



Composing:
***Music, Visual Art and the Natural World meet up
and exchange inspirations***



St. Louis Symphony's SchoolTime performance of
Olivier Messiaen's *Des Canyons aux Étoiles (From the Canyons to the Stars)*

Monday, February 1, 2016 at 11am

Zellerbach Hall, University of California, Berkeley

The Cal Performances *From the Canyons to the Stars* Engagement Guide was written, edited and designed by Rica Anderson, Sabrina Klein, Ricki Nelson, Stephen Texeira and Marilyn Stanley.

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All landscape photos are by Deborah O’Grady and are featured in the St. Louis Symphony’s performance of Olivier Messiaen’s *From the Canyons to the Stars*.

How to use this Engagement Guide

If you have photos or lesson plans to share, please let us know! Use #SLS@Cal.

We invite you to challenge yourself and your students to think with the curiosity and passion of the arts. This engagement guide is organized around 4 key artistic practices (as identified by the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards at <http://nccas.wikispaces.com/>)

Investigating: Questioning, exploring and challenging.

Imagining: Opening the door to what's possible, and even to what seems impossible.

Creating: Making artistic choices with a work of art in mind.

Connecting: Reflecting on both process and product and making connections to other aspects of life and study.

You'll be able to link on specific subjects that you or your students may want more information about. The body of the Engagement Guide invites exploration before and after the performance, giving each student tools to make personal and meaningful connections during the show.

We've included a pre-performance engagement activity and a post-performance activity for artistic practice and reflection. By no means should you feel limited by these suggestions! Go, make art, learn more...and share your experiences where you can.

Artistic Literacy: Having the skills and knowledge you need to connect meaningfully with works of art—that's what we mean by artistic literacy. We think that means something different than knowing the names of all the different instruments musicians might play, or being able to reproduce the exact melodies you might hear during a show. To us at Cal Performances, it means you and your students will have a significant glimpse into the artistic process and will have a chance to try to solve the problems the artists aim to solve creatively. It means that the next time you see a performance, you'll be able to use these same insights to connect with a work of art through the artist's process and that this will deepen your experience as an audience member.

The artistically literate student audiences comes to understand that every artist draws from a core set of concepts skillfully chosen and applied in performance to create a work of art both unique to the artist, and connected to other works of art.

And along the way, we hope that students of all ages—and their teachers and adult mentors—will be inspired to experiment with artistic decision-making and creativity themselves.

Enjoy the show!

Your ★ STARRING Role in the Theater



As an audience member, you are a STAR, too! You play an important role in the performance community. The artists need YOU in order to give you their best work.

S.T.A.R. Audiences

S = Support the artists by being attentive and focusing on the performers.

T = Tune in: listen and watch for understanding (and for St. Louis Symphony, watch for how all the artists – composer, conductor, musicians, photographer-videographer – have chosen and arranged sound and visuals to make a unique performance.)

A = Appreciate the performers by clapping at the right time. For example, when a scene or dance ends, or when the stage lights fade to dark.

R = Respect the performers and other audience members. At a performance, you, the others in the audience and the artists are sharing this experience together and are part of a performance community. Think about ways you can best support the community's performance experience.

We know you will be a STAR today and will help your classmates shine too!

About the Performance



The entire symphony of *Des canyons aux étoiles* (we'll use the title in English from here forward: ***From the Canyons to the Stars***) consists of 12 separate movements. At the SchoolTime matinee performance, you'll hear the first seven of these movements. As you listen to the music, you'll also see on stage one conductor, nearly 40 musicians, stage lighting, and a large screen rich with photos and videos by Berkeley artist Deborah O'Grady. (*David Robertson and the St. Louis Symphony pictured on the left.*)

The artists work together to create a completely original performance experience—one in which music was inspired by nature, and photos were inspired by both music and nature. It's an art cycle: nature inspires music inspires photography inspires nature. **What do you see and hear that inspires you?**

Messiaen titled each movement, inspired by the landscapes he observed as he was composing his symphony, and sometimes influenced by his deep religious beliefs. Translated into English with the original French title in parentheses, here's a brief description of each movement you will hear at Cal Performances.

