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GREAT ORGAN MUSIC AT YALE

JAMES O'DONNELL, ORGAN

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GREAT ORGAN MUSIC AT YALE

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Prelude et Fugue sur le nom d'Alain, Op. 7

Maurice Duruflé
(1902–1986)

Les Corps Glorieux

Olivier Messiaen
(1908–1992)

Sept Visions brèves de la Vie des Ressuscités

- i Subtilité des Corps Glorieux
- ii Les Eaux de la Grâce
- iii L'Ange aux Parfums
- iv Combat de la Mort et de la Vie
- v Force et Agilité des Corps Glorieux
- vi Joie et Clarté des Corps Glorieux
- vii Le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité

Delapsus resurgam (American Premiere)

Francis Pott
(b. 1957)

Delapsus sum

Resurgam

The concept of resurrection—from the Latin verb *resurgere*, meaning “to rise again”—underlies most of the world’s great faith traditions, both ancient and modern. But it is particularly central to the three religions emanating from the patriarch Abraham, who, the Bible tells us, believed in God’s power to raise his son Isaac from the dead. For the three composers represented on today’s program, resurrection is both an article of faith and a metaphor for the creative process, in which the spark of life is constantly being reborn and finding new forms of expression.

Maurice Duruflé, *Prélude et Fugue sur le nom d’Alain*, Op. 7

Although he lived and died in the twentieth century, Maurice Duruflé’s musical roots were firmly planted in the soil of French Romanticism and impressionism. His early training as a choirboy in Rouen instilled a lifelong love of plainsong, or Gregorian chant, a vast lode of melody that he mined in much of his organ and choral music. As the long-time organist of the Church of St. Étienne-du-Mont in Paris’s Latin Quarter, Duruflé was well placed to mount a rear-guard action against what he saw as the “vulgarization” of the Catholic musical heritage in the wake of the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960s. Equally affronted by the newly authorized “jazz masses” and the Vatican’s abandonment of the traditional Latin liturgy, he looked forward to the time when the Church would “celebrate in an immense *Te Deum* the triumphal return of its eternal liturgical chant, music sublime in its simplicity, music of all time.”

Prélude et Fugue sur le nom d’Alain (Prelude and Fugue on Alain’s Name) stands in the venerable tradition of the *tombeau*, a French word denoting a musical memorial or “tombstone.” The subject of Duruflé’s heartfelt tribute is Jehan Alain, an immensely gifted young composer-organist who was killed in action at the beginning of World War II. (His sister, the late Marie-Claire Alain, would go on to become a renowned organist as well.) In a more specifically musical sense, Alain is also the thematic subject of the work: both the Prelude and the Fugue feature a five-note motive (A, D, A, A, F) that serves as a cipher for his surname in Duruflé’s idiosyncratic version of German musical notation. Moreover, Duruflé memorializes Alain less cryptically by quoting a snippet from the latter’s popular organ solo *Litanies* at the end of the Prelude, an undulating melody that’s strikingly similar in outline to Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy.”

Like T. S. Eliot’s “still point of the turning world” where “past and future are gathered,” this luminous interlude is preceded and followed by cascading triplets that gambol and gyre with restless, almost obsessive energy. This too, as the organ scholar Ronald Ebrecht notes, evokes the spirit of Jehan Alain, who wrote: “When the Christian soul in distress cannot find new words to implore God’s mercy, it repeats without pause the same prayer with vehement conviction.” The premiere of Duruflé’s work constituted a kind of resurrection in itself: the composer gave the first performance in 1942 on the newly restored—and somewhat altered—1878 Cavaillé-Coll organ then housed in Paris’s Palais de Chaillot, which incorporated portions of the demolished Trocadéro concert hall. (The instrument

was subsequently moved to the Auditorium Maurice-Ravel in Lyon.) Having begun in the shadow of death, in murky D minor, Duruflé's *tombeau* finally surges to a resplendent, life-affirming D-major climax.

