



ST JOHN'S SMITH SQUARE

Monday 14 December 2020
35th Christmas Festival

La Nativité du Seigneur

David Titterington – organ
Timothy West – narrator



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La Nativité du Seigneur
(The Birth of The Lord)

Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992)

Conceived of a Virgin, unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given. Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion: behold thy King cometh unto thee, just and lowly.
(Isaiah 9:6; Zachariah 9:9)

1. The Virgin and Child

This opening tri-partite movement sets the nativity scene of the Virgin with Child. Slow moving modal chords contrast with the dancing middle section in which the chant Puer natus est nobis (Unto us is born a child) sings ecstatically in the higher registers of the organ.

On the morning of Christ's Nativity: John Milton

2. The Shepherds

Slow, glinting chords depict a dark starlit night and the shepherds contemplating the sleeping child. The second section finds the Shepherds piping their rustic songs of joy.

Said the Child..... : Dame Ninette de Valois

3. Eternal Purposes

One of Messiaen's long expressive adagios in which time and movement are suspended. Darkness and light combine in a glowing movement of un-resolving harmony out of which comes the word of God.

Life: George Herbert

4. The Word

The eternal birth of the word is expressed in a dramatic and tumultuous opening section, which closes with the descent of the word, powerfully expressed in a fortissimo descending scale. The final section is one of Messiaen's most exquisite movements in which 'the word' speaks of eternity in long, arching melismatic solo lines.

5. The Children of God

The spiritual birth of Christians is depicted in a movement of increasing restlessness and tension. The climax arrives with crashing chords with the cry 'Père, Père' (Father, father), gradually subsiding into the balm of slow moving, encircling chords which resolve into infinity.

And there were in the same country
Shepherds abiding in the fields.....

6. The Angels

Described by Messiaen as “a kind of paradisaical dance”, the Angels swoop and soar singing their hymn Gloria in excelsis Deo.

Take him, earth, for cherishing: Prudentius

7. Jesus accepts Suffering

The suffering of God is expressed in the darkest registers of the organ. Increasingly dissonant rising thirds, anguished and painful, lead to the final climax in which the words Here I am cry powerfully on blazing fortissimo chords.

Journey of the Magi: T S Eliot

8. The Magi

The Wise Men appear in this lilting, nocturne in which the chant of Veni Creator Spiritus sings in the solo pedal register. When these travellers from the east, finally arrive at the stable to pay their homage to the Christ child, the music bathes the scene in the luminous key of F# Major.

9. God among us

God among us, opens with the descent of God to earth in a powerful, fortissimo descending pedal line. The ‘theme of love’ appears and links to a section based on the Magnificat – My soul doth magnify the Lord expressed in birdsong. A recapitulation of themes and mounting energy brings the movement to a climax. The closing exultant toccata, representing the incarnation, brings the cycle to thrilling close.

This monumental masterpiece of the organ repertoire was written by Messiaen in 1935. It is one of the first works with which the young composer truly marked out his own distinctive style, filled as it is with many of Messiaen’s core compositional features. We hear birdsong alongside plainchant alongside rhythms from Indian classical music and the rich harmonic texture is a result of some of Messiaen’s early experiments with Modes of Limited Transposition (a series of melodic scales, each of which has differing interval structures to our more familiar major and minor scales). The synthesis of all these elements (later codified in his *Technique de mon langage musical* of 1944) into one compositional style is what marks Messiaen’s music out as so distinctive; a unique voice in twentieth century music who has often been emulated but never matched. This spiritual reflection on various tableaux from the nativity story is rightly regarded as one of the pillars of the organ repertoire. It is one of the core musical celebrations of Christmas, sitting comfortably alongside those seasonal masterpieces of Berlioz, Britten, Tchaikovsky and Bach.

Programme notes © Richard Heason



David Titterington is Artistic Director of St Albans International Organ Festival, Head of the Organ Department at the Royal Academy of Music and Organ Curator, St John's Smith Square. He was an Organ Scholar at the University of Oxford before continuing his organ studies in Paris with Marie-Claire Alain at the Conservatoire de Reuil-Malmaison where he won a Premier Prix a l'unanimité avec les félicitations du Jury. Further study continued with Petr Eben in Prague.

He made his debut at the BBC Proms with a solo recital featuring a Proms commission from Diana Burrell, *Arched forms with Bells* whilst at the BBC Proms 2000, he played in the UK premiere of Hans Werner Henze's *Symphony No. 9* with the BBC Symphony Orchestra. At the BBC Proms 2009, he gave his second solo recital of works by Elgar and Peter Dickinson. Royal Festival Hall recitals include the 50th anniversary recital series which featured the premiere of Stephen Montague's *Toccata Incandescent* commissioned by the Southbank Centre and most recently in February 2016, including the world premiere of Sally Beamish's *Chaconne*.

