

Olivier Messiaen – Vingt Regards sur L'Enfant-Jesus (1993)

Written by bluesever

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Disc: 1 1. I. *Regard du Père* 2. II. *Regard de l'étoile* 3. III. *L'échange* 4. IV. *Regard de la Vierge* 5. V. *Regard du Fils sur le Fils* 6. VI. *Par Lui tout a été fait* 7. VII. *Regard de la Croix* 8. VIII. *Regard des hauteurs* 9. IX. *Regard du temps* 10. X. *Regard de l'Esprit de joie* 11. XI. *Première communion de la Vierge* Disc: 2 1. XII. *La parole toute-puissante* 2. XIII. *Noël* 3. XIV. *Regard des Anges* 4. XV. *Le baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus* 5. XVI. *Regard des prophètes, des bergers et des Mages* 6. XVII. *Regard du silence* 7. XVIII. *Regard de l'Onction terrible* 8. XIX. *Je dors, mais mon cœur veille* 9. XX. *Regard de l'Élise d'amour*
Hakon Austbo - piano

Please let this CD grow on you. At first hearing, and even several subsequent ones, the gentle playing of Norwegian pianist Håkon Austbø, winner of many music awards and prizes and a professor at the Amsterdam conservatory, seems a little too relaxed, almost like a neophyte concert-performer who's learnt to overcome extreme nerves by some sort of auto-suggestion. If you're familiar with other reference recordings like Aimard's (on Teldec 26868) and Osborne (Hyperion, CDA67351/2), then you may find Austbø understated one at first, dour, cold almost.

In fact the opposite is true. Austbø, who is engaged in such ambitious projects as recording the complete Debussy piano music (for Simax; indeed the present release forms part of Naxos' own complete Messiaen piano cycle), approaches the *Vingt regards* from a position of strength, not timidity. After working your way through the music a few times, you'll start to realise that the way he scales the heights of, say, 'Par lui tout a été fait' (VI) is the result more of an almost detached introversion and reverence for the music, than any lack of confidence.

The *Vingt regards* is music central to the composer's mystical form of Christianity ... reverential, full of awe, meditative and passionate. Written towards the end of the second world war in Nazi-occupied Paris, the twenty separate pieces range in length from two and a half to eleven

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minutes and are connected as much by musical virtuosity - extremes of tempo, harmony and mathematically-inspired effects - as doctrine. It is indeed the totality – in the end, the wholeness of tonal integrities – that makes the impact, not the pyrotechnics of any one 'regard'.

By the end of the sublime 'Le baiser de l'enfant Jésus', a tender translation of spiritual devotion into melodic atmosphere has been almost perfectly achieved where it counts most – in your head. It takes an empathy with the composer's intentions to achieve that. Austbø has it. He is able to make the music stand still on its axis, so to speak, without slowing it down – by playing each phrase in such a way that, although the next does not follow immediately, your anticipation fills the pause.

There are times when the actual sound of the piano, particularly when Austbø is enthusiastic about some of Messiaen's characteristic chords, verges on the harsh with little left in reserve dynamically. This is not true in the case of perhaps the most serious contenders for first choice, Loriod on the Warner Classics (62162) 'Messiaen Edition' and Serkin (Rca Victor Red Seal, 62316). But then see how Austbø's confidence (which is definitely not bravado) brings 'Regard des hauteurs' to light with a delicacy that never veers into tentativeness or becomes twee, which can happen if interpreters try to over-colour Messiaen's tones. ---Mark Sealey, musicweb-international.com

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