dans  
les ténèbres  
Comme une vomissure triangulaire,  
Et le choc bruyant des anneaux sur la porte  
irréparable  
Rythmerait ton désespoir  
Pour rassasier les puissances du feu.  
ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ho!  
ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ho!  
ho! ha, ha, ha, ha!*

### V. L'Épouse

*Va où l'Esprit te mène,  
Nul ne peut séparer ce que Dieu a uni,  
  
Va où l'Esprit te mène,  
L'épouse est le prolongement de l'époux,  
Va où l'Esprit te mène,  
Comme l'Église est le prolongement du  
Christ.*

### III. The House

We are going to leave this house:  
I see it in your eye.  
Our bodies we will leave as well:  
I see them in your eye.  
All these sights of sadness imprinted on  
your eye,  
Your eye will encounter them no more:  
When we contemplate Truth,  
In bodies that are pure, young, forever filled  
with light.

### IV. Terror

ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ho!  
Do not bury your memories in the earth, you  
won't find them again.  
Don't throw them out, or crumple them, or  
shred them.  
Bloody scraps would follow you into the  
shadows  
Like vomitous retching,  
And the noisy rapping of rings on the  
unmendable door  
Would sound the rhythm of your despair  
To satisfy the fire-powers.  
ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ho!  
ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ho!  
ho! ha, ha, ha, ha!

### V. The Wife

Go where the Spirit leads you,  
Nothing can separate what God has joined  
together,  
Go where the Spirit leads you,  
The wife is the extension of the husband,  
Go where the Spirit leads you,  
Just as the Church is the extension of  
Christ.

*(Please turn the page quietly.)*

## VI. Ta voix

*Fenêtre pleine d'après-midi,  
Qui s'ouvre sur l'après-midi,  
Et sur ta voix fraîche  
(Oiseau de printemps qui s'éveille).  
Si elle s'ouvrirait sur l'éternité  
Je te verrais plus belle encore.  
Tu es la servante du Fils,  
Et le Père t'aimerait pour cela.  
Sa lumière sans fin tomberait sur tes  
épaules,  
Sa marque sur ton front.  
Tu complèterais le nombre des anges  
incorporels.  
A la gloire de la Trinité sainte  
Un toujours de bonheur élèverait ta voix  
fraîche  
(Oiseau de printemps qui s'éveille):  
Tu chanterais.*

## VII. Les Deux guerriers

*De deux nous voici un.  
En avant!  
Comme des guerriers bardés de fer!  
Ton oeil et mon oeil parmi les statues qui  
marchent,  
Parmi les hurlements noirs, les écroule-  
ments de sulfureuses géométries.  
Nous gémissons: ah! écoute-moi, je suis tes  
deux enfants, mon Dieu!  
En avant, guerriers sacramentels!  
Tendez joyeusement vos boucliers.  
Lancez vers le ciel les flèches du dévoue-  
ment d'aurore:  
Vous parviendrez aux portes de la Ville.*

## VI. Your Voice

Window filled with afternoon,  
That opens on the afternoon,  
And on your clear voice  
(Bird of springtime that awakens).  
If it should open on eternity  
I would see you as still more beautiful.  
You are the handmaiden of the Son,  
And the Father would love you for that.  
His light would fall forever on your  
shoulders,  
His mark on your forehead.  
You would complete the number of  
incorporeal angels.  
To the glory of the Holy Trinity  
An eternity of happiness would raise your  
clear voice  
(Bird of springtime that awakens):  
You would sing.

## VII. The Two Warriors

From two we here are made one.  
Forward, march!  
Like warriors clad in armor!  
Your eye and my eye among the statues  
that march forth,  
Among the black shrieks, the collapsing of  
sulfurous structures,  
We moan: oh! listen to me, I am your two  
children, my God!  
Forward, march, sacramental warriors!  
Joyfully thrust out your shields.  
Shoot toward the sky the arrows of  
dawn's devotion:  
You will reach the gates of the City.

## VIII. Le Collier

*Printemps enchaîné, arc-en-ciel léger  
du matin,  
Ah! mon collier! Ah! mon collier!  
Petit soutien vivant de mes oreilles lasses,  
Collier de renouveau, de sourire et de grâce,  
Collier d'Orient, collier choisi  
multicolore aux perles dures  
et cocasses!  
Paysage courbe, épousant l'air frais du  
matin,  
Ah! mon collier! Ah! mon collier!  
Tes deux bras autour de mon cou, ce matin.*

## IX. Prière exaucée

*Ébranlez la solitaire, la vieille montagne de  
douleur,  
Que le soleil travaille les eaux amères de  
mon coeur!  
O Jésus, Pain vivant et qui donnez la vie,  
Ne dites qu'une seule parole et mon âme  
sera guérie.  
Ébranlez la solitaire, la vieille montagne de  
douleur,  
Que le soleil travaille les eaux amères de  
mon coeur!  
Donnez-moi votre grâce, donnez-moi votre  
grace!  
Carillonne, mon coeur!  
Que ta résonance soit dure, et longue, et  
profonde!  
Frappe, tape, choque pour ton roi!  
Frappe, tape, choque pour ton Dieu!  
Voici ton jour de gloire et de résurrection!  
La joie est revenue.*

*Text by Olivier Messiaen, property of Editions  
Durand, Paris*

## VIII. The Necklace

Springtime bound in chains, light-hued  
morning rainbow,  
Ah! My necklace! Ah! My necklace!  
Little living prop beneath my weary ears,  
Necklace of renewal, of smiling and of grace,  
Necklace of the Orient, necklace assembled  
from many colors, from pearls unyielding  
and lighthearted!  
Curving landscape, wedded to the cool air  
of morning,  
Ah! my necklace! Ah! my necklace!  
Your two arms around my neck, this morning.

## IX. Prayer Answered

Shake the lonely, ancient mountain of  
sadness,  
That the sun may stir the bitter waters of  
my heart!  
O! Jesus, living Bread who giveth life,  
Say but a single word and my soul will be  
healed.  
Shake the lonely, ancient mountain of  
sadness,  
That the sun may stir the bitter waters of my  
heart!  
Bestow on me thy grace, bestow on me thy  
grace!  
Ring out as a carillon of bells, my heart!  
Let your resonance be strong, and long,  
and deep!  
Strike, ring, resound for your king!  
Strike, ring, resound for your God!  
Now is your day of glory and of resurrection!  
Joy has returned.

*Translation © James M. Keller*