**Messiaen, Olivier (1908-1992)**

**Stephen Broad**

Olivier Messiaen was one of the foremost composers of the twentieth century, with a distinctive compositional style of great emotional intensity. This style drew on a diverse array of rhythmic, harmonic, timbral and formal influences that included the songs of birds, and expressed a deeply-held Catholic faith. Messiaen was influential as a teacher, and foresaw the concept of total serialism that was taken forward by his pupils Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen. There are major works throughout his sixty year career, including *La Nativité du Seigneur* (1935) the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (Quartet for the End of Time, completed 1941), *Catalogue d’oiseaux* (completed 1958), *Couleurs de la Cité céleste* (1963), *Des Canyons aux étoiles* (completed 1974) and *St François d’Assise* (completed 1983). In his treatises *Technique de mon langage musical* (1944) and *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d’ornithologie* (1994-2002), he set out his musical inspirations and processes in considerable detail.

Messiaen was born in Avignon, France, in 1908. Even his earliest extant compositions, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, are marked by a seriousness of approach and emotional sincerity that contrasts with the bright levity of much music of that time and, to a lesser extent, with the perceived intellectualism of the Second Viennese School. When he co-founded a ‘friendly group’ of young composers in 1936, it was to underline a ‘common desire to be satisfied with nothing less than sincerity, generosity and artistic good faith.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

Early in his compositional life, Messiaen identified a number of diverse musical sources that he fused into a distinctive compositional style. These included an approach to pitch organisation that drew on the practices of Rimsky-Korsakov, early Stravinsky, and above all Debussy, to create an allusive harmonic world in which straightforward added-sixth chords could co-exist with subtle shifts in tonality; and an additive approach to rhythm that embraced ancient Greek meters and the rhythms of the Indian sub-continent and evolved into a highly sophisticated rhythmic language.Messiaen was, then, an eclectic who saw no tension between gathering resources from a wide range of musics and a deeply-held sincerity of expression.

Shortly after completing his studies at the Paris Conservatoire, he became organist at the Church of the Holy Trinity in Paris, a post he held until his death in 1992. The organ, which he had been encouraged to take up in his later years at the Conservatoire on account of a great skill in improvisation, became an important further source of inspiration, especially in timbral terms. The organ’s ability to create unusual groups of timbres, often deployed in alternation, may be seen reflected in Messiaen’s wider music, as may be its capacity to generate a mighty and implacable tone.

The notion of éblouissement (dazzlement) is an example of how Messiaen’s aesthetic is intimately connected with his distinctive view of the Catholic faith, which has mystical and surreal elements. In dazzling the listener with extremes of volume, duration, and timbre, Messiaen sought to represent the truths of his faith; the result for the listener is often overwhelming, a transcendent experience that goes beyond specific belief systems. This power helps to explain the considerable popularity of his music among a wide listening audience.

In 1939, Messiaen joined the French army as a medical orderly and was captured and imprisoned. During his captivity in Stalag VIIIA in Görlitz, Silesia, he completed the Quartet for the End of Time, which was performed in the camp on 15 January 1941, before an audience of fellow prisoners. Although there are a number of myths associated with this performance, it rightly stands as one of the most famous premières of the twentieth century.

Upon repatriation, Messiaen began teaching analysis at the Paris Conservatoire. Although this was not his first experience of teaching, it was significant in bringing him into contact with the young Pierre Boulez, and Yvonne Loriod, a young pianist who would later become his second wife, and whose pianistic brilliance would inspire him throughout the remainder of his life. Around this time he published his first treatise The Technique of my Musical Language.

After a series of high-profile works in the 1940s came a phase of experimentation, culminating in the *Quatre Études de rythme* (completed 1950), which is the first known attempt to serialise all elements of music. It is now known from Messiaen’s diaries that he had been considering expanding the serial principle from pitch to other elements of music as early as 1945. Although this experimental phase was important historically, because it pointed the way to the total serialism of the 1950s, it was, for Messiaen, only of passing interest. From 1952 onwards, he became increasingly interested in the songs of birds, writing firstly *Réveil des oiseaux* (completed 1953) then Catalogue of the Birds. Although Messiaen’s birds sing according to his aesthetic parameters, many are quite accurately drawn from life, whether directly (as Messiaen liked initially to claim), or from his own or commercial field recordings.

