Des Canyons aux Étoiles
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When invited by conductor David Robertson to create images to accompany performances of Olivier Messiaen's monumental symphonic work "Des Canyons aux Étoiles," I was intrigued by the possibility of exploring the language of landscape imagery in conjunction with the emotional power of music. The intent of the commission from Mr. Robertson was to enhance the musical experience by showing the specific places that inspired the music. "Des Canyons" is a ninety minute work that is intended to be heard without pause. That presents a certain challenge - ninety minutes of still photography, a lengthy slide show of national park images - did not seem to me to satisfy the demands of this complex and deeply felt musical composition.

Furthermore, because most people recognize that we are in an extreme ecological crisis, a travelogue of postcard images seems both irresponsible and out of place. When Messiaen encountered these landscapes of the United States, he was unencumbered by masses of tourists. Traveling in April 1972 he said, "It's totally deserted and wild....the spring, a season that also makes it possible to avoid throngs of tourists." But now there is no season when our national parks are not overcrowded and stressed. The optimistic vision of the earthly paradise that Messiaen encountered is less easily accessed by the contemporary tourist, yet the power of these places to inspire endures. As we enter the year of the centennial of the creation of the national parks, at a time when deep political and philosophical differences divide the country, I feel that my challenge in creating this work is to recognize both the spiritual aims of Messiaen's score and my own concerns for the pressures our culture places on the land that degrades the landscape while simultaneously exploiting it for leisure.

To this end, I utilize images made in a variety of western desert landscapes, including the named national parks visited by Messiaen in 1972, in a variety of ways. Music, being an art of time, requires that images, too, be manipulated in time. I use four "modes" of time (to echo Messiaen's use of rhythmic and harmonic modes) - still images, time lapse images (compressed, accelerated time), natural time video, and slow motion video. Beyond the national parks theme, desert landscapes, day and night skies, reminders of the native inhabitants in their petroglyphs, animals, birds and bird habitats, the presence of abandonment and ruins, roads and other evidence of the age of oil that we live in, and possible solutions to environmental problems constitute the imagery I've collected for the production.

To create a coherent visual complement to the music, I have adopted the idea of choreography as my model. This visual choreography is informed by Messiaen's statement to Claude Samuel that this work is "at once geological, ornithological, astronomical, and theological," as well as my own encounters with this landscape. Messiaen introduced each movement of "Des Canyons" with texts that indicate this to be a strongly spiritual work, one that is deeply personal, reflecting his intense mystical connection to his religion. I use these texts as guides to both the composer's intent and other, more contemporary interpretations.

This production, then, aims to explore the landscapes that provided inspiration to Messiaen as both the exterior/physical and interior/spiritual loci of experience, and marry that experience with the musical performance. Staging elements include lighting designed to create an enclosed visual field that brings the orchestra into the stage picture with the projected images. Rather than a screen, a ceiling to floor drape provides the surface upon which images are projected. A simple horizon with gently undulating distant hills encloses the orchestra from the upstage area, providing a second projection area to receive projected light. The orchestra, seated in a pool of modulating colored light, completes the picture.

I. Le Désert - location: Death Valley “Celui qu’il s’agit de trouver est immense: il faut être deliveré de tout pour faire vers lui les premieres pas… Enfonce-toi dans le Désert des déserts….Ernest Hello

Speaking of the desert as the symbol of the emptiness of the soul that allows an interior conversation with spirit signals a movement of interiority. The desert representing that place where one can make this journey, then represents both interior and exterior landscape, inscape and landscape.
Quiet, empty, just the wind and an occasional bird. The first sentence of Messiaen's preface sets the stage for active imagination - going deep inside in silence in order for the individual to converse with capital-S Spirit. Personal soul meets world soul.

The image: individuals at Badwater in Death Valley, some alone and some in groups, watching a brilliant magenta/crimson sunset. The spirit of coyote visits.

II. Les Orioles - location: Amargosa wetland preserve  The image: complex desert plants with an occasional bird sighting.

Orioles have been observed in the desert wetland near Shoshone, California just south of Death Valley, along with many other bird species. This bird intensive movement features still and video footage of the severely beautiful habitat of these birds. Occasionanly, a bird may also be encountered. Often heard yet rarely seen, birds define this stark and complex landscape.

III. Ce Qui Est Écrit sur les Étoiles - location: the desert, roads, and Parowan Gap petroglyph site

"Voici qui est écrit: Mené, Teqél, Parsin. Mené: mesuré - Teqél: pesé - Parsin: divisé"

Messiaen offers a mysteriously positive interpretation of this harrowing story that tells of human hubris in the face of God. When the words written on the wall by the mysterious hand are interpreted by Daniel, Belshazzar is found wanting and is slain the very next night. Contemplating the biblical tale at this time in our history, I find a deep metaphorical resonance with the ecological crisis that grips our planet. Indeed, our deeds are measured, our acts are weighed, our people divided. The stark, blocky music demands that we see traces of our own human impact on the landscapes that Messiaen reveres. Messiaen creates specific harmonies using full orchestra to spell out the words of the writing on the wall - Mene, Tegel, Parsin. These words define the structure of the movement.

The image: the writing on the wall, images representing abandonment of the land, the effects of environmental destruction and ancient Native American petroglyphs, literally writing on the wall, representing the heavens and astronomical events.