Throughout his career, David Titterington has worked closely with many composers across a wide range of styles including commissioned works, first performances and in recital with works by Mauricio Kagel, Diana Burrell, Lyell Cresswell, Peter Dickinson, Jonathan Dove, Paul Patterson, Giles Swayne, Per Nørgård. In 1998, he gave the New Zealand premiere of Olivier Messiaen's *Livre du Saint Sacrement* – “a performance of spellbinding authority...Titterington giving us a performance of staggering intensity and brilliance” (The Dominion, Wellington)

David Titterington has been awarded numerous honours and awards which include Fellowship (honoris causa) of the Royal College of Organists, Doctor (honoris causa) and Honorary Professorship by the Liszt Ferenc State University, Budapest. Honorary doctorates have also been conferred by the Universities of Huddersfield and Bolton. David Titterington is an Honorary Member of the Royal Academy of Music, a Fellow of King's College London, Fellow Commoner, Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge and Professor, University of London.

Recent engagements include recitals at Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, Dresden Musikfestspiele, Sogakudo Hall, Tokyo and the Great Hall of Moscow Conservatory. In 2018 he was Distinguished Visiting Professor at the National University of the Arts, Tokyo, and at Yonsei University, Seoul. In 2021, engagements include a three-week recital tour of Japan (MUZA Kawasaki, Nagoya Concert Hall, Hiroshima, Rikkyo University...); Lotte Concert Hall, Seoul, Chair of the Jury for the 10th International Northern Ireland Organ Competition and a member of the jury for the 1st International Organ Competition, South Korea



Timothy West

Timothy can currently be seen on the very successful Great Canal Journeys on Channel 4, for which he has presented for the last nine seasons with his wife Prunella Scales. He has also just recently finished shooting the BBC costume drama *Gentleman Jack* with Suranne Jones.

Timothy West was born on 20 October 1934 in Bradford, Yorkshire, England, the son of actors Harry Lockwood West and his wife Olive (Carleton-Crow). Educated at John Lyon School and the Polytechnic, he first appeared on the stage in 1956 at the Wimbledon Theatre in a production of *Summertime*. He then spent several seasons in repertory at such venues as Wimbledon, Newquay, Hull Northampton, Worthing and Salisbury. He made his London debut at the Piccadilly Theatre in the comical farce *Caught Napping* in 1959. Timothy West last appeared on stage at The Bristol Old Vic playing Lear in *King Lear*. He also starred in The Donmar Warehouse production, *The Vote*, alongside Judi Dench, Mark Gatiss and Catherine Tate.

His performances on the London stage have included *Gentle Jack*, *The Italian Girl*, *Abelard and Heloise*, *The Homecoming*, *Beecham*, *Master Class*, *When we are Married*, *The Sneeze*, *It's Ralph*, *Twelve Angry Men* and *The Birthday Party*, *The Old Country* and *The Collection*. He starred in *A Number* at the Menier Chocolate Factory which subsequently transferred to South Africa. Other notable performances include: *King Lear*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and *Luther* all for the National Theatre and *Laughter* (The Royal Court), Falstaff in both parts of *Henry IV* (English Touring Theatre) and Solness in Ibsen's *The Master Builder* on tour and in London; Caryl Churchill's *A Number* (Sheffield Crucible); *The Winslow Boy* (Rose Theatre, Kingston, and UK Tour) and *Quartet* (UK Tour).

In 2012 he played Professor Serebryakov in *Uncle Vanya* at Chichester Festival Theatre and Romka in *The Handyman* UK Tour. Television includes: *EastEnders*, *Broken Biscuits*, *Edward VII*, *Churchill and the Generals*, *Brass*, *The Monocled Mutineer*, *The Good Doctor*, *Bodkin Adams*, *What the Butler Saw*, *The Contractor*, *Blore, M.P.*, *Beecham*, *Framed*, *Eleven Men Against Eleven*, *Murder in Mind*, *Bedtime*, *Bleak House*, *A Room with a View*, *Going Postal*, *Lewis*, *Exile*, *Titanic*, *Coronation Street* and *Last Tango in Halifax* (Series 2). Recent films: *We The Kings*, *Going Postal*, *Ever After*, *Joan of Arc*, *Villa des Roses*, *Iris*, *The Fourth Angel*, *Beyond Borders* and *Endgame*. Work as Director has included *HMS Pinafore* for Carl Rosa Opera. He has taken part in over 500 radio broadcasts and recorded many Talking Books. His autobiography *A Moment Towards the End of the Play*, and *So You Want to be an Actor* (co-written with his wife Prunella Scales) are published by Nick Hern Books. He was made CBE in 1984, and is currently President of the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, and of the Society for Theatre Research.



ST JOHN'S SMITH SQUARE

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