

# OH MY GOD

Messiaen in the Ear  
of the Unbeliever

Paul Festa

To be a musician-believer who speaks about faith to  
atheists - how could there be a way to understand me?

Olivier Messiaen

Hello. My name is Paul Festa. I'm the creator, along with the people you'll hear from in the following pages, of the movie *Apparition of the Eternal Church*. The movie documents a confrontation between thirty-one mostly nonreligious artists and the music of Olivier Messiaen, the great French Catholic composer who was born a century ago this year and died in 1992. Originally, the point of the movie was to see how people would respond to Messiaen's 1932 organ work *Apparition of the Eternal Church*, but over time the mission clarified into a question very close to the second part of this book's title: what does this passionately Christian music sound like to those of us who are not Christian?

This book and a text-only edition are adaptations of the film. The black type you're reading is the director's commentary. The white type on the following pages, beside the still images, is the movie's transcript. Unless you've seen the movie, I'd recommend skipping right to the transcript and reading this later. The director's commentary tells you who these listeners are and how they wound up wearing headphones in front of a camera, information the movie deliberately withholds. With a handful of exceptions, these thirty-one listeners don't have any special expertise in Messiaen. I felt that introducing them by artistic accomplishment or professional affiliation would extend a false promise of their authority while demolishing the intimate atmosphere that made this movie so much fun to shoot and edit. Besides, though I only realized this later, what qualified them to be in the film wasn't that they were successful artists. It was that they didn't believe in Jesus.



Why have I got  
this on?

So that you can hear  
the music.

Oh! Oh Christ!  
What's coming?



The experience of leaving Juilliard and walking into Albert's studio was like emerging from a Kansas concussion into Technicolor or escaping Privet Drive through Platform 9 3/4. Juilliard was a good school, but its spectacularly depressing physical plant – the exterior top-heavy as a migraine, the practice rooms tattered, smoke- and food-stained, airless, low-ceilinged and windowless – bore a more than coincidental resemblance to the student body's mental health. Albert's studio, with its twenty-two-foot ceilings, twenty-panel map of 18th-century Paris, artificial palms, elegant harpsichords and 19th-century Steinway Model C, carried an equally powerful resonance of Albert's



So is this sort of self-explanatory or do you have any questions?

I don't think so I just am going to listen to the music, right?



And...talk.

Oh, I'm going to talk too? Oh!