IV. Le Cossyphe d’Heuglin - location: sky above Cedar Breaks

Piano solo - this is the first movement where Messiaen specifies colors in the music. Static image of a slowly changing cloud in a bright blue sky, with slowly changing colored lighting focusing on the soloist, linked to color associations of harmonic structure of the score. Stand lights and other stage lighting reduced to minimum brightness.

V. Cedar Breaks et le Don de Crainte

"Le remplacement de la peur par la crainte ouvre un fenetre sur l'adoration."  Ernest Hello

Messiaen found Cedar Breaks to be one of the great marvels of Utah. A vast amphitheater of savage beauty inspiring both fear and awe, reflected in the music by alternating passages of strange instrumental effects and ecstatic birdsong.

Bizarre sounds and the return of "letters" (as in Mvt.3) - block chords that spell out words, this time Greek invocations in praise of God: Agios o Theos - Agios ischyros - Agios athanatos Birds, some returning from earlier movements, characterize this movement. A canyon wren on solo horn is introduced, one of the only literally repeating musical themes in the piece.

"Savage beauty" "La crainte est le commencement de la sagesse." signifies reverence toward the sacred - divine presence = hierophany, the literal manifestation of the sacred. Fear of punishment is the lowest on the ladder of the sentiments. The deep abyss as a reminder of damnation. (robin - E major=RED)

The image: Deep, bizarre canyons, some real and some imaginary. Wind. Birds flying below. Sunset point. The raven haired girl. In the deep impenetrable canyons of Cedar Breaks, night falls, distant lights flicker - not stars but human activity, then stars create the transition to the next movement.
VI. Appel Interstellaire -location: full moon rising over Zion Park

"O terre, ne couvre pas mon sang, et que mon cri ne trouve pas ou se cacher!" - Book of Job

Inspired by texts from the Book of Psalms and the Book of Job, Messiaen said of this movement "...it sums up all the questioning about misfortune and suffering, it can be said that the entire work answers it by showing alongside the atrocities surrounding us, the miraculous beauties of our planet...."

Horn solo. Light the player as if in the moon's beam. Projection of the rising full moon just outside Zion National Park. Moon emerges from behind a cliff, moves slowly across the screen and disappears. All other stage lighting reduced to minimum.

VII. Bryce Canyon et les Rochers Rouge-Oranges

“Les choses temporelles ne seront pas effacées, mais assumée dans l’éternité.” “...vous comprendre la hauteur et la profondeur…” “Les assises du rempart sont rehaussées de pierreries: la sixième assise est de cornaline (rouge), la neuvième de topaze (jaune orange), la douzième d’améthyste (violette).” - Romano Guardini, Saint Paul, The Apocalypse of Saint John

Stating that Bryce Canyon is the greatest marvel of Utah, Messiaen saw there many fantastic forms - cathedrals, castles, natural windows, statues, columns, entire cities. Along with his wife, he walked the trails from the top of the amphitheater to the bottom of the deep canyon, taking detailed notes on the colors of the rocks. He would reflect these colors in detail in the score. He also plunges the listener into the abyss, a reminder of the fear and awe of Cedar Breaks. Dominated by E major - shades of red.

The piano solo cadenza introduces the mockingbird, subject of a later solo movement.

The image: Tourists hike in a constant flow in and out of the canyon. Close up photos of rock formations fade in and out of view. Birds fly in and out of distant rock formations and a raven watches.

VIII. Les Ressuscités et le Chant de l’Étoile Aldébaran -location: sands, dunes, and hills of southern Death Valley

"Tout sera transparence, lumière...l'amour comme état permanent de la création, l'identité de l'intérieur et de l'extérieur: voilà ce que sera le ciel!"

Desert sands, day and night, transformations from stars to animal tracks on the ground create a literal interpretation of the title of the piece - from the canyons to the stars; soft long fades from image to image and imaginary desert landscapes with multiple moons and multiple superimposed time frames.

IX. Le Moqueur polyglotte -location: Zion Canyon

Second piano solo, spotlight the soloist. Image - screen fills with the canopy of a cottonwood tree, its leaves slowly moving in the breeze, creating a gentle background for the sometimes raucous chatter of the mockingbird. Colors green, yellow, and red.

X. La Grive de Bois -location: Kern National Wildlife Refuge and I-5

"Je lui donnerai une pierre blanche: sur la pierre est gravé un nom nouveau, que nul ne connaît sauf celui qui le recoit." The Apocalypse of Saint John

While the music is naive, the message is grave. Quick birdsong here represents, for Messiaen, the moral failures of humanity. Slow birdsong, alternatively, represents ultimate good. The movement returns to images alternating between environmental destruction and the optimism of great beauty. The Kern National Wildlife Refuge is juxtaposed with landscapes seen from a fast moving car along California's Central Valley.
XI. Omao, Leiothrix, Elepaio, Shama - location: Australia: Blue Mountains & Sydney zoo; San Francisco zoo, Zion Canyon

Exotic birds from around the globe populate this movement, especially birds of Asia and Australia. Image: landscapes and occasional birds of the Blue Mountains in eastern Australia, echoes of "the writing on the wall" as found in graffiti on canyon walls. Exotic animals and birds in captivity in zoos, both American and Australian.

XII. Zion Park et la Cité Celeste

Messiaen described Zion Park as a symbol of Paradise, Zion mountain as a synonym of a celestial Jerusalem. Color is specified in certain sections, such as the opening brass chorale of grey and gold, but always moving toward a final massive cadence in A-Major, the color of sky blue. The short theme of the canyon wren signals the final cadential sequences.

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