



# Joaquín **NIN-CULMELL**

## **Symphonie des Mystères**

for Organ and  
Gregorian Chant

**Richard Robertson, organ**  
of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception,  
Denver, Colorado

**Tenors and Basses  
of St Martin's Chamber Choir**  
**Timothy J. Krueger, director**

**FIRST RECORDING**

# ***SYMPHONIE DES MYSTÈRES***

## **Note by the Composer for the First Performance**

Since my reading of Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross, of Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson, since the example of my teacher Manuel de Falla and of my friend Roland-Manuel, since the influences of my first spiritual director – Father Jean-Pierre Altermann – and of my beloved religious men and women of all orders, I have wanted to sing what my faithful Catholic heart has always sung privately. Thanks to the generous commission of Pierre Lacroix for the Festival of Saint Bertrand de Comminges, I can now do so publicly for the Glory of God, for the love of His Son and of all His children in honor of the Holy Virgin, Mother of God and of us all.

Even though these titles of the fifteen musical meditations on the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary are different from the liturgical titles, the essence and the symbols remain the same. In some ways they are less intimidating – at least for the composer – from the titles already so gloriously illustrated by our great composers. In addition, they offer – for the composer as well as for the listener – the possibility of free-association without losing frame-work or origin.

Sarrià, November 1993

## **JOAQUÍN NIN-CULMELL: A BIOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE**

by Martin Anderson

Joaquín Nin-Culmell's refined and elegant music points to the gentle equanimity of his character rather than to his disruptive childhood; he seems to have suffered far less from it than did his elder sister, the writer Anaïs Nin. He was born into a dysfunctional but musical family. His father, the composer-pianist Joaquín Nin y Castellanos (1878–1949) was born in Cuba, like his mother, the singer Rosa Culmell, but grew up in Barcelona. Nin-Culmell's parents were living in Paris when Anaïs was born, in 1903; a second child, Thorvald, later to become a businessman, followed in 1905, and in 1908 Joaquín was born (on 5 September) in Berlin, where his father had moved to try to further his career. In 1909 Nin tried – and failed – to launch a national opera in Cuba and then retreated with his family to sulk in the outskirts of Brussels. Three years later the immature and exploitative Nin despatched wife and children to his parents in Barcelona and moved to Paris, abandoning his family to pursue his abusive peccadillos in the French capital.

It was thus in Barcelona that Nin-Culmell began to study music, with Conchita Badia, a former student of Granados. He, too, then moved to Paris, studying piano at the Schola Cantorum and, at the Conservatoire, joining Paul Dukas' composition class, where his fellow students included Jehan Alain, Jean Langlais and Olivier Messiaen. In the summers of 1930, 1932 and 1934 he took composition lessons with Manuel de Falla in Granada, meanwhile working on his piano technique with Alfred Cortot and Ricardo Viñes, a member of his father's circle in Paris. In 1936 he paid homage to both his main composition teachers when he gave the first performance of Falla's *Pour le tombeau de Paul Dukas*.

Nin-Culmell emigrated to the United States in 1939, and it was there that the rest of his career was spent, his reputation as an outstanding teacher eventually threatening to obscure his activity as a composer. His first teaching post was at Middlebury College in Vermont, with a longer stay (1940–50) at Williams College in Williamston, Massachusetts. He moved to the west coast in 1950 to become the head of the music department of the University of California at Berkeley, passing on the chairmanship in 1954 but remaining on the staff for another twenty years, until his retirement in 1974. Edwin Dugger, a former colleague and close friend of 30 years' standing, described him as 'a wonderful mentor at that time to all of the young faculty members. He was exceedingly kind and helpful'.<sup>1</sup> Outside his academic responsibilities, Nin-Culmell was a regular conductor of the university symphony orchestra, and as a pianist he was a frequent participant in chamber-music concerts in the Bay Area.

For all of Nin-Culmell's peregrinations, his music retained a decidedly Spanish quality, blending a lyrical instinct with a high rhythmic charge, in clear, tonal textures spiced with the occasional dissonance. It is perhaps best heard in the four series of *Tonadas* for piano (1956–61), one of the few of his works to have been repeatedly recorded.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, he kept in close contact with Spanish folk-music, setting *24 Popular Songs of Catalonia* for voice and piano in 1957–61; *4 Popular Songs of Catalonia* and *4 Popular Songs of Salamanca* followed in 1959–61 and *5 Traditional Spanish Songs* in 1971. Nor did he neglect the chorus, producing *3 Traditional Cuban Songs* in 1952 and *2 Spanish Christmas Villancicos* in 1956–57.

But his music could be severe, too, particularly as with age religious music came to dominate his interests. In 1971 he composed a Mass for the dedication of the Cathedral of St Mary in San Francisco; and the *Symphonie des Mystères* of 1993–94 alternates Gregorian chant from a male-voice chorus with austere and powerful meditations on the chant material by the solo organ. Another substantial sacred product of his continued activity in old age is the *Tu Deum* for chorus and organ of 1999.