In the final phase of his compositional career, Messiaen synthesized the various elements of his style in a series of enormous landmark works – *La Transfiguration de Nôtre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (completed 1969), *Des Canyons aux Etoiles* and *St François d’Assise*.

Messiaen’s legacy extends to the many significant musicians he taught in his long teaching career, who have become important composers – such as Tristan Murail, Gilles Tremblay and François-Bernard Mâche. Among composers of later generations he is revered for his unerring sincerity of expression and the concealed subtlety of his musical structures. Perhaps most significant, however, is his ongoing popularity with audiences, especially in Europe, America and Japan, who are moved by the intense experience of his music.

Selected Works, with dates of completion

Opera

*Saint François d’Assise: Scènes franciscaines* (1983)

Orchestral

*L’Ascension: Quatre Méditations symphoniques pour orchestra* (1932)

*Turangalîla-symphonie* (1948)

*Réveil des oiseaux* (1953)

*Chronochromie* (1960)

*Couleurs de la Cité celeste* (1963)

*Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* (1964)

*Des Canyons aux étoiles* (1974)

*Eclairs sur l’Au-Delà* (1992)

Chamber Music

*Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (1941)

Organ

*Le Banquet céleste* (1928)

*La Nativité du Seigneur: Neuf médiations pour orgue* (1935)

*Les Corps glorieux: Sept Visions brèves de la Vie des Russicités pour orgue* (1939)

*Messe de la Pentecôte* (1950)

*Livre d’orgue* (1951)

*Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (1969)

*Livre du Saint Sacrement* (1984)

Piano (solo and duo)

*Préludes* (1929)

*Visions de l’Amen* (1943, two pianos)

*Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus* (1944)

*Quatre Etudes de rythme* (1950)

*Catalogue d’oiseaux* (1958)

Vocal

*Poemes pour Mi* (1937, soprano and piano or orchestra)

*Chants de Terre et de Ciel* (1938, soprano and piano)

*Trois Petites Liturgies de la Présence Divine* (1944, piano solo, ondes martenot solo, celesta, vibraphone, percussion and strings)

*Harawi: Chant d’Amour et de Mort* (1945, soprano and piano)

*La Transfiguration de Nôtre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (1969, choir, instrumental soloists and orchestra)

Writings and interviews

*Technique de mon langage musical* (1944)

*Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d’ornithologie* (1994 – 2002)

Bibliography

Benitez, V. P. (2008) *Olivier Messiaen: A Research and Information Guide*, New York and Abingdon: Routledge. (A comprehensive guide to sources on Messiaen, with a strong bibliography.)

Broad, S. (2012) *Olivier Messiaen: Journalism 1936-1939*, Aldershot: Ashgate. (Messiaen’s early writings, which illustrate his relationship with the wider musical world of the 1930s.)

Hill, P. (1995) *The Messiaen Companion*, London: Faber and Faber. (The first study to be published after the composer’s death – a series of themed essays, including an interview with the composer’s widow, Yvonne Loriod.)

Hill, P. and Simeone, N. (2005) *Messiaen*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press. (The definitive biography of Messiaen.)

Boivin, J. (1995) *La Classe de Messiaen*, Paris: Christian Bougeois. (A detailed account of Messiaen the teacher, based on interviews with former students.)

Dingle, C. (2007) *The Life of Messiaen*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (A concise account of Messiaen’s life, giving particular detail on the composition of *St François d’Assise*)

Johnson, R. S. (2008) *Messiaen,* revised and updated by Caroline Rae, London: Omnibus Press.(Especially good on analysis of Messiaen’s style, useful lists of déçi-tâlas and bird names.)

Messiaen, O. (1994) *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel* translated by E. Thomas Glasow, Portland OR: Amadeus Press. (English translation of extensive interviews with Messiaen, which were carefully edited by Messiaen to represent his considered views on the topics discussed.)

Rischin, R. (2003) *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet*, Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press. (Fascinating insights into the première of the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, but includes a number errors.)

Simeone, N. (1998) *Olivier Messiaen: A Bibliographical Catalogue of Messiaen’s Works*, Tutzing: Hans Schneider. (Superseded in some respects by Benitez, but also valuable additional material such as early concert reviews.)

1. Boston Symphony Orchestra, 56th Season (1936-37), Second Programme (16 and 17 Oct 1936), programme book, 74-75. Quoted in: Nigel Simeone, ‘La Spirale and La Jeune France: Group Identities’, *Musical Times* 143/1880, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)