

Yvonne Loriod remembered

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'Each of us must go some day to meet the Lord, and all life long we yearn for that encounter to be a joyful one.' The words of Yvonne Loriod, widow of Olivier Messiaen, written to me after the death of my father: they seem so poignant following her own death on May 17, 2010. During her lifetime, Loriod undoubtedly found joy in Messiaen's special and vital music. For the majority of her 86 years, her *raison d'être* was in being by his side, as a wife and interpreter – both of them together in an extraordinary creative partnership.

So it is tempting to view Mme Messiaen through the lens of her husband's life – indeed, most of the press obituaries have said perhaps too much about him and not enough about her. Yet, in my meetings with Loriod, I found the woman behind the man to be utterly fascinating in her own right, as a teacher, as a pianist, and as a person.

I got to know Yvonne Loriod during my mid-twenties while preparing repertoire for the Messiaen 2002 International Conference in Sheffield. She was already an inspiration to me – I was familiar with her commanding and authoritative concert and recorded interpretations of Messiaen's music. Yet the thought of lessons with her was rather daunting, my main concern being not to cause any displeasure to this most formidably gifted and important lady in her own home.

It was here, at the Messiaen apartment in the heart of Montmartre, that I visited Yvonne Loriod on a number of occasions and got an unforgettable glimpse into her world. This place had been Mme Loriod's home since before she married. She told me the story of how they had colonized successive adjacent apartments as they became free. With walls knocked through, all spaces soundproofed, the result was a sizeable unit of compact rooms spread over three floors.

Loriod's beautiful manner and personal charm set me at ease straight away. I had made the *faux pas* of bringing to a diabetic the gift of syruped fruit – but she would get enjoyment, she reassured me, all the



more by being able to offer these delicacies to visitors. This altruism was borne out by her offer to me of Coca-Cola. 'I get it in specially for my young visitors,' she said.

Lessons with Loriod were thrilling, particularly for the way they started. She would ask 'Will you play with music?', at the same time removing the score from my hand. It was a question loaded with more-than-ordinary significance, I knew, since Loriod's own memory was legendary: it had allowed her to learn Bartók's Second Piano Concerto in just eight days for the first French performance with the Orchestre National under Manuel Rosenthal. As I played to her, Loriod was always hugely attentive, always encouraging. She would enthuse verbally during a performance if she was enjoying it, praising me and sometimes asking me to repeat a passage. Her connexion to the music itself – even though she was not playing it – was always manifestly obvious. (At one of Peter Hill's recitals at which Loriod was present I observed her fingers moving constantly.)

One of the most memorable features of my lessons with Loriod was the sound she produced when she played for me. Demonstrations were (sadly) few and far

between – lessons were more about drawing out of me the best I could offer. But on occasion she would move me from the piano and fill the apartment with that instantly recognisable, incisive sound of hers. As she went she would explain how she was achieving the required tone. One method revolved around 'picking out' specific notes within the texture. In Messiaen, she explained, every chord has a 'focus'. And every chord progression has a melody. Sometimes, it is at the top of the texture; sometimes, it is in the middle. But it must always be audible; it can never be *too* present. As an example, over and over again she asked me to give more sound to the top notes of the progression that opens the *Petites esquisses d'oiseaux*.

Another way Loriod achieved such a warm, resonant sound, was by her liberal use of the pedal. She talked a lot about speed of pedaling, or, more accurately, the speed of change in the pedal. In particular, she was always concerned that the rate of pedal change complemented the tempo. In the passage mentioned above, she wanted the chords joined by *legatissimo* pedal, specifically requiring me to wait (what seemed to me) a very long time after each chord. She offered the same

advice with the chords of 'the rose-coloured lake at dawn' in *La Fauvette des jardins*, and in many similar instances she would repeatedly say 'change after', 'change later'. This way, I noticed, the changes in harmony become almost imperceptible. On the other hand, Mme Loriod was very clear that elsewhere, particularly before rests, the pedal be cleared quickly.

A major characteristic of Loriod's playing was its physicality, something that she would try to explicate if necessary. She would frequently demonstrate the touch she wanted on my hand, coaxing out more suppleness for the 'Regard de l'esprit de joie' (No. 10 from *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*), or a precise attack for the Song Thrush in the *Petites esquisses*. Sometimes, gesture was as much about the visual as the practical: both arms should be lifted to the same height in bar 10 of *La Fauvette des jardins* – 'to look like the mountains', she said. On occasion, she encouraged me to 'draw' with my hands, to imagine myself as a painter and the piano a canvas, the scene at once represented in the music and on the instrument.