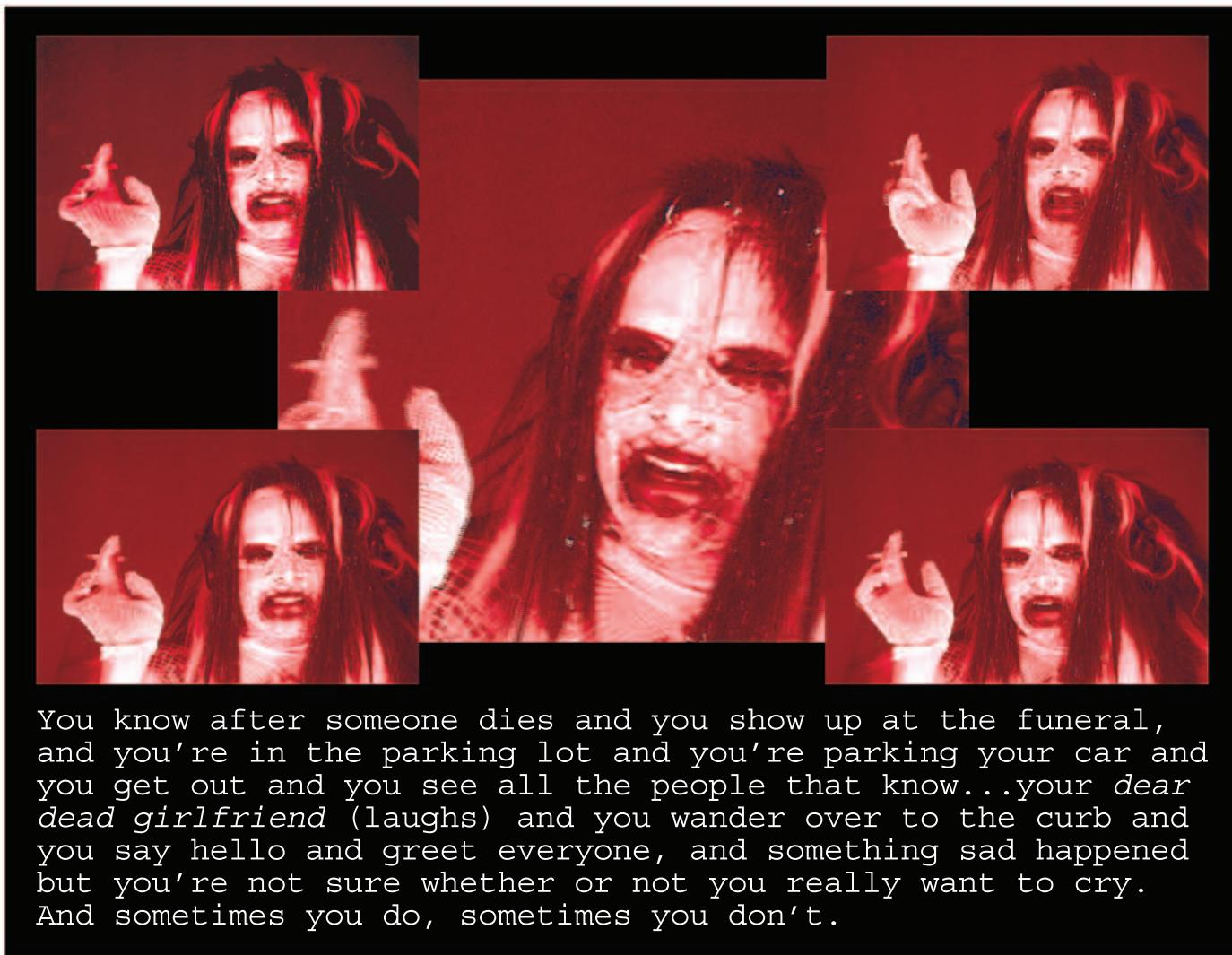
Yeah, that's why the mike is on the...

Ha! OK good, I'm glad you told me because I wouldn't have talked, I would have been just like listening.

I met the lovely and talented Eisa Davis at a party in New York when we were nineteen. I thought we must know each other, because she looked so familiar, and because we were both from the Bay Area – she from Berkeley and me from San Francisco. After several minutes of my trying to tease out the connection, Eisa put an end to it. "You don't look familiar to me at all," she said. The mystery cleared itself up a few months later at Queen Latifah's New Year's Eve show in San Francisco, where I once again ran into Eisa. She was there with Angela Davis, her aunt, whom she resembles.



I took Harold Bloom's seminar after a four and a half year hiatus between my sophomore and junior years (three at Juilliard, another eighteen months to write and throw away a memoir about growing up gay in San Francisco in the 1970s and 80s). In Bloom's class, "Shakespeare and Originality," as many as sixty of us crowded into a seminar room to listen to him dissect the histories and tragedies. The most thrilling part was watching him throw his head back and read obscure Renaissance poems off the insides of his eyelids. The scariest was when he disagreed with a student comment, but I don't think I was ever as frightened as I was watching him respond to the opening notes of the Messiaen.



You know after someone dies and you show up at the funeral, and you're in the parking lot and you're parking your car and you get out and you see all the people that know...your *dear dead girlfriend* (laughs) and you wander over to the curb and you say hello and greet everyone, and something sad happened but you're not sure whether or not you really want to cry. And sometimes you do, sometimes you don't.

Squeaky Blonde, another Trannyshack veteran. Our interview, conducted at four in the morning after a party, sat in a drawer for more than a year before I watched it. When I sat down to look at new interviews, something told me to watch Squeaky's. The tape had seemed unusable, because it didn't fit with the conversation that had emerged in the film. But once I watched it a couple of times I became seduced by the way it commanded its audience, like the Ancient Mariner (the nets!) stalking innocent wedding guests.



