

The Northwest Mahler Orchestra presents Messiaen's *Turangalîla* Symphony

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On September 9th, the newly-renamed [Northwest Mahler Orchestra](#) will be [performing the Seattle premiere of Olivier Messiaen's *Turangalîla* Symphony](#) at Benaroya Hall.

I first heard this piece back in the 1990's in a live performance by the San Francisco Symphony. It's a large, sprawling work, and I was wise to have attended the pre-concert lecture. With music as with language, I have a particular affinity for structure, and knowing how the piece is put together greatly improves my appreciation. There are unifying themes and devices, but it's a big help when somebody points them out to you ahead of time so you can recognize them when they appear.

The *Turangalîla* Symphony is unique among all the works of Messiaen in that it is the only one that doesn't suck.¹ I tried to be generous in my [overview of the 2006 Seattle Symphony season](#) and described Messiaen's *L'Ascension* as *polarizing*, reserving the possibility that somebody might actually like it. (Nobody in my group did.)

But *Turangalîla* is different somehow. Not only does it not suck, it's actually pretty neat.

One of my colleagues wrote to me that he attended a performance of this piece about ten years ago by the [Houston Symphony Orchestra](#) under [Christoph Eschenbach](#). "The performance was outstanding. About a third of the audience ran from Jones Hall with their fingers in their ears, and the rest stayed transfixed."

That sounds about right. I'll be one of the people sitting there transfixed. Here's [the fifth movement](#) if you want to see how you'd react. (By the way, that's the [National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain](#), maximum age: 19.²)

In that video, the strange piano-like contraption played by the older woman is the [ondes Martenot](#), an electronic instrument that produces an ethereal [theremin](#)-like sound. (Get to know it [up close and personal](#) in another YouTube video.) [Jensen Harris](#) calls it "one of the

most unlikely musical contraptions ever.” He tells me that an ondes Martenot and soloist are being flown in from France at great expense for the concert. (Incidentally, the pianist is also flying in from France.)

Trivia: Performances of the Northwest Mahler Orchestra are pretty much the only times you’ll find me and Jensen Harris in the same room. I’m in the audience; Jensen is on stage.

Nitpicker’s Corner

¹Although this statement is presented as fact, it is actually my personal opinion. I do not know whether Microsoft Corporation officially takes the position that Messiaen’s music, with one exception, sucks, though if it were put up to a vote, I’d definitely vote in favor.

²The maximum age applies to the orchestra members themselves, not to the conductor or guest soloists.

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