Loriod frequently impressed upon me the importance of respect for the written score. She reminded me many times that Messiaen's rhythmic values are exact, absolute. She was extremely sensitive to even slight transgressions, for instance drawing attention to unwarranted rests of four demisemiquavers as opposed to five demisemiquavers. This scrupulosity tended to result in requiring me to count – in French, out loud – from one to five at a tempo of demisemiquaver equals 240; it was lesson well learned, I feel.

On not a few occasions, Mme Loriod took a liberal attitude with Messiaen's text. She would, for instance, insert pedal breaks in a multitude of places where Messiaen himself had not marked them. A striking example of this is in 'Le Merle noir' from the *Petites esquisses*, where she asserted that the chord in bar 4 (and corresponding places) was not to be linked to the previous chord sequence; in this case, the pedaling was to be broken abruptly. Moreover, even though in the same piece Messiaen clearly dictates that the pedal resonance ring on from bar 5 into bar 6, Mme Loriod insisted there needed to be a break. In every such case, I have come to understand there is a structural concern, best appreciated in the

context of performance. A similar challenge to the printed score was with the tempo of 'Par Lui tout a été fait', the phenomenally challenging fugue from *Vingt Regards*; here, the piece can be faster than indicated – 'It is easier nowadays than it was then,' Loriod pointed out.

Nowhere was Loriod's technical mastery more evident to me in our lessons than in the area of keyboard fingering. It is hardly surprising that this aspect of piano technique – so much a challenge with Messiaen – should have been given the most attention. There were definite 'rights' and 'wrongs' – no thumbs on black notes, for example. In 'Première communion de la Vierge' (No. 10 from *Vingt Regards*) there were some ingenious borrowings between the hands. Overall, the sheer creativity of Mme Loriod's 'solutions' to the physical challenges of Messiaen's music was fascinating.

Yvonne Loriod's sublime technique was summed up by Messiaen: 'to her anything is possible'. I learned that her technical aptitude for her husband's music merely underlined her spiritual and emotional oneness with it. The *double entendre* of Loriod's name – Le Lorient is French for 'Golden Oriole' – was a serendipity in which Messiaen delighted. When I was preparing *La Fauvette des jardins* with her, Mme Loriod explained to me that the arrival of the Oriole two-thirds of the way through is 'an event' – its song is so beautiful that 'all the other birds stop to listen'. She told me the story of how the Golden Oriole would come to the Messiaens' garden at their summer-house in Petichet and eat all the cherries – and then she promptly produced some cherries she had bought in to feed me specifically at this point in my

performance. It was all part of giving character to the moment, to the playing. And so she told me to give Messiaen's birds a vivid, dramatic character – the Robin was 'amiable, kind, tender, charming', the Nightingale was 'joyous, triumphant', the Great Reed Warbler was 'angry, not nice'.

Loriod had the gift of bringing the piano to life, and whenever I met her I came away more inspired and more in love with Messiaen's music. My personal sadness on her death was balanced by an intense gratitude for having had the opportunity to meet her, to play for her, and to enjoy her guidance at the instrument. The warmth and good humour that characterised being in her company will always stay with me. At the end of the lessons, as I left the Messiaen apartment, she would say, not 'Au revoir' or 'Bonne chance', but 'Courage!' It was, I felt, a reflection of her joyful attitude to life, which stemmed from the complete security she had in her Catholic faith.

I once asked Mme Loriod how she got by missing Messiaen. She replied that her life continued to be enriched by him. After retirement from the concert platform, she spent her time faithfully bringing to fruition Messiaen's enormous *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie*. And, she told me, she played Mozart every day.

Yvonne Loriod is buried with her husband in the cemetery of Saint Théoffrey, the grave marked by a headstone in the shape of a bird that she herself designed. It reads, 'Tous les oiseaux des étoiles' – 'All the birds of the stars'. The passage, from Messiaen's song cycle *Harawi*, continues: 'Loin du tableau mes mains chantent' – 'Far from the painting my hands are singing'. ■

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