It sounds a little bit like some sort of horror film as well, as if something *bad* was going to happen to somebody, although, you know, generally that sort of thing's just in the *movies*, people are *acting*.

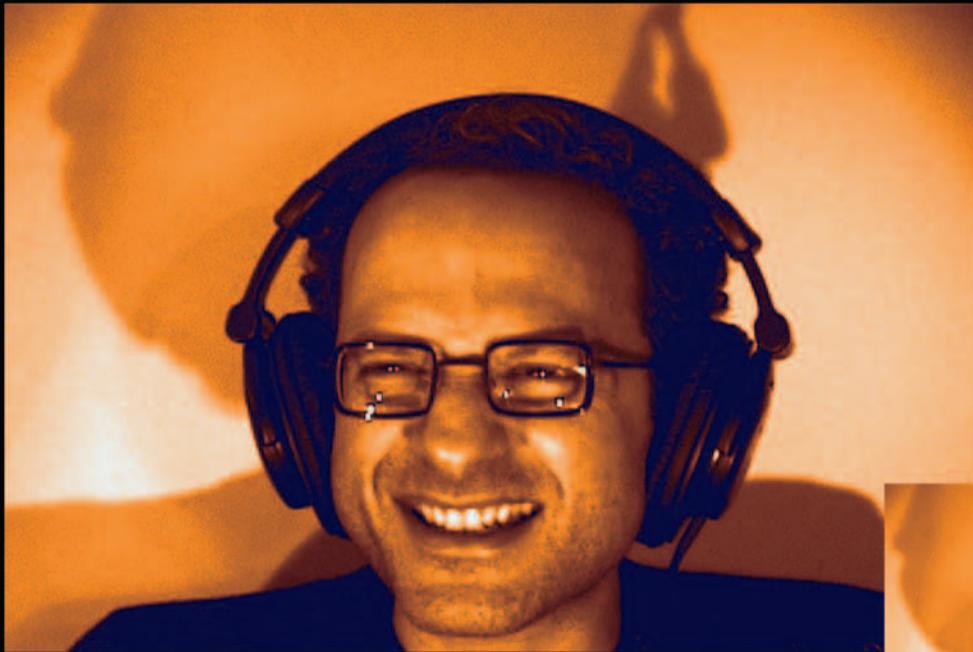


Bad things happen in real life and this sort of music isn't playing at all! I know I've had terrible things happen to me when I was listening to the *polka*, maybe I was listening to some sort of a jitterbug, or some sort of really up-tempo music that you should be having fun to -



Justin Bond was the last interview I did (out of 115). It followed the photo shoot for Kiki & Herb's Broadway debut, which would be nominated for a Tony. She rescued a theme - raised in more than 90 percent of the interviews - that I'd had to jettison, which was the resemblance of this music in the modern ear to the cheap Hollywood horror soundtrack. "Frankly it sounds rather like the background of one of those dreadful Vincent Price Poe movies," opined Bloom. One college classmate spent his ten minutes narrating a spontaneous vampire abduction story (perhaps 100 people mentioned Count Dracula at some point in their interview) and Jonathan Caouette was kind enough to screen for me, after our session, the organ scenes from the 1962 horror flick *Carnival of Souls*.

I went out on a few limbs in terms of taste and decorum in this film, and the only time I retreated was in this part of the Kiki interview. Originally, she went on to say, "You could be in a room, you could be hearing laughter, people having a good time - you could be shoved in a closet having someone rape you, someone you don't even know! This is the kind of music you want to hear when you're being raped."



It also feels a little bit – this is obscene – like being *fucked by light*.



Fucked by light!

Rape is never funny, as a rule. I was sure this was the exception. Also, rape was on topic, to the extent that several people (including Wayne Koestenbaum, above) talked not just about the movie's erotic drive but its demand that you surrender to being "ravished" by it.

