

Kirill Petrenko opens the Biennale: Messiaen, Nemtsov and Hindemith

Thursday, January 14, 2027 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin
Kirill Petrenko, conductor

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	MESSIAEN 1908–1992 <i>Les Offrandes oubliées</i>	
2	NEMTSOV b. 1980 <i>Antlitz</i>	20'
3	HINDEMITH 1895–1963 <i>Symphony: Mathis der Maler</i>	26'
TOTAL MUSIC		46'

Olivier Messiaen

1908–1992

Les Offrandes oubliées

THE COMPOSER

Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992) was one of the most original and influential composers of the twentieth century, a devout Catholic mystic whose music sought to express the eternal and the divine. For over sixty years organist at the church of La Trinité in Paris, he developed a wholly personal musical language built on his own ‘modes of limited transposition,’ complex rhythmic systems (drawn partly from ancient Greek and Indian sources), brilliant orchestral and harmonic colour (he experienced sound as colour, a form of synaesthesia), and, most famously, the transcription of birdsong, which he regarded as the music of God’s creation. His masterpieces include the Turangalila-Symphonie, the Quartet for the End of Time (written in a prisoner-of-war camp), and the vast opera Saint François d’Assise. As a teacher at the Paris Conservatoire he shaped a whole generation, including Boulez and Stockhausen.

ABOUT THE WORK

Les Offrandes oubliées (The Forgotten Offerings) is where Olivier Messiaen’s career as an orchestral composer begins. He wrote it in 1930, aged 22, just after leaving the Paris Conservatoire, which he had entered at eleven and where his teachers included Paul Dukas. Walth-

er Straram conducted the first performance at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris on 19 February 1931. Messiaen later recalled it as “my first work played by an orchestra and my first contact with the public at large”.

The subject is the one that would occupy him for the next sixty years. Messiaen was a devout Catholic, and he said many times that the first purpose of his music was to set out the truths of his faith. Here the idea is simple and severe. The “offerings” of the title are Christ’s death on the Cross and the Eucharist, and humanity, absorbed in sin, has forgotten them. Messiaen printed a short poem of his own at the head of the score to spell this out. It has three stanzas, one for each part of the music, and the first and last end with the same line: “We have forgotten, sweet Jesus, how you love us.”

The three parts are played without a break, and Messiaen gave them plain names: the Cross, the Sin and the Eucharist. As he put it: “The sin is the forgetting of God. The Cross and the Eucharist are the divine offerings.” Much of what is characteristic of the later composer is present already in this early piece: very slow music that seems to suspend time, rhythms that avoid a regular beat, and harmony he described in terms of colour.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The Cross. The piece opens with a slow lament for the strings, marked to be played with deep sadness. The melody moves in short groups of uneven length, which Messiaen compared to the “neumes” of plainchant, the small note-groups of medieval notation. There is no steady pulse to hold on to, and the line keeps sinking back into long, drawn-out notes that the composer called “mauve and grey wailings”.

The Sin. Without warning the tempo snaps to fast and the full orchestra enters. Messiaen described this section as a “race to the abyss” at an almost mechanical speed. Listen for the heavy accents that fall at the ends of phrases, the whistling slides of string harmonics and the sharp calls of the trumpets. The music drives forward until it simply breaks off.

The Eucharist. What follows is the heart of the work and the longest of its three parts. The violins play one long, extremely slow phrase that climbs gradually higher over a bed of very quiet chords. Messiaen heard those chords as “reds, gold, blues, like a

faraway stained-glass window”. The music grows no louder and reaches no climax, and it ends by fading out at the top of the violins’ range.

Sarah Nemtsov

20 minutes

b. 1980

Antlitz

THE COMPOSER

Sarah Nemtsov is a German composer, born in Oldenburg in 1980 as the daughter of the painter Elisabeth Naomi Reuter. She began composing at the age of eight and took up the oboe at fourteen. She studied composition in Hanover with Nigel Osborne and Johannes Schöllhorn, alongside oboe studies, and then with Walter Zimmermann at the Universität der Künste in Berlin. Since 2007 she has worked solely as a composer. Her catalogue runs to more than 150 pieces in almost every genre, and much of it starts from literature: she has drawn on writers such as Paul Celan and Edmond Jabès, whose *Book of Questions* is the basis of her opera *L’Absence*, first staged at the Munich Biennale in 2012. Later operas include *Sacrifice*, for Halle in 2017, and *Ophelia*, for Saarbrücken in 2023. Her music has been published by Ricordi since 2016. She is a member of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin and has been professor of composition at the Mozarteum University in Salzburg since 2022.

ABOUT THE WORK

Antlitz is a new piece, and these performances are its first. Sarah Nemtsov wrote it in 2025 and 2026 to a commission from the Berliner Philharmoniker Foundation, shared with the Lucerne Festival and the Bayerische Staatsoper. Her own list of works gives it as a score for large orchestra lasting about twenty minutes.

The title is an old, elevated German word for the face: closer to “countenance” than to the everyday *Gesicht*, and familiar to German speakers from the language of the Bible and of poetry. Beyond the title, the scoring and the duration, nothing about the content of the piece had been published when this guide was written, so what follows describes the composer’s music in general and not this score in particular.

Nemtsov, born in Oldenburg in 1980 and based in Berlin, has written more than 150 works, among them several operas. Literature is a constant starting point for her, and she has drawn on writers including Paul Celan, Edmond Jabès, Walter Benjamin and Virginia Woolf. Her biography describes a musical language that takes in influences from Renaissance and Baroque music to jazz, rock and electronic music, and an interest in transitions and in-between states: between sound

and noise, between instrument and electronics, between construction and chaos. Her most recent large orchestral project before this one was the tetralogy *TZIMTZUM* for soloists and orchestra, first performed complete in 2023.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

One detail of the scoring can be reported in advance. Alongside triple woodwind, full brass, harp and three percussionists, Nemtsov asks for an electric guitar, an instrument that appears in several of her orchestral works. It is worth listening for how it sits inside the orchestra, and for moments where it is hard to tell which instrument a sound is coming from.

