

URSULA OPPENS

PIANO

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The Dizzying Palette of Messiaen and the Darkness of Debussy Spring From Four Hands

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Three of the greatest inspirations for the visionary French composer Messiaen were his Roman Catholic faith, birds and Yvonne Loriod, the student who became his second wife. All three are celebrated in his “Visions de l’Amen,” a majestic piano duo written shortly after Messiaen was released from a World War II prisoner of war camp.



The pianists Ursula Oppens and Jerome Lowenthal offered a colorful performance of the work on Tuesday at the Yamaha Piano Salon on Fifth Avenue.

Messiaen experienced a form of synesthesia and associated colors with particular sounds or harmonies. “Visions” is largely written in the key of A, which for the composer represented blue — the color of the sky and eternity.

Julietta Cervantes for The New York Times Ursula Oppens performed at the Yamaha Piano Salon on Tuesday.

The work in seven movements is based on what Messiaen called a “theme of Creation,” a cadence of solemnly unfolding chords.

The opening “Amen of Creation” crescendos to an ecstatic clanging of bells. Messiaen described the ensuing “Amen of the Stars” as a “wild and brutal dance,” and its cacophonous energy was vigorously conveyed by Mr. Lowenthal and Ms. Oppens.

In “Amen of the Angels, of the Saints and of Birdsong,” Messiaen displays his fascination with nature, which he said “never displays anything in bad taste.” He wove transcriptions of bird songs into many of his works, represented in this section by brilliant, sparkling keyboard writing — played with flair by the two musicians.

The dizzying palette of colors in the final, exuberant “Amen of the Consummation” suggests thousands of pealing bells.

The program opened with an evocative rendition of Debussy’s “En Blanc et Noir” for piano duo, in which the pianists illuminated the contrasting character of the three movements. The work was written during World War I, and Debussy attached a quotation from the libretto for Gounod’s opera “Roméo et Juliette” to the first movement:

They dance, but at home

I must sit alone

This blow and this shame

With bowed head I proclaim.

In the somber second movement, mournful chord progressions and phrases reminiscent of bugle calls depict war and a soldier’s death with a focus, according to Debussy, “on blackness and tragedy, as in a capriccio by Goya.”

Debussy died a few years after composing “En Blanc,” but the harmonically adventurous final movement (dedicated to Stravinsky) hints at what future works might have sounded like.

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