The first time the movie screened with Kiki in it was at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, to a room full of artists, and after the rape line I watched sympathy evaporate from my audience like steam off a plate of overcooked pasta, only faster. Reliable laugh lines went by in perfect silence. Poignant moments elicited impatient sighs. It was the single worst screening, public or private, that the movie ever had. So I caved. I cut Kiki's rape scene.

I met Wayne as his Renaissance-poetry student at Yale. He wore couture to our seminar, carried papers in a corrugated plastic briefcase, and read Donne's epithalamiums in a husky voice. I failed to go to bed with him too, one of the lasting disappointments of my college education.



It's really –

– oh my god –



– this music is really –

– oh my god!

Albert has Miss Tully leaving us with the sentence "I can't thank you *enough* for having come to play that *glorious* music for me. I loved it and am very grateful to you," which is about thirty syllables more than the old woman was capable of speaking at that phase of her illness. Still, the passage is at least based on a true story, and there's undoubtedly one at the root of Albert's memory of playing *Apparition of the Eternal Church* at the National Cathedral.

I love the chords, themselves –



She gets into either a unison or a chord with just a fifth – and then she scares the shit out of you with all of this dissonance. So fucking much dissonance!

Dissonance isn't,  
dissonance isn't really the  
word for it, it's chords  
stacked on chords.



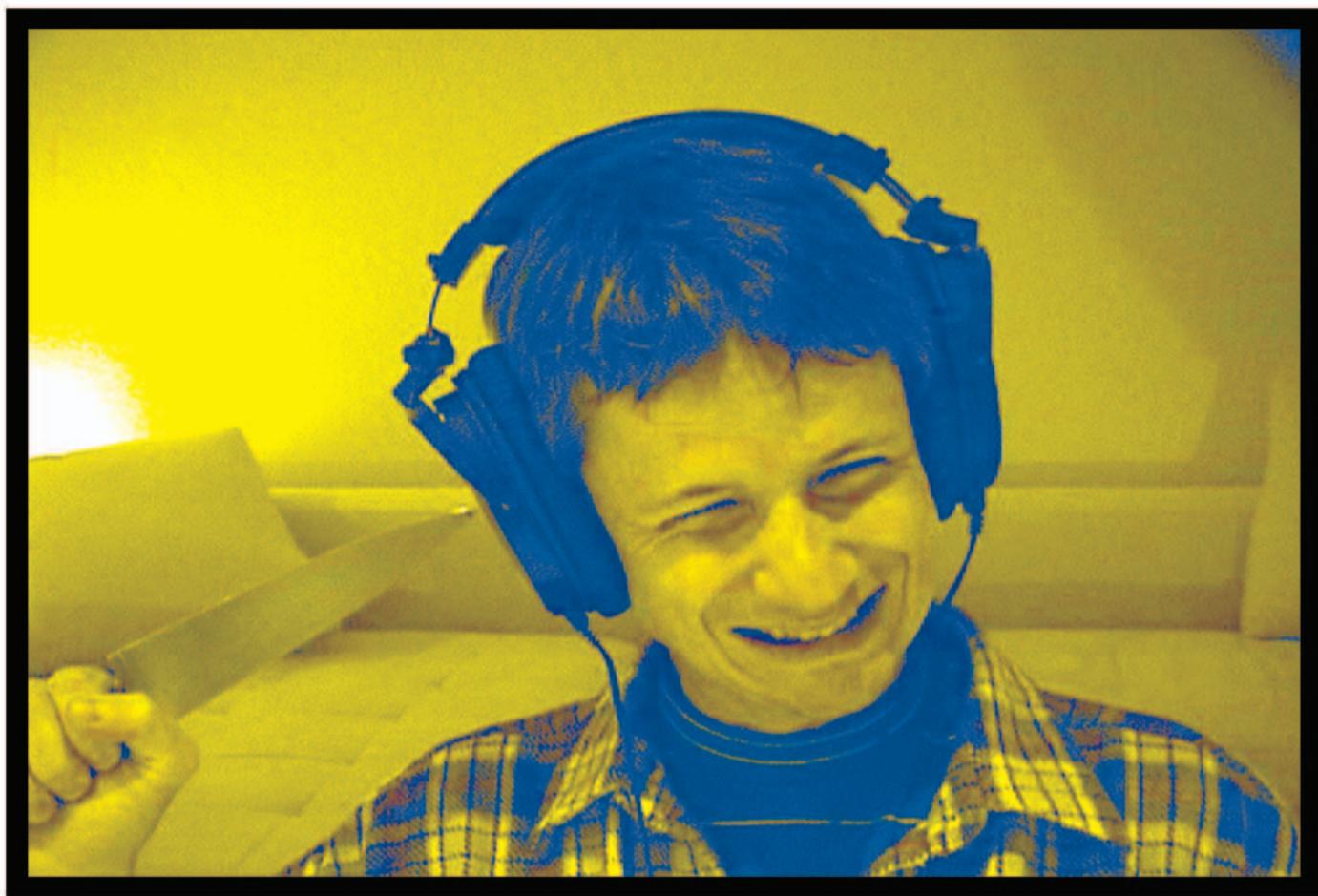
Messiaen's perspective, from a defense of his work published in the April 1939 issue of *Le Monde musical* (again quoted and translated in Hill & Simeone): "As for those who moan about my so-called dissonances, I say to them quite simply that I am not dissonant: they should wash their ears out!"