In the concert the piece stands between two works that respond to religious images: Messiaen's meditation on the Cross and the Eucharist, and Hindemith's symphony on the painted panels of an altarpiece.

Paul Hindemith

1895–1963

Symphony: Mathis der Maler

THE COMPOSER

Paul Hindemith was born in Hanau, near Frankfurt, in 1895 and became one of the central figures of German music between the wars. He was a practical musician first: a professional violist who founded the Amar Quartet in 1921 and toured Europe with it. As a composer he made his name in the 1920s with lean, energetic, contrapuntal music that was linked to the New Objectivity movement and looked back to Bach, including the series of chamber concertos he called *Kammermusik*. He taught composition at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik. After the Nazi regime turned against him, he left Germany, moving to Switzerland in 1938 and to the United States in 1940, where he taught at Yale University. His best-known works include the opera and symphony *Mathis der Maler*, the viola concerto *Der Schwanendreher* and the Symphonic Metamorphosis of Themes by Carl Maria von Weber. He set out his thinking about harmony in the treatise *The Craft of Musical Composition*. He died in Frankfurt in 1963.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Berlin Philharmonic gave the first performance of this symphony, under Wilhelm Furtwängler, on 12 March 1934. Furtwängler had conducted the premiere of Paul Hindemith's *Philharmonisches Konzert* for the orchestra's fiftieth anniversary in 1932 and asked the composer for another piece. Hindemith was then at work on an opera, and he answered the request by shaping three orchestral movements from it into a symphony.

26 minutes

The opera, *Mathis der Maler* (Mathis the Painter), is about Matthias Grünewald, the painter of the Isenheim Altarpiece, a large folding altar made in the 1510s and now in Colmar in Alsace. Hindemith wrote the libretto himself. It is set during the German Peasants' War of 1524 and 1525 and asks what an artist owes to society in a time of upheaval: Mathis gives up painting to join the peasants' revolt, is repelled by its violence, and returns to his art. Hindemith took up the subject in 1933, the year the Nazis came to power, and the parallel with his own position is hard to miss.

Each movement of the symphony is named after a panel of the altarpiece. In his note for the premiere Hindemith wrote that he was trying, by musical means, to approach the same state of feeling that the paintings produce in the viewer.

The premiere was a success, but the consequences were serious. The regime had already turned against Hindemith's music. When Furtwängler defended him in a newspaper article later in 1934, the result was a public attack on the composer by the propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, that December. Hindemith finished the opera in 1935, but it could not be staged in Germany and was first performed in Zurich in 1938. He moved to Switzerland the same year, and in 1940 to the United States.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

I. Engelkonzert (Angelic Concert). The first movement, which also serves as the overture to the opera, takes its name from the panel in which angels play music for the Virgin and Child. It opens with soft, luminous chords in G major. After a few bars the trombones quietly intone an old German song, "Es sungen drei Engel" (Three angels were singing), and the tune is taken up and built into a broad, hymn-like introduction. The main part of the movement is quick and bright, set going by the flute and the violins and worked out in busy counterpoint.

II. Grablegung (Entombment). A short, slow lament, after the panel at the base of the altarpiece that shows the body of Christ being laid in the tomb. In the opera this music belongs to the final act. The lines are spare, with muted strings and solo woodwinds, and the movement rises to one grave climax before sinking back.

III. Versuchung des heiligen Antonius (The Temptation of Saint Anthony). The finale is by far the longest movement and the most violent. The panel shows the saint attacked by grot-

esque demons. Hindemith begins with a slow, free introduction for the strings alone, like a recitative, and then sets off a fast movement of great force, with snarling brass and hammering percussion. Shortly before the end the storm clears. The woodwinds introduce the medieval chant “Lauda Sion Salvatorem” over rushing strings, and the brass answer with a blazing chorale of alleluias that closes the symphony.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century**

Alex Ross, Picador 2008

Ross’s history of twentieth-century music tells the story of Hindemith, Furtwängler and the Nazi regime, and has a memorable portrait of Messiaen, so it frames both older works on this programme.

ACCESSIBLE **Messiaen**

Peter Hill, Nigel Simeone, Yale University Press 2005

A richly illustrated life of Messiaen built on his own diaries and papers, beginning with the Conservatoire years in which *Les Offrandes oubliées* was written.

DEEPER **Composers of the Nazi Era: Eight Portraits**

Michael H. Kater, Oxford University Press 2002

A historian’s study of eight composers under the Third Reich, with a chapter on Hindemith that examines the *Mathis der Maler* affair and his uneasy years before emigration.

SOURCES

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3. Les Offrandes Oubliées, Olivier Messiaen, Los Angeles Philharmonic. <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/460/les-offrandes-oubliees>
4. Messiaen: Les Offrandes Oubliees, Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.indianapolissymphony.org/backstage/program-notes/messiaen-les-offrandes-oubliees/>
5. Orchestra, Sarah Nemtsov. <https://www.sarah-nemtsov.de/en/works/orchestra/>
6. Biography, Sarah Nemtsov. <https://www.sarah-nemtsov.de/en/biography/>
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8. Programme Note: Symphony “Mathis der Maler”, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/paul-hindemith-symphony-mathis-der-maler/>
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 14. Messiaen, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780300109078>
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