<sup>1</sup> Press release from the University of California, Berkeley, 20 January 2004, online at [http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2004/01/20\\_nin.shtml](http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2004/01/20_nin.shtml).

<sup>2</sup> Alicia de Larrocha recorded Vol. 2 for Decca in 1970. The CD recordings of all 48 *Tonadas* are by Maria Luisa Cantos (Marco Polo 8.223524; 1994), Miquel Villalba (Anacrusi dd01013; 2004), Marcel Worms (Zefir Records 9613, 2008) and Pedro Piquero (Verso vrs2060; 2008).

Besides the *Tonadas*, his output for the piano includes the early *Tres Impresiones* (1929), a *Sonata brève* (1932), a set of 3 *Homenajes*, stretched between 1941 and 1990, and 12 *Cuban Dances* (1985); there is also a Piano Quintet from 1934–36. He made some worthwhile contributions to the guitar repertoire, too, among them the 6 *Variations on a Theme of Luis Milán* (1945), 2 *Cuban Dances of Ignacio Cervantes* (1947) and *La Matilda y El Emilio* (1990).

There are larger-scale secular works as well, his orchestral scores numbering the *Homenaje a Falla* (1933), concertos for piano (1946) and cello (1962; it was reworked for the guitar in 1992), 3 *Piezas antiguas españolas* (1959–61) and *Diferencias* (1952). And his music for the stage encompassed two sets of incidental music, for García Lorca's *Yerma* (1956) and Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* (1980), two ballets, *El burlador de Sevilla* (1957–65) and *Le rêve de Cyrano* (1978), and an opera, *Celestina*, twenty years (1965–85) in the writing.

For Gérard Hugon, working at his publishers, Éditions Max Eschig, Nin-Culmell was

a magnificent example of that fertile mix of old world and new. He had the calm charm of ages past and, at the same time, the pragmatism of the American academic, efficient, quick, always in a hurry. His arrival in my office, when he was passing through Paris, was always a warm and happy moment.<sup>3</sup>

Nin-Culmell's one lasting regret was that his opera *Celestina* had never made the stage.<sup>4</sup> But when he died, in Oakland, California, on 14 January 2004, he was essentially a happy, fulfilled man. Edwin Dugger put it simply: 'Composing music and playing the piano was his life.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> E-mail to the author, dated 16 January 2004.

<sup>4</sup> It was eventually produced by the Teatro de la Zarzuela in Madrid in September 2008.

<sup>5</sup> *Loc. cit.*

# NIN-CULMELL'S SYMPHONIE DES MYSTÈRES

by Helen Glaisher-Hernández

*Esta música es callada porque su audición es interna. Contención y reserva, su emoción es secreta y solamente toma forma en sus resonancias bajo la gran bóveda fría de nuestra soledad.*

This music is silent because it is heard in one's inner self. The emotion remains hidden, and the sounds only take shape when they find echoes in the bareness of our solitude.

Federico Mompou<sup>1</sup>

On 14 January 1994 Joaquín Nin-Culmell completed a large-scale work, begun in 1992: the *Symphonies des Mystères* for alternating Gregorian chant and organ, a suite dedicated to the fifteen Mysteries of the Rosary – a collection of Roman Catholic prayers which recount the life of Christ from the Annunciation to the Ascension. They are divided into three main sections – 'Joyful', 'Sorrowful' and 'Glorious' – each comprising 'Mysteries' (episodes in the life of Christ), which are interspersed with repeated sequences of the Lord's Prayer and numerous Hail Marys. The first of these three sections was premiered on its own at the Comminges Festival in 1993; the work as a whole, which is dedicated to Pierre Lacroix, the founder of the Festival, was first performed on 5 August 1994.

## I. 'Joyeux'

In the opening movement the Gregorian chant 'Ave Maria' ('Hail Mary') [1] precedes the brief organ 'Sérénade' [2] which illustrates the Mystery of the Annunciation and also provides the theme for a gentle 5/4 melody calling high in the treble shaped by appoggiaturas (directly inspired, like much else in the *Symphonies des Mystères*, by the music of Federico Mompou), perhaps conveying the voice of the Angel Gabriel. This melody works at a considerable remove, both on the page and in effect, from the perambulating modal harmonies in the left hand, which suggest Mary quietly contemplating the words of the Angel above her, the parts combining in a kind of polymodality reminiscent of the French organ school. There is no hint of Mary's shock or anxiety, only a pervasive sense of calm and acceptance.

