

**Gregorio Benítez takes flight in
Messiaen's *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (Oct. 11)**

by Peter Feher



Some of the best birdwatching in Cleveland this season has, unusually, been at Severance Music Center.

The songs of dozens of different species could be heard in Reinberger Chamber Hall on Friday evening, October 11, when Spanish pianist Gregorio Benítez presented selections from Olivier Messiaen's *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (Catalog of birds).

This just happened to be the same weekend that The Cleveland Orchestra, upstairs in Mandel Concert Hall, was performing two avian-inspired works: Esa-Pekka Salonen's *Cello Concerto*, which ends with an echoing seagull effect, and Jean Sibelius' Fifth Symphony, whose finale is meant to depict swans in flight.

Rarer sightings were possible during Benítez’s recital, which attracted a small but committed crowd, perhaps motivated by a passion for modernist music and/or ornithology. Both pursuits demand patience, but devotees know that the payoff comes in sudden flashes of clarity, brilliance, and discovery.

Messiaen would have wanted listeners to take their time. Throughout his career, which spanned virtually the entire 20th century, the French composer and organist upheld the idea of what he called “une musique vraie,” or a *true* music (the italics are his). In his work, truth and reality manifest in eclectic but recognizable ways. His oeuvre is devoted to Roman Catholicism, ever more complex systems of rhythm and harmony, and the music of the natural world, birdsong in particular.



Putting these beliefs on paper was something of a labor of love for Messiaen. Many of his best-known compositions, including *Catalogue d’oiseaux*, were written for and premiered by his second wife, pianist Yvonne Loriod. Love in every sense — religious,

romantic, obsessive — is the unifying theme of Messiaen’s music, which helps explain his interest in what birders might, in many cases, classify as courtship and mating calls.

Messiaen’s passions have had a way of inspiring others, and Benítez is obviously immersed in the composer’s school of high modernism. The pianist demonstrated a specialist’s touch throughout his recital, playing the entire 75-minute program from memory.

Yet Benítez isn’t a disciple who’s rigidly dogmatic. He clearly conceived of this presentation of *Catalogue d’oiseaux* to be inviting, settling on a representative sample of seven pieces from the original thirteen-part composition (which would take two and a half hours unabridged). He then reordered his selections to make dramatic sense.

As a result, the first half of Friday’s recital seemed to unfold within a familiar multi-movement structure. The opening “Le traquet stapazin” (The black-eared wheatear) established Messiaen’s basic musical framework of moody chords pierced by rattling outbursts. Next came two contrasting excerpts — the short, zippy “L’alouette calandrelle” (The short-toed lark) and the dark, plodding “L’alouette lulu” (The woodlark) — like the Scherzo and Largo movements of a symphony.

These extremes were developed and then brought into balance in the first half’s grand finale, “Le loriot” (The golden oriole), a piece especially cherished by Messiaen and Loriod, whose surname would be pronounced the same as the bird in French.

Benítez upped the virtuosity after intermission with three more selections — “Le merle de roche” (The rock thrush), “Le courlis cendré” (The curlew), and “Le traquet rieur” (The black wheatear) — each of which could have been a standalone showpiece. His hands flitted over the keyboard and took off in musical flight.

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