

*Messiaen: Musical Expressions of Birdsong and
Christian Spiritualism*

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Emily Judd

Olivier Messiaen was much more than a typical composer of music. He traveled around the world observing and cataloging birdsongs, was imprisoned as a German prisoner of war during World War II, and toured many countries performing his own music. These unique experiences, along with his strong Catholic faith, had a major influence on his musical style, prompting the inclusion of birdsong and Christian symbolism into his musical writing. Messiaen's distinctive compositional traits such as the incorporation of birdsongs and Christian spiritualism are demonstrated through the example of two of his works, *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* and *Des canyons aux étoiles*, which, though written during separate compositional and time periods of his life, both exhibit the spiritual qualities of his Catholic faith and the accuracy of his ornithological influence.

Olivier Messiaen enjoyed surveying nature, especially birds, and became extremely interested in collecting the songs of a multitude of species. He traveled extensively through France and toured throughout