Olivier Messiaen, *Les corps Glorieux*

A mild-mannered revolutionary, Olivier Messiaen was the vital link in French music between Debussy and Boulez – between the luminous, free-floating harmonies of the impressionists and the tightly organized serialist procedures favored by the post-World War II avant garde. (Although he and the archconservative Duruflé served together on the faculty of the Paris Conservatoire after World War II, they seem to have had little to do with each other.) A devout Catholic, Messiaen served for more than six decades as organist of the Church of the Holy Trinity in Paris. The intensity of his spiritual life is reflected in such religious-themed works as the piano cycle *Vingt regards sur l'enfant-Jésus* (Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus), the opera *St. Francis of Assisi*, and the *Quartet for the End of Time*, a paean to eternal peace written while he was interned in a German concentration camp in 1941. For Messiaen, God was manifest in nature and human love as surely as in the teachings of the Catholic faith. A sense of landscape suffuses much of Messiaen's music. As a teenager, he began meticulously notating the birdsongs that recur, filtered through his own stylistic processes, in works such as the massive *Catalog of Birds* for piano.

Composed in 1939, shortly before Messiaen was called up for service in the French army, *Les Corps Glorieux* was inspired by St. Thomas of Aquinas's discussion of "glorified [resurrected] bodies" in his encyclopedic *Summa theologiae*. The subtitle of this tantalizingly mystical meditation, *Sept Visions brèves de la Vie des Ressuscités* (Seven Brief Visions of the Life of the Resurrected), points to the composer's highly personalized approach to Catholicism. Characteristically, Messiaen provides a key to his esoteric sound world in the short scriptural epigraphs placed at the head of each of the seven movements. In the opening "Subtilité des corps glorieux," for example, the "subtlety of the resurrected" – by which Aquinas meant the incorporeality of human bodies in their spiritual state – is expressed in the "pure," chant-like monody associated with "God's angels." The gently rippling, harmonically amorphous passagework of "Les Eaux de la Grâce" (The Waters of Grace), which Messiaen links to the Lamb of God, contrasts with the rhapsodic reverie of "L'Ange aux Parfums" (The Angel of Incense) and the turbulent existential drama of the fourth movement's "combat between death and life," with its "stupefying" extremes of registers, timbres, and dynamics.

In the fifth movement, the organist's hands move nimbly in parallel octaves emblematic of the "strength and agility of glorified bodies," while the sixth movement's bright, fanfare-like chords and flourishes evoke the "joy and clarity" of the souls of the righteous "shin[ing] like the sun in the kingdom of their Father." The trinitarian symbolism of the cycle's finale is expressed in three subtly individualized melodic lines that ultimately trail away into silence. In *Les Corps Glorieux*, Messiaen offers a vision of Paradise that is at once numinous and consolatory. "The life of the resurrected is free, pure, luminous, colorful," he said. "The

timbres of the organ will reflect those characteristics.” He once compared the luminosity of his post-tonal harmonies to that of a stained-glass window, its colors melding together under shifting sunlight in the open air. His overarching goal was to create what he called “a *true* music – that is to say, spiritual – a music which may be an act of faith.”

Francis Pott, *Delapsus resurgam*

In contrast to Messiaen and Duruflé, British composer Francis Pott parted company with the Anglican Church while serving as a lay chorister at Winchester Cathedral in the 1990s. Although he now describes himself as an agnostic, he has written many works on religious themes, including a two-hour-long “Passion symphony” for organ titled *Christus*, a full-length Mass for eight-part choir, and *Word*, “a sequence of meditations on the Gospel in the twenty-first century” for chorus and organ. Pott compares himself to Brahms, Vaughan Williams, Herbert Howells, and John Rutter – “composers in the grip of doubt or unbelief” who have nevertheless continued to write “spiritual” music from a humanistic perspective. A recent example is Pott’s *Delapsus resurgam* (Having Fallen, I Shall Rise Again), a “diptych” incorporating an organ fanfare that James O’Donnell premiered on July 26 at the dedication of the new Dobson pipe organ at St. James’s Church in Sydney, Australia.