It is the second verse of another Gregorian 'Ave Maria' (*Benedicta tu es inter mulieres*; 'Blessed art thou among women') [3] that introduces the 'Dialogue' [4], commenting on the Mystery of the Visitation (where Mary, now pregnant, visits her cousin Elizabeth, also pregnant with John the Baptist). The 'Spanish' references of the work are

<sup>1</sup> From a speech given at the Academia de Bellas Artes de San Jorge on 17 May 1952, quoted in Clara Janés, 'Mompou: Aborto en la bóveda de la soledad', *Adamar*, Year 6, Issue 25, online at <http://www.adamar.org/num15/m2.html>.

conveyed with heavy use of the Phrygian mode and a driving left-hand melody and crushed appoggiatura chords in the treble which could almost have been written by Falla or Albéniz. The piece has a restless feel, obsessively returning to the opening bars three times before concluding with a brief set of deep and majestic ascending flamenco-esque chords which resolve the piece with a feeling of majesty and fulfillment.

The Introit *Puer natus est nobis* ('A child is born to us', from the Book of Isaiah, chapter 9, verse 6), [5] serves as the frontispiece to the third movement depicting the Mystery of the Nativity, which Nin-Culmell entitles 'Il est né!' after the French Christmas carol from which the opening motif is borrowed (and is ingeniously echoed in the opening notes of the chant) [6]. A suitably more cheerful and straightforward movement with rhythmically lively writing, it recalls the folk elements of the carol, with the melody supported by more sophisticated harmonies and a counterpoint in the pedal. Another ascending scale closes the movement with an aura of wonderment.

In the fourth movement, the antiphon *Lumen ad revelationem gentium* ('a light to the revelation of the Gentiles', from St Luke's Gospel, chapter 2, verse 32 – as used at Candlemas) [7], heralds the 'Offrande' which stands for the Mystery of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple [8]. The piece uses a succession of loud and soft stops, possibly to recreate the original antiphonal nature of the chant. The melody echoes that of the opening movement, supported by a walking chromatic bass which repeatedly climbs and descends – a technique commonly used in sacred music to delineate the recognisably Christian arch symbol denoting union with God. Exchanging 'light and shade' passages are concluded with yet another set of ascending luminescent chords.

The *Fili, quid fecisti nobis sic?* ('O Fils, que nous as-tu fait ainsi?', from the communion chant for the Feast of the Holy Family in the Gospel of St Luke, chapter 2, verses 48 and 49) [9] introduces the 'Retrouvailles', the Mystery of the Finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple [10]. Perhaps the most hauntingly beautiful movement of the entire work, it uses a formula very similar to that of the 'Sérénade', with a Phrygian melody floating above swinging second-inversion chords in the left hand, which is then echoed by the pedal. The combination of these two parts produces a bittersweet effect which is transformed into an illuminating A major chord in the final four bars.

## II. 'Douloureux'

A communion chant (*Pater*; 'Our Father') from Palm Sunday, adopted from the Gospel of St Matthew, chapter 26, verse 42 [11], precedes 'Les gouttes de sang' ('Drops of Blood'), or the Mystery of the Agony in the Garden [12]. From this point the music now starts to become more directly poignant. The piece is punctuated by short notes suggestive of the drops of blood – or perhaps these are an allusion to Jesus' tears as he contemplates his destiny: at this very moment he is being betrayed by Judas. Two alternating sections, the first more positive, the second more chromatic and distraught, with falling lines in the bass, convey Jesus' faltering resolve.

Then follows Jesus' flagellation, 'Les coups', (the Mystery of the Scourging at the Pillar) [14] with the chant taken from the Good Friday Reproaches for the Veneration of the Cross (*Ego te pavi manna per desertum*; 'I fed you with manna in the desert') [13]. The strokes of the whip are represented by the inexorable repeated sustained

notes of the right hand and the incessant semiquavers. But the movement is ironically quiet, the composer calling for the echo keyboard at various points and *piano* throughout. The glowing, divine harmonies produce an effect less violent than indicative of Christ's steady psychological state. The longest movement in the whole work finishes with the placidly triumphant harmonies of Christ's endurance.

The chant [15] which accompanies 'La couronne d'épines' ('The Crown of Thorns') [16] is also derived from the Good Friday Reproaches, using exactly the same melody. (*Ego dedi tibi sceptrum regale*; 'I gave you a royal sceptre'.) More detached notes follow with slow, grave, dirge-like minor chords and diminished progressions which recall the tolling of church bells and the types of music one might hear in a Spanish town during a street procession at Easter. The right-hand melody makes heavier use of the Phrygian mode, repeating with dramatically increasing dynamics and cumulative voices to produce ever-thicker textures of two, three, four and finally five notes. After the climax, the original one-line tune is reinstated and the piece dies away softly.

'Les blessures' ('Wounds') [18] indicates the Mystery of the Carrying of the Cross, with the chant taken from the Gradual for Palm Sunday from Philemon, chapter 2, verse 8 (*Christus factus est pro nobis obediens que ad mortem*; 'Christ became obedient for us unto the death') [17]. The piece employs an octatonic mode, as used by Messiaen in the organ studies written in imitation of Marcel Dupré. In another protracted movement, the weight of the cross bears down on the minims in the right hand, mirrored by the pedal and filled out with semiquavers. The music goes round in fraught circles, to be relieved only in the final four bars by ascending celestial chords.