God save me, save me! Save me from what I've done! *Oh!*



When I initially asked Eisa to do this interview and described the format, she was hesitant. "I can sort of come apart when I listen to music," she warned me. "But maybe that's what you want." When James and I left Albert's studio with the tape of that first interview, I thought I might have a movie. When Eisa left the Bar Nothing after delivering this scene, I knew it.



Albert Fuller saw an early cut of the movie shortly after this clip was added and said to the screen, wide-eyed and earnest, "Honey, it's not the *headphones*..."



I crawled in the bottom of a thirty-two-foot, open diapason made of wood, and it was big enough for a small kid to get into, and I fucked up the tuning thing at the end of course by doing it. But I always wanted to say that I had and I was there with Jimmy who gave me my first blow-job in a swell box, while Paul Calloway was playing some big French toccata thing. And we were in the middle of this box, and the organ was screaming. But on the outside, because the Venetian blinds were shut, people thought it was soft. But in the box, the sound ricocheted everywhere and it was the loudest thing I've ever heard. And in the middle of all this Jimmy bestowed upon me that great blessing, for the first time. And I went crazy! I went crazy. And the organ was my instrument. Oh boy – was it ever...

In September 2007, after several years of poor health, Albert died of congestive heart failure at the age of eighty-one. He died at home in the arms of his friend Patrick Rucker, who three weeks later would fulfill Albert's wish to have his ashes scattered in the Bishop's Garden of the National Cathedral.

With Albert gone, amid the sense of loss, I felt tremendous gratitude for all he'd shared with me over the last fifteen years of his life – lessons taught, opportunities given, friendship, all those nights at the Positive Bar, and all that video, this interview and fifteen more tapes that will one day, I hope, become another film.

I was also grateful that Albert lived long enough to see the New York premiere at St. Bart's. I sat next to him during the screening and rather than watching the film itself I experienced Albert's response as the main event: laughter, a wave or gentle swat in my direction, a wry sidelong comment. In the middle of this last interview clip his jaw dropped and he clutched my arm. In a voice mail message the next day, he said he'd entirely forgotten that he'd told me the story of Jimmy in the swell box. In fact, Albert lived to be surprised by that clip several times. He'd seen the film on at least two or three occasions prior to the St. Bart's screening, and the story, while personal, is hardly private – it's on pages 83 and 84 of the Alice book. But memory loss has its virtues and I think he enjoyed being surprised once again by his own candor. (As did others – one person remarked after the screening that it was the first time he'd heard the word "blowjob" in church, and if this film achieves nothing else...)

Albert concluded his voice mail saying the night at St. Bart's was one of the great nights of his life – surely, like so much he expressed in his life and art, a little more than the facts could support, but at least based on a true story.