- i. **The Desert** ("Le désert"). The theme played on the horn evokes a peaceful state; birds and desert wind (performed on the Éoliphone) define the vast silence of the desert.
- ii. **The Orioles** ("Les orioles") consists almost entirely of birdsong sounded in the solo piano and orchestra.
- iii. **What is written in the stars...** ("Ce qui est écrit sur les étoiles...") is inspired by the stars and their movement in the universe.
- iv. **The White-Browed Robin** ("Le cossyphe d'Heuglin") is a piano solo based on the song of this African bird.
- v. **Cedar Breaks and the Gift of Awe** ("Cedar Breaks et le don de crainté") evokes a sense of awe at the overwhelming beauty in unspoiled nature and a symbol of spirituality.
- vi. **Interstellar Call** ("Appel interstellaire") features a horn solo that seems to reach across the vastness of outer space, interspersed with the calls of birds.
- vii. **Bryce Canyon and the Red-Orange Rocks** ("Bryce Canyon et les rochers rouge-orange") is the central movement of the work and uses music to emphasize the color red-orange. In an interview, Messiaen once said "Bryce Canyon was of special interest to me. That's because it had all those wonderful colors, and I wanted to put them into music. So, the piece I composed about Bryce Canyon is red and orange, the color of the cliffs."



Artistic Concept: Composing: Music, Visual Art and the Natural World Meet Up and Exchange Inspirations

We tend to think of “composing” as being equal to creating, as in: from 1972-74, Olivier Messiaen composed the symphony titled (in English) *From the Canyons to the Stars* (or in the original French, *Des Canyons aux Etoiles*). And usually the term “composer” is reserved for artists who write music.

But looking more deeply into what composing entails, we see that for artists, **composing is also an act of making or forming a whole entity by combining things, parts or elements**. Artistically, then, composing is about seeing individual things, parts or elements and selecting and arranging from among them to create some whole new piece.

One way artists seek to compose is to observe very carefully the individual and smaller things, parts or elements that are around them. Choreographers might observe every motion the body can make, and other motions seen in nature or things. Musicians might observe sounds in objects, environments or the natural around them, as well as in musical instruments. Visual artists observe both the real world they can touch, and the imagined worlds of dreams and abstract forms.

What we perceive or observe creates the raw material from which we choose things to compose. Our artistic purpose drives what we choose and how we arrange it, or sometimes, the opposite also happens: what we choose and how we arrange informs our artistic creativity and we begin to see new creative possibilities in the act of composing.

For the work *From the Canyons to the Stars*, musical composer Messiaen observed the natural environment (specifically, at national parks in Utah). He observed with all his senses—Messiaen said he actually perceived colors when he heard musical chords (a perception known as synaesthesia) and that he composed using combinations of colors as part of his process. The literal sounds of the natural environment also formed an important part of his compositional palette.

Visual artist Deborah O’Grady observed Messiaen’s written score (with its creative notation to capture such sounds as wind or bird song), listened closely to the music of his composition, and herself went into the same natural environments Messiaen had observed more than 40 years ago. She had an exceptionally rich palette of “things, parts and elements” to select from and arrange to compose the whole of her visual arts installation.

The conversation between these two “composers” in their different art forms—music and photography/videography—is deepened when we as audience participants bring our own compositional creativity into play. What do you observe, where do you focus, through your ears and your eyes, your thoughts and your feelings, at any one moment in this multi-disciplinary performance, which also includes live musicians playing instruments on stage? What draws your attention? How do the images turn your attention to the music? When does the music draw you to an image?

We are each of us a “composer” in this performance of the St. Louis Symphony’s masterpiece, *From the Canyons to the Stars*, by Olivier Messiaen, with visual installation by Deborah O’Grady.



O'Grady chose this image as part of her videographic composition for the performance.

Messiaen observed and loved birdsong, and wrote these musical notations to capture their sound as part of his composition.



Pre-performance Classroom Activities

Step 1 Addressing Expectations

Have you ever had an idea in your mind about a place you'd never been to, but when you got there it was different from how you'd imagined it?

We do this all the time – create expectations of what we'll see and experience using the memories and knowledge we already have. But this can sometimes get in our way of fully participating in a new experience.



When you come to the St. Louis Symphony SchoolTime performance, you may have a certain expectation of a classical music concert, but we encourage you to open your mind (and ears!) to the music you'll hear.

Activity: Expectations for Concert-going: Discuss what each student already knows or thinks about classical music concerts and how this concert will be different from what they might expect. Chart pad expectations (it's okay if expectations include worrying that it will be “boring” or “loud”). If your students are musicians, ask them to review the concert process. What did they have to do to prepare for a concert?

Sample Questions for conversation

When you hear that we're going to see an orchestra playing a concert, what do you guess we might be seeing?

What kinds of instruments do you think we might see the musicians playing on stage?

What else do you think will be on stage besides musicians and their instruments?



In closing:

Let your students know that the music they will be hearing is not like most classical music. The composer invented new sounds for the musicians to make and he even invented a new instrument to make sounds that traditional instruments can't make.