The final Mystery of the Crucifixion, which Nin-Culmell entitles 'Les rivières de sang' ('Rivers of Blood') [20], revisits once again the Good Friday Reproaches in the chant (*Sanctus Immortalis*; 'Holy Immortal One') [19]. The gloomy cascading thirds which collide in dissonant minor seconds are made to sound strangely serene by the unusual use of a bell-like stop. As the piece moves inexorably downwards with a falling chromatic scale in the pedal and a lamenting melody in the right hand, Jesus' life ebbs away, and the (literally) lowest note in the work (D flat) appears in the pedal, the final minor chord signalling Christ's departure.

### III. 'Glorieux'

Nin-Culmell reserves the full resources of the organ for the final 'Glorious' Mysteries, where God's true power and majesty are revealed. They begin with a luminous antiphon from Mark, chapter 16, verse 2 (*Et valde mane una sabbatorum*; 'And very early in the morning on the first day of the week') [21] and 'Le lever du soleil' ('Sunrise') – the Mystery of the Resurrection [22]. The imagery is straightforward: a fanfare of successive triads ascending in minor sixths herald the miraculous event, the wondrous, almighty harmonies bolstered by a portentous pedal line played at full volume. It is only here that Nin-Culmell begins to asking for slightly louder lower notes (now reaching C) to incite a sense of wonder and trepidation.

An Offertory from Ascension Day (a chant from Psalm 46, verse 6: *Ascendit Deus in jubilatione*; 'God has ascended with jubilation') [23] precedes 'Les nuages' ('Clouds') and the Mystery of the Ascension [24]. It is a rather

mystifying portrayal of the Ascension, consisting of an eerie counterpoint between the three parts, with another arched left-hand line mirrored in major sixths and thirds in the pedal. The hauntingly ethereal and supernatural sound effects are contrasted with an extraneous final major chord.

The Mystery of the Descent of the Holy Spirit [26] is renamed 'Le vent' ('Wind'; an image commonly used to represent the Holy Spirit) and is accompanied by a communion chant for Pentecost Sunday recalling Acts of the Apostles chapter 2, verses 2 and 4 (*Factus est repente de caelo sonus advenientes spiritus vehementis*; 'Suddenly there came a sound from heaven') [27]. This 'sound' is disturbingly spectral, as the music shifts between uneasy five- and seven-beat time signatures, through repeated diminished scale passages. The revelation of the drama is conveyed in common time in the final four bars, marked with a sudden *ff sempre*, leading to a big C major chord.

The more tonal 'La ceinture mystique (Lourdes)' ('the Mystical Cincture (Lourdes)') [28] is the only movement in the work assigned with a key signature (B flat major). Referring to the Mystery of the Assumption of Mary (the taking up of the Virgin Mary's body into Heaven at the end of her life), it offers a setting of the traditional Lourdes Hymn, based on a traditional tune from the Pyrenees, and which shares the Fruit of this Mystery: devotion to Mary. The Cincture refers to the Catholic Orthodox belief that Mary gave her belt to the Apostle Thomas before her assumption. The highly melismatic chant *Assumpta est Maria in caelum* ('Mary has been taken up into Heaven') [27] is traditionally used for the Feast of the Assumption on 15 August.

The concluding movement to the Glorious Mysteries, and to the *Symphonie des Mystères*, is called 'La couronne mystique' (the Mystical Crown'), otherwise known as the Mystery of the Coronation of the Blessed Mary [30]. (The chant, *Ave Regina caelorum* ('Hail, Queen of Heaven'), [29] comes from the concluding antiphon in the The Liturgy of the Hours from the Presentation of the Lord until Holy Thursday.) Nin-Culmell's hymn-based melody has a processional quality apposite for a coronation, before it returns to the motif with which he initiated the work in the opening 'Sérénade'. Thus, the *Symphonie des Mystères*, like the Rosary Mysteries, end with Mary, just as they began, giving the work a sense of aesthetic completion. But this time Mary's motif, like Mary herself – and indeed mankind – is transformed through the Mysteries, with glorious chords in the left hand and pedal, leading to a final sustained C Major chord.

The writing of such a fervently Catholic piece as the *Symphonie des Mystères* is not necessarily what one might have expected of a highly cosmopolitan composer like Joaquín Nin-Culmell on the brink of the 21st century: his interest in the Mysteries appears somewhat anachronistic considering that by 1992, when he began work on it, the rosary had lost much of its cultural significance in an increasingly secularised world. But it is important to bear in mind that although Nin-Culmell had never spent more than a few fleeting periods in Iberia, his heart lay in his ancestral Spain – or, to be more precise, the Spain of his formative youth, a time when it was still commonplace for Spanish families to congregate at home daily to recite the prayers of the rosary together by rote; a time when he also enjoyed instruction from his most beloved teacher, the piously Catholic, quasi-ecclesiast Manuel de Falla,



whose influence on Nin-Culmell – both artistic and religious – was definitive. ‘Spain haunts me’, he once said.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, anyone glancing at Nin-Culmell’s catalogue for the first time could be forgiven for assuming that he was in fact a Spanish composer; his output, his approach to composition and his stylistic choices were typical of many of his Spanish contemporaries. In short, Spain provided the spiritual initiation into Catholicism to which Nin-Culmell would remain faithful for the rest of his life.

