

# Jennifer Bate obituary

**Virtuoso organist chosen by the French composer Olivier Messiaen to be the interpreter of his colourful music**



Jennifer Bate was on a recital tour of Scottish organs in the mid-1970s when she was told that the great composer Olivier Messiaen was in London and had asked to hear her play. As the young virtuoso later told *Gramophone* magazine, she immediately flew south and played for him on the organ at her father's church in north London, choosing the Frenchman's seven-movement *Les Corps Glorieux*. "Have you heard my record?" asked an excited Messiaen when she finished. "This is exactly how I play my music. I can hear all the inner parts."

As Bate later recalled, Messiaen and his wife, Yvonne Loriod, "then came home for tea and it was the beginning of many years of friendship". Bate was soon the foremost proponent in Britain of Messiaen's organ music. In October 1986 she gave the British premiere at Westminster Cathedral of his *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, a collection of pieces on the Eucharist. Eleven months earlier he had

sent her a handwritten copy of the score of the work, which was to be his last great organ cycle, “with strict instructions that I wasn’t to tell anybody it existed”, she recalled.

Not that practising organ music is an easy secret to keep, with many instruments being in churches and cathedrals. Much of her rehearsal was after hours. “I sent him a progress tape in March and then we had five evenings working on it together at Westminster,” she said. A *Times* critic described how it was “performed with the unashamed positiveness, wide-ranging colour and sheer virtuosity one has come to associate with Jennifer Bate’s playing”.

Messiaen then invited Bate to Paris to make the first recording of the work at the church of St Trinité, where he was the organist. “Messiaen sat beside me throughout the sessions and kept his own log,” she recalled. He “would sometimes suggest a point of articulation, or something he felt could be better, especially with the birdsongs, which are very important to him”.

Messiaen was not the only composer with whom she collaborated. “I learnt about 20 to 30 concertos by living composers,” she told *Choir & Organ* magazine. “And it was through my friendship with Andrzej Panufnik, Peter Dickinson and others that I got my first chances to record or play.”

Bate was a great champion of her instrument, recording music not only by Messiaen but also by Mendelssohn and César Franck. Her aim, she said, was “to raise the level of organ performance and put it on a par with that of other instruments”. She worked with student organists and at the Jennifer Bate Organ Academy for young women organists she would often pass on her father’s advice: “Always use your brain before you use your feet or fingers.”

Jennifer Lucy Bate was born in London in 1944, the only child of HA (Horace) Bate and his wife, Dorothy (née Hunt). Her father was organist and choirmaster of St James Muswell Hill, where he designed a fine organ. One of his choristers was Ray Davies, later frontman of the Kinks.

She played her first notes on the piano at three, but a decade later the pianist Colin Horsley advised her not to be tied to one instrument. When she tried the organ she found it “a revelation”. However, it was not until after graduating from Bristol University with a music degree that she decided to make it her chosen instrument, whereupon she learnt 16 works in three weeks for her professional debut at Birmingham town hall in 1967.

The following year she married the organist and composer George Thalben-Ball who was 48 years her senior. The marriage was dissolved four years later. She is survived by her partner of the past 20 years, Air Vice-Marshal Andrew Roberts, who handled her engagements. There were no children.

Over the years she recorded all Messiaen’s music, mostly at Beauvais cathedral in France, where she was enthralled by the space. “It’s the largest nave in Europe, and for Messiaen you must find a reverberant acoustic which naturally fills the dramatic pauses in the music,” she explained. However, her favourite instrument was in the Royal Albert Hall, where she appeared at the Proms on four occasions. “If I was told that tomorrow would be the last day I could play I would choose the Albert Hall,” she told *The Age* in Melbourne. “It is so exciting.”

Much of Bate’s work was overseas, especially in Italy where she gave her final concert at Novara in October. She sometimes toured for the British Council, combining recitals with teaching and lecturing, a venture that took her to some exotic places with equally exotic instruments. She recalled how on one occasion she was performing at a Methodist church in Freetown, Sierra Leone, where she managed to accommodate missing organ stops. However, “the front pipes leaned out at a dangerous angle and looked likely to fall on my head [and] the sound of the full organ was like a cow in labour”.

**Jennifer Bate, OBE, organist, was born on November 11, 1944. She died from breast cancer on March 25, 2020, aged 75**