The composer writes: “*Delapsus resurgam* originated a little untidily, in two stages. The eventual ‘Resurgam’ movement was commissioned, with the designation ‘fanfare,’ by St. James’s Church, Sydney, Australia, back in 2019. This was to mark the planned inauguration of a new organ from the celebrated U.S. company of Dobson, based in Iowa. But in June 2021 a catastrophic fire in the Dobson warehouses destroyed the almost-completed instrument destined for Sydney, and much else besides. After an interval the project effectively started all over again, in the process demonstrating the resilience and determination of the close-knit Dobson ‘family,’ who labored night and day to overcome the calamity that had befallen them. The commissioned fanfare was put on ‘hold.’ A second Dobson instrument, identical to the ill-fated first, was duly inaugurated last summer, as Harry Haskell describes above.

“The phrase ‘Delapsus resurgam’ appears *inter alia* in *Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan (1628–1688). Wishing to make some token gesture of solidarity with Dobson, I obtained permission from Sydney to preface the fanfare (in my mind, by now, ‘Resurgam’) with a contrasted movement honoring the feelings in 2021 of all affected by the conflagration in Iowa: numbed grief and shock. Through social media and online charitable fundraising, I secured from public sponsorship a four-figure ‘commissioning’ sum for this added movement and was able to send the proceeds on to Dobson – my thanks are due to all those well-wishers who supported this. The movement naturally took on the mantle of Bunyan’s ‘Delapsus’ (for syntactical reasons, when designated on its own it requires the addition of *sum* – ‘I was’). For this composer, Bunyan’s complete phrase came to represent not existential challenges in the abstract (although those overarching concerns in my work are pertinently mentioned by Mr. Haskell), but a more mundane adversity suffered and, at length, materially overcome. Although the words make no carved or painted appearance on

the organ casing of the new Sydney instrument, it was helpful for me to envisage them in those pictorial terms while writing.

“The shared raw material of these paired movements deliberately evokes two sides of a single coin. There seems no need to go into further description of this; suffice it to say that ‘Delapsus sum’ remains swathed in dark clouds, before the sun comes out harmonically for ‘Resurgam.’ James O’Donnell’s performance today is the world premiere of the first movement and of the complete work; also the *deuxième* of ‘Resurgam’!”

Notes © by Harry Haskell


Harry Haskell is a regular program annotator for New York’s Carnegie Hall and Metropolitan Opera and the Pierre Boulez Saal in Berlin. He is the author of *The Early Music Revival: A History*, winner of the Prix des Muses in musicology awarded by the Fondation Singer-Polignac, and editor of *The Attentive Listener: Three Centuries of Music Criticism*.

James O’Donnell is professor in the practice of organ and sacred music at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music.

For the last twenty-three years, O’Donnell was the organist and master of the choristers at Westminster Abbey where he led their music department and oversaw all musical aspects of the Abbey’s work, including directing the celebrated Choir of Westminster Abbey. He was also responsible for the music at royal, state, and national occasions, including the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge in April, 2011, and the funeral of Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother in April, 2002. Most recently, he led the music for the state funeral of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

Internationally recognized as a conductor and organ recitalist, O’Donnell has performed all over the world, including the United States, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and throughout Europe. As soloist and director he has worked with many of Britain’s leading ensembles. He is music director of St James’ Baroque and appears regularly with the BBC Singers. He is visiting professor of organ and of choral conducting at the Royal Academy of Music and was president of the Royal College of Organists from 2011–13. He is an honorary fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge, and Doctor of Music honoris causa of the University of Aberdeen.

Before taking up his appointment at Westminster Abbey in 2000, O’Donnell was a junior exhibitioner at the Royal College of Music and then organ scholar of Jesus College, Cambridge. His first professional appointments were at Westminster Cathedral, where he was for five years assistant and subsequently, for twelve years, master of music. Under his direction, the Choir of Westminster Cathedral won the *Gramophone* Record of the Year award for its Hyperion disc of masses by Frank Martin and Pizzetti and a Royal Philharmonic Society award, both unprecedented for a cathedral choir.

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