

VISIONS

Yvonne Loriod is synonymous with the music of Olivier Messiaen, but her legacy is an inspiration in its own terms, writes former pupil and pianist *Matthew Schellhorn*

With the death of Yvonne Loriod on 17 May this year, the musical world lost not only a great pianist and teacher but also the catalyst behind some of the 20th century's most extraordinary music. For some 50 years she was personally linked to Olivier Messiaen, first as his pupil, then as his muse and dedicatee, then as his wife and pre-eminent interpreter.

She was also, to me and to many others, an inspiration. I first met Yvonne Loriod in 1994, two years after Messiaen's death, when I was a pupil at Chetham's School of Music. My music teacher had arranged for me to visit her in her dressing room at Manchester's Free Trade Hall, where she was giving a performance of *Réveil des oiseaux* that evening. I was already in love with Messiaen's music, and was preparing to perform *Visions de l'Amen* – the first work written by Messiaen for Loriod, and which she and the composer premiered in 1943. It made a huge impression on me to meet the very person for whom the piece was written. Seeing Loriod perform in concert – on this occasion in partnership with her sister, Jeanne, on ondes Martenot – was also a wonderful spectacle: the two venerable ladies, dressed in matching multi-coloured voluminous dresses, captivated the audience with irresistible flair and panache.

Loriod's playing was, in a word, extraordinary. A child prodigy, who had learned the whole of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* and all of Beethoven's piano sonatas by the age of 14, her pianism was so mature and powerful by the time Messiaen met her in 1941 that it gave him a blank canvas. He is quoted as saying: 'I could allow myself the greatest eccentricities because to her anything is possible. I knew I could invent very difficult, very extraordinary, and very new things: they would be played, and played well.' While

Messiaen's early piano style had been rooted in organ-like textures, now he gave free rein to his imagination. So followed a stream of pieces written specifically with Loriod's remarkable gifts in mind. After *Visions de l'Amen* came *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* ('Twenty gazes on the Christ-child', 1944), and then the enormous *Turangalîla-Symphonie* (1946-48) – 'like a piano concerto', Messiaen described it.

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Many other works for piano and orchestra followed, but of all the works written for Loriod it is the epic piano cycle *Catalogue d'oiseaux* ('Bird Catalogue', 1956-58) that encapsulates how her incisive playing provided Messiaen with the 'voice' his music most required. In her great 1970 recording of the *Catalogue*, the rhythmic precision and the voicing is belied by the seeming naturalness of the playing. Loriod can be seen in many pictures following the composer in the fields and woods with a tape recorder. Messiaen, of course, delighted in the double entendre of Loriod's name: in French, *Le Loriot* is the Golden Oriole, a bird that in the *Catalogue* has a movement of its own. It was my privilege to prepare the other solo bird pieces, *La Fauvette*

des jardins ('The Garden Warbler', 1970) and the *Petites esquisses d'oiseaux* ('Small Bird Sketches', 1985), with Loriod in my mid-twenties. I remember her gift for (vocal) mimicry, and the enthusiasm with which she would continually rush to the bookcase to get books on birds – all duly described in purely anthropomorphic terms, of course. Most of all, I remember the joy she experienced hearing her husband's music – she always referred to him as Messiaen – music she herself knew so well, and which she must have played and heard hundreds of times.

Loriod was always inquisitive about the new music I was playing, and I was pleased to be able to tell her about the works I was premiering. Her championing of new music takes on a significance when one considers the lesser-known fact that she was a talented composer in her own right. She was modest about her unusual and intriguing musical works. Mostly premiered during the 1940s, they are characterised by their unusual combinations of instruments (*Pièces africaines* is scored for a bizarre ensemble of flute, oboe, ondes Martenot, guitar, bongos, timpani and two pianos, for example). It is perhaps this personal affinity with Messiaen's vocation, combined with her other phenomenal skills, which gave this lady the edge in terms of her ability to communicate Messiaen's music. Yvonne Loriod's life and career testify to the fact that all new music needs passionate advocates, and all performers have a role to play in the creative process.

Pianist Matthew Schellhorn is a prominent performer and supporter of Messiaen's work. His new disc with the soloists of the Philharmonia Orchestra (*Messiaen: Chamber Works*) is available on Signum Classics.

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