Encourage them to accept each moment of the concert as a new experience and see what is interesting or strange to them.

Step 2 Close Observation, An Artist's Way of Seeing the World

See Resources on page 13 for links to National Geographic activities about national parks and other websites.

We all see the world around us in different ways, and the wonderful thing artists do through their work is show us how they see things. In *From the Canyons to the Stars*, Messiaen's music tells us how he experienced the red rocks, cliffs, mountains and streams of the national parks he visited. Being in and observing nature closer made him hear certain natural and musical sounds.

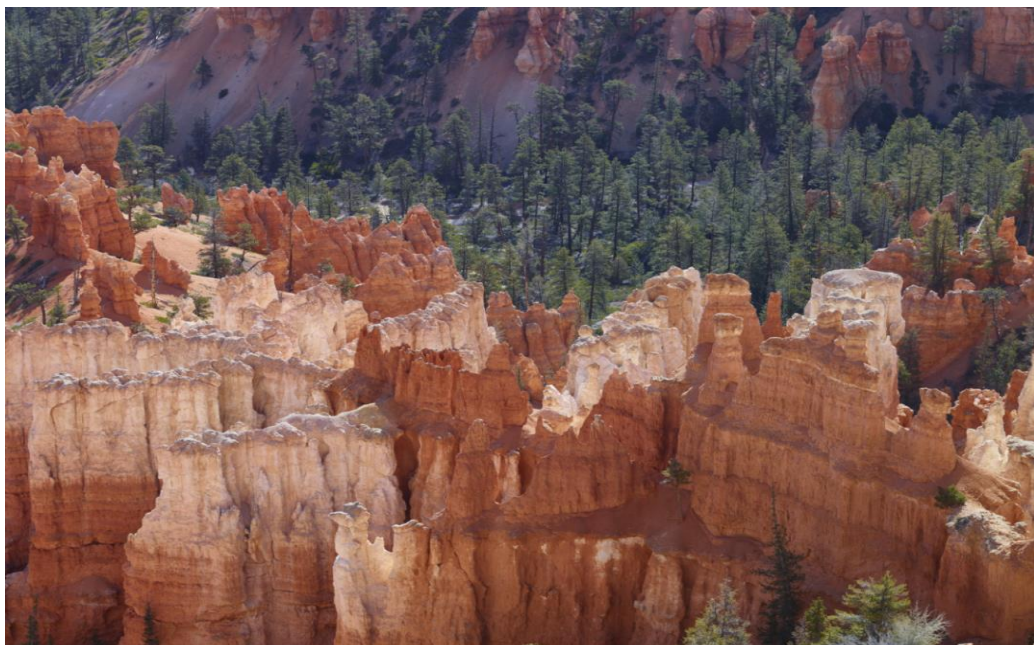
Photographer Deborah O'Grady listened to Messiaen's music and then she went back to visit some of the same natural landscapes he did. She took photos and made videos that expressed what her observations meant to her.

Activity: Seeing the Natural World

Look closely at photos of the natural wonders of national parks, especially Bryce, Zion and Cedar Breaks parks in Utah, as these inspired the original music for the composer. Artists study such things in great detail, describing every line, every change in color, and every part of a landscape, noticing the differences between sky, clouds, rocks, mountains, trees, shrubs, water, birds, every piece of the whole picture.

Challenge your students to focus on one small section of the photo below (which they will see in the performance) or another photo they can study closely. Write down as many words as they can think of to describe that section. How many different colors do they see? What kinds of lines, shadows, shapes, relationships?

Each close observation led Messiaen, the composer, to hear sounds he captured in his music. Each close observation by O'Grady, the photographer, led her to choose what to focus on and how different images related to one another.



During the performance, in addition to seeing the conductor and the musicians playing, you'll also see large photographs and videos of Zion, Bryce and Cedar Breaks parks projected above the stage. This may remind you of seeing a movie with a soundtrack, but that's not what this photographer is aiming for. Her photos and videos instead are inspired by the music AND by the natural world that inspired the music in the first place.

This "art cycle" -- nature to music to photography back to nature -- is what makes this a truly unique performance. Moving yourself through that art cycle as you experience the concert is a great way to see and hear new things in new ways.

If you have time, share Deborah O'Grady's video about how she chose her images from studying both Messiaen's music and nature:

<http://calperformances.org/learn/press-room/press-kits/2015-16/st-louis-symphony.php>



Step 3 Human Impact on the Natural World

One thing the photographer Deborah O'Grady was interested in is how the landscapes might have changed since the composer first wrote the music 40 years ago. All the natural beauty is extraordinary. Sometimes human beings can appreciate that deeply. Other times they may not notice that human activity can change or even destroy that beauty.

Some of the images O'Grady creates conjure human presence on the land well before Europeans arrived. In the first movement, ghostly images of people look like they could be from the past or the present. In other images, the presence of people is only hinted at through the things they leave behind.



Students may notice graffiti, telephone wires, and sometimes people just walking in the beautiful natural park. What other ideas might they have for how a photographer might notice how humans impact the natural world?

Make a list of possibilities.

Ask the students to be alert to these kinds of images in the performance, and to notice how the music draws their attention to the image.

Step 4 Ways to prepare your students to focus

Audiences are invited at the performance to connect what they will see and hear to their own creative process, and watch and listen to the choices the artists have made.

Ask students to select one or more of the focusing questions to use while they watch and listen to the performance. Because so much is happening on stage, a focusing question can bring you back to a central idea that can help you make meaning that is both fun and interesting to you.

- How does the music call our attention to what we see in the photo or video? (For example, a horn solo might call our attention to the fact that the moon is rising).
- How does a photo call our attention to what we hear in the music? (For example, a bird moving quickly across the screen might call our attention to music that the composer wrote inspired by birdsong.)
- How does the music call our attention to human impact on the landscape over time? (For example, petroglyphs, telegraph poles, graffiti, human images.)
- Notice that the music and the photos are kind of having a conversation with one another. What do you imagine is happening in parts of this conversation?



Step 5 After the performance

Encourage students to connect their expectations before the performance to their actual experiences: what did they see and hear? What surprised them? What seemed a little familiar? What seemed really strange? What questions would they want to ask the artists if they could? What artistic advice might they share with someone who was going to see the performance?

Resources

Deborah O'Grady photos, video and information on Messiaen and the St. Louis Symphony:

<http://calperformances.org/learn/press-room/press-kits/2015-16/st-louis-symphony.php>

On Olivier Messiaen's life and work, with several video interviews and nice drawings

<http://www.52composers.com/messiaen.html>

Messiaen playlist and commentary

<http://www.sinfinitomusic.com/uk/learn/composers/olivier-messiaen>

Websites

St. Louis Symphony

<http://www.stlsymphony.org/>

Olivier Messiaen

<http://www.oliviermessiaen.org/messbiog.html>

Deborah O'Grady

<http://www.deborahogrady.com/>

National Parks Centennial

<http://www.nps.gov/subjects/centennial/index.htm>

National Geographic Educational Activities

<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/activi>
[ty](http://education.nationalgeographic.com/activi)

Books

The Technique of my Musical Language by Olivier Messiaen. The composer demonstrates his musical concepts and composition techniques.

Visions of Amen: The Early Life and Music of Olivier Messiaen by Stephen Schloesser. A biography of Messiaen and analysis of his pivotal works.

Birdsong in the Music of Olivier Messiaen, by David Kraft

Code Talker Stories by Laura Tohe and Deborah O'Grady. WWII veterans and Navajo Code Talkers remember the war and reflect on the aftermath and their legacy. Order online at:

http://www.rionuevo.com/book.php?book_isbn=9781933855745

National Geographic Photography Guide for Kids, 2001, Neil L. Johnson

Age Range: 8 - 12 years, Grade Level: 3 – 7, Paperback: 80 pages

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Phone: 510.643.7053 / Email: ssobey@calperformances.org



About Cal Performances and the Cal Performances Classroom

The mission of Cal Performances is to produce and present performances of the highest artistic quality, enhanced by programs that explore compelling intersections of education and the performing arts. Cal Performances celebrates over 100 years on the UC Berkeley Campus.

What is a Cal Performances Classroom?

Your classroom, of course!

The arts are an endlessly replenishable resource for a lifelong love affair with thinking, learning and feeling across disciplines and cultures. They connect fluidly with curriculum throughout the school years, and – perhaps with more endurance – they connect us to ideas and reflection on human experience that can't be easily expressed any other way.

Each season at Cal Performance, you will find a menu of compelling performances and classroom opportunities for any age. You can create your Cal Performances classroom through any or all of our artistic literacy programs for grades K-12.

Cal Performances holds artistic literacy on a par with language and numerical literacy. Those who are artistically literate hold the keys to a lifelong engagement with the arts, able to unlock and make personal connections to any work of art, regardless of level of familiarity with the work and the artists.

Artistic literacy skills are developed in the Cal Performances classroom as students and teachers are engaged in the artist's process. These skills are embedded in everything we do, from pre-performance talks to community conversations to teacher workshops and artist visits to the classroom.