To be sure, and as Nin-Culmell himself explains in his introduction, one’s understanding of the *Symphonie des Mystères* is best illuminated within the context of that particularly Spanish brand of Catholicism: the mysticism of Spain’s Renaissance luminaries, Saint Teresa of Ávila and St John of the Cross (known as the Discalced Carmelites), whose teachings formed part of the wider cultural discourse of Spain’s celebrated *Edad de Oro* (‘Golden Age’) which also produced Spain’s superlative composer, Tomás Luis de Victoria. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Victoria wrote exclusively sacred music, a fact which has continued to cast an inescapable shadow over subsequent Spanish composers to this day. (In fact, so engulfing was the cult of Victoria that until the end of the nineteenth century it totally dominated the European view of Spanish serious music, propounding the misfounded notion that Spain had produced only music for the church – something which ultimately proved a major factor in the historical exclusion of Spanish serious music from the canonic precepts of the West.) Through the centuries many Spanish composers have felt impelled to partake in this Golden-Age dialectic, almost as a rite of musical passage, and the *Symphonie des Mystères* is descended from a long line of Spanish works nodding to Spain’s glorious Catholic heritage, from composers such as Juan Bautista Comes (1582–1643) to Fernando Sor (1778–1839) and Isaac Albéniz (1860–1909) through to contemporary authors such as Antón García Abril (b. 1933). The apotheosis of this exchange culminated in *Música llamada* (1959–67) of Federico Mompou (1893–1987), a profound and sophisticated musical ‘take’ on the concept of meditation that St John of the Cross characterised as ‘*música llamada / soledad sonora*’ (‘silent music / sonorous solitude’). For Nin-Culmell, the music and culture of this period remained a constant source of fascination, as the rest of his catalogue makes clear, as did his long commitment to curating exhibitions and editing collections of early Spanish repertoire, a preoccupation he inherited from his father, Joaquín Nin Castellanos; Nin-Culmell’s deepest musical desire was indeed for his *chef d’œuvre*, the opera *La Celestina*, based on the eponymous Renaissance classic by playwright Lope de Vega, to make its world debut in Spain.<sup>3</sup>

Nin-Culmell’s choice of text is also pleasantly surprising, given the extent to which the Rosary Mysteries have remained strangely overlooked by composer of sacred music (with offerings from Biber and Milner providing the only notable exceptions<sup>4</sup>). But the context and form of the Rosary Mysteries were to provide Nin-Culmell with the

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Arlene B. Woehl, ‘Nin-Culmell: España me persigue’, *Clavier*, No. 26 (1) January 1987, pp. 20–27.

<sup>3</sup> Nin-Culmell’s wish was indeed fulfilled, but only posthumously: *La Celestina* was first produced in the Teatro de la Zarzuela in Madrid on 19 September 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Heinrich Biber’s fifteen *Rosary Sonatas* for violin and continuo are relatively well known; Anthony Milner’s *Variations for*

perfect framework in which to explore the Catholic doctrine of the Spanish mystics, whose order was predicated on a rejection of the vain outward displays of faith and flaunting of material wealth of the contemporary Church, in favour of cultivating a personal, inner union with God wrought through silent prayer and meditation, and the leading of a generally cloistered existence requiring renunciation of all attachments to the outside world. As non-liturgical prayers, the Mysteries of the Rosary were traditionally prescribed by the Catholic Church to its congregation for private, domestic worship in order to encourage regular meditation on the life of Christ and, thus, initiate direct conversation between Christ and the soul.

This personal imperative makes the selection of solo organ – rather than the panoply of mixed chorus and orchestra – natural choice for the instrumentation of the *Symphonie des Mystères*, the more so as the composer was a keyboard player himself. The peculiar form chosen by Nin-Culmell – who points to the significance of French influences in his preface (the modern Catholic philosophy of Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson, adjacent to the teachings of the Spanish mystics) – is borrowed from a curious format invented by the twentieth-century French school of organists including Charles Tournemire, Olivier Messiaen and Jean Langlais, who liked to indulge their penchant for improvisation during mass by spicing up the plainsong with tangy harmonies – a practice epitomised in Tournemire's colossal work *L'Orgue mystique*. Its French title aside, the *Symphonie des Mystères* tellingly provides instructions for a specifically French organ console. In this fashion, Nin-Culmell depicts each Mystery of the Rosary with one (original) plainchant followed by an improvised extrapolation from the organ. Placing the music, rather than the text, centre-stage, allows him even more emphasis on the individual musical response to 'communal' texts, with the brief chants becoming almost ancillary to the much longer organ parts. For the performer, the relative scarcity of any expression markings in the score – characteristic of Nin-Culmell's notational tendencies – also invites more freedom in personal interpretation.

The *Symphonie des Mystères* is wholly notated but has an improvisatory nature which is of central importance in Nin-Culmell's intention to recreate the meditative experience of the Rosary. Saint Teresa's descriptions of her own meditations tell of the necessity of absolute subjection to God through disengagement of the intellect and other higher faculties – a kind of conscious rapture leading to a completely passive state where awareness of being in the body disappears. The spontaneous and naive act of performance, and improvisation in particular, requires the attainment of a similar state which most musicians spend their entire career striving to achieve on stage; significantly, Messiaen considered the church setting much more conducive than the podium to the freeing of the imagination during improvisation. Nin-Culmell also admits to deviating liberally from the titles of the original Mysteries and the intuitive responses in his music are disinterested in maintaining any consistent overarching style. The *Symphonie des Mystères*, resisting conformity to any superimposed design, hermetically stands against notions of externally prescribed doctrine, both religious and musical.

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Orchestra, Op. 14, of 1958 presages Nin-Culmell's *Symphonie des Mystères* in falling into three groups of five sections each.

Similarly, there is a distinct lack of development in the themes in favour of an obsessive repetition of cells and motifs which provide the means to this trance-like state; on the page, many movements are formulaic to the point of resembling technical studies. Gentle undulations in the music, which, as any 'good' Catholic will know, echo the highly repetitive nature of the rosary text itself (requiring use of a string of beads so as not to lose track of the number of Decades recited) are designed literally to mesmerise the listener into this kind of conscious slumber. Consequentially, the *Symphonie des Mystères* hardly delivers the dramatic response to the Rosary Mysteries that one might have otherwise anticipated. In the hands of a different composer, the story of Christ's life and death could easily assume epic musical proportions; Nin-Culmell's rendition, by contrast, is a modestly intimate and austere affair. These traits, manifest in many other of his works, are also indicative of his somewhat calm and collected personal demeanour and his desire to eschew exhibitionism. *Piano* is, overwhelmingly, the dynamic indication most frequently requested by the composer in the score, which may seem especially surprising when it occurs at junctures where Christ is supposed to be undergoing his most agonising physical trials. Yet the objective of reciting the Rosary Mysteries is not to dwell on the 'histrionics' of Christ's story but to induce a particular spiritual 'fruit' (for example, faith, wisdom, patience and so on), and so in the *Symphonie des Mystères* the especially restrained emotions and attenuated climaxes speak more of Christ's spiritual state of mind than his physical pain. They reflect the closed feeling of someone resigned to his fate, and the blissful peace of a soul engaged in complete communion with God.

The rewards of that communion apparently increase commensurately to the degree of physical pain being felt. The path to God is an arduous one: the Spanish mystics subjected themselves to a severely ascetic existence requiring penance, poverty and even mortifications of the flesh, in pursuit of this state. St John, who was forced to endure incarceration and public flagellation because of his faith, instructs his readers to 'do the most difficult, the harshest, the less pleasant, the unconsoling, the lowest and most despised; want nothing, look for the worst'.<sup>5</sup>

And so the ultimate union with God was, paradoxically, a sweetly painful encounter. Similarly, the *Symphonie des Mystères* is not intended to be an 'easy listening' experience, the work makes no aesthetic compromises or gratuitous attempts to please the ear, and it is suitably 'discaled', dispensing with all superfluous embellishments. Compared to the composer's most cherished works, not least the four volumes of *Tonadas* for piano and the several sets of *Canciones populares* for voice and piano, the musical language is far less accessible and at times even obtuse – a far cry from the sensual and vibrant vernacular of his piano pieces and songs. His normal Spanish-Catalan sound world is instead refracted through a more esoteric harmonic landscape. Yet the many fleeting moments of spiritual epiphany and revelation in the piece are endowed with compellingly bewitching, 'mystical' harmonies.

Nin-Culmell uses a language that is hard to recognise because its subject is not one that is generally known or comprehended. The *Symphonie des Mystères* delights in the inherent capacity of music to express the ineffable;

<sup>5</sup> The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book 1, Chapter 13, Verse 3.

it reminds the listener that music is the highest mystical and metaphysical art-form, and for the composer the act of making music itself provided a divine means of connecting with the higher powers of the universe. Ultimately, all analysis falls away before the fact that this is music intended to be experienced rather than understood.

*Helen Glaisher-Hernández is a concert pianist, musicologist, pedagogue and programme curator who combines her two principle enthusiasms – music and hispanicity – as a specialist in Iberian repertoire. She is a graduate of Cambridge University and Trinity College of Music. Her research interests include the tango as interdisciplinary art form, the postcolonial dialectics of place and identity in Latin American ‘serious’ music, and the history of Latin American piano music.*

**Richard Robertson** is the Assistant Organist at St John's Cathedral in Denver, Colorado. He studied at Manhattan School of Music and Westminster Choir College. Before coming to St John's Cathedral, he was the organist at Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta and then Holy Ghost Catholic Church in Denver.

**St Martin's Chamber Choir** is a professional, non-church affiliated ensemble of 24 singers. The group was founded in 1994, and takes its name from the site of its first concerts, St Martin's Chapel at St John's Episcopal Cathedral in Denver. The choir presents imaginative concert programmes which span the centuries, from Renaissance motets to new pieces composed expressly for it. The repertoire is largely a *cappella*, but St Martin's has also collaborated with such groups as the Boulder Philharmonic Orchestra, the Baroque Chamber Orchestra of Colorado, the Confluence String Quartet and the Musica Sacra Chamber Orchestra of Augustana Arts.

The choir has released nine CDs which regularly appear on classical play-lists on radio stations across the USA. Through its concerts and recordings St Martin's has become recognised as the region's foremost choir of its size. The first American performance of the *Symphonie des Mystères* was given by Richard Robertson and the men of St. Martin's, in the presence of the composer, on 7 December 1997 in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Denver.

**Timothy J. Krueger**, founder and Artistic Director of **St Martin's Chamber Choir**, studied musicology at the University of Colorado-Boulder, the University of Hamburg and Royal Holloway College at the University of London. He has worked professionally with such ensembles as the Santa Fe Opera, the Santa Fe Desert Chorale, Chicago a cappella, the early-music ensemble Vox from Ann Arbor, the St John's Cathedral Choir in Denver, and the Ars Nova Singers of Boulder, Colorado. He is choirmaster of St Andrew's Episcopal Church, Denver, chorus-master for the Colorado Music Festival and the Boulder Bach Festival, and a part-time faculty member at Metropolitan State College of Denver.

- 1 Ave Maria, gratia plena,  
Dominus tecum,  
benedicta tu in mulieribus.
- 3 Benedicta tu inter mulieres,  
et benedictus fructus ventris tui.
- 5 Puer natus est nobis,  
et filius datus est nobis,  
cujus imperium super humerum ejus  
et vocabitur nomen ejus, magni consilii Angelus.
- 7 Lumen ad Revelationem gentium,  
et gloriam plebis tuae Israel.
- 9 Fili, quid fecisti nobis sic? Ego et pater tuus  
dolentes quaerebamus te.  
Quid est quod me quaerebatis? Nesciebatis quia in  
his quae Patris mei sunt, oportet me esse?
- 11 Pater, si non potest hic calix transire, nisi bibam  
illum: fiat voluntas tua.
- 13 Ego te pavi manna per desertum, et tu me cecidisti  
alapis et flagellis,
- 15 Ego dedi tibi sceptrum regale: et tu dedisti capiti  
meo spineam coronam.
- 17 Christus factus est pro nobis obediens usque ad  
mortem. Mortem autem crucis.
- 19 Sanctus Immortalis, miserere nobis.
- 1 Hail Mary, full of grace,  
the Lord is with thee,  
blessed art thou amongst women
- 3 Blessed art thou among women,  
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.
- 5 A child is born to us,  
and a Son is given to us:  
Whose government is upon His shoulder:  
and His Name shall be called, the Angel of Great Counsel.
- 7 A light to lighten the Gentiles  
and the glory of thy people Israel.
- 9 Son, why hast Thou done so to us? Behold Thy  
father and I have sought Thee sorrowing.  
How is it that you sought Me? did you not know  
that I must be about my Father's business?
- 11 O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from  
me, except I drink it, thy will be done.
- 13 I fed you with manna in the desert, and you have  
stricken me with blows and scourges.
- 15 I gave thee a royal sceptre: and thou hast given to  
My head a crown of thorns.
- 17 Christ for our sake became obedient unto death.  
Even the death of the Cross
- 19 Holy, Immortal, have mercy on us.

[21] Et valde mane una sabbatorum, veniunt ad monumentum, orto jam sole.

[23] Ascendit Deus in jubilatione, Dominus in voce tubae, alleluia!

[25] Factus est repente de coelo sonus, tamquam advenientis spiritus vehementis ubi erant sedentes, alleluia;  
et repleti sunt omnes Spiritu Sancto,  
loquentes magnalia Dei, alleluia, alleluia.

[27] Alleluia. Assumpta est Maria caelum:  
gaudet exercitus Angelorum.

[29] Ave, Regina caelorum,  
Ave, Domina Angelorum:  
Salve, radix, salve, porta  
Ex qua mundo lux est orta:  
Gaude, Virgo gloriosa,  
Super omnes speciosa,  
Vale, o valde decora,  
Et pro nobis Christum exora.

[21] And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun.

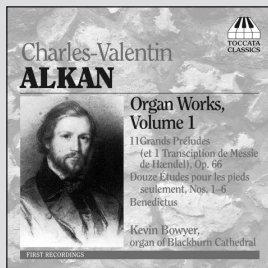
[23] God ascends in rejoicing, the Lord in the voice of trumpets, alleluia!

[25] And suddenly there came where they were sitting, a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, alleluia;  
And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking of the wonders of God, alleluia, alleluia.

[27] Alleluia. Mary is taken up into heaven:  
the host of Angels rejoice.

[29] Welcome, O Queen of Heaven.  
Welcome, O Lady of Angels  
Hail! thou root, hail! thou gate  
From whom unto the world, a light has arisen:  
Rejoice, O glorious Virgin,  
Lovely beyond all others,  
Farewell, most beautiful maiden,  
And pray for us to Christ.

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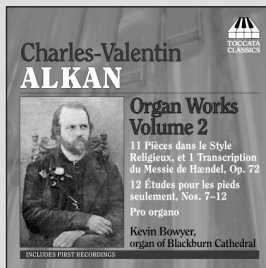


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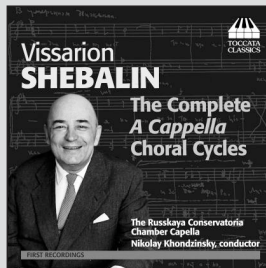
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### RECORDING OF THE MONTH

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Recorded on 12 October 1997 in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Denver, Colorado  
Production and engineering by Penguin Digital, Inc. (pendigital@aol.com)

Artistic director: Allen Hobbs

Recorded in the presence of the composer

Texts: Joaquín Nin-Culmell, Martin Anderson, Helen Glaisher-Hernández

Background photograph courtesy of Chris Rice: the interior of the Church of St Bertrand  
de Comminges, where the *Symphonie des Mystères* was first performed

Design and layout: Paul Brooks, Design and Print, Oxford

Music published by Éditions Max Eschig, Paris

This recording was made possible by the late Msgr. Richard C. Hiester and his sister, Mrs Wayne Nolop.

Executive Producer: Martin Anderson

TOCC 0011

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Joaquín Nin-Culmell (1908–2004) was a student of Dukas and Falla and his early music reflects his Spanish background. The *Symphonie des Mystères* (1992–94) for alternating Gregorian chant and organ, is a product of the religious devotion of his old age, the chant sections setting in bold relief the austere passionate organ commentaries, which have an affinity with Messiaen, as Nin-Culmell's music traces a dramatic arch charting the birth, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.



## JOAQUÍN NIN-CULMELL *Symphonie des Mystères*

<b>I. Joyeux</b>	<b>16:22</b>	<b>16</b>	La Couronne d'épines	3:32
<b>1</b> Chant: <i>Ave Maria</i>	0:27	<b>17</b>	Chant: <i>Christus factus est pro nobis</i>	1:02
<b>2</b> Sérénade	2:31	<b>18</b>	Les Blessures	2:18
<b>3</b> Chant: <i>Benedicta tu inter mulieres</i>	0:24	<b>19</b>	Chant: <i>Sanctus Immortalis, miserere nobis</i>	0:30
<b>4</b> Dialogue	2:20	<b>20</b>	Les Rivières de sang	3:55
<b>5</b> Chant: <i>Puer natus est nobis</i>	1:16	<b>III. Glorieux</b>	<b>18:07</b>	
<b>6</b> Il est né!	1:13	<b>21</b>	Chant: <i>Et valde mane una sabbatorum</i>	0:31
<b>7</b> Chant: <i>Lumen ad Revelationem gentium</i>	0:22	<b>22</b>	Le Lever du soleil	1:42
<b>8</b> Offrande	3:00	<b>23</b>	Chant: <i>Ascendit Deus in jubilatione</i>	1:31
<b>9</b> Chant: <i>Fili, quid fecisti nobis sic?</i>	1:21	<b>24</b>	Les Nuages	2:24
<b>10</b> Retrouvailles	3:28	<b>25</b>	Chant: <i>Factus est repente de coelo sonus</i>	1:19
<b>II. Douloureux</b>	<b>18:28</b>	<b>26</b>	Le Vent	1:47
<b>11</b> Chant: <i>Pater, si non potest hic calix transire</i>	0:33	<b>27</b>	Chant: <i>Alleluia. Assumpta est Maria caelum</i>	1:42
<b>12</b> Les Gouttes de sang	3:17	<b>28</b>	La Ceinture mystique (Lourdes)	1:58
<b>13</b> Chant: <i>Ego te pavi manna per desertum</i>	0:26	<b>29</b>	Chant: <i>Ave, Regina caelorum</i>	1:37
<b>14</b> Les Coups	2:28	<b>30</b>	La couronne mystique et retour de la Sérénade	3:36
<b>15</b> Chant: <i>Ego dedi tibi sceptrum regale</i>	0:27			
				<b>TT 52:56</b>

### Richard Robertson, organ St Martin's Chamber Choir

Tenors: Brock Erickson, David Huskey, Glen McGrath, Chris Wolvorton  
Basses: Jacob Cooper, Joe Francis, Tom Keyse, Tim McCandless, Terry Schlenker

### Timothy J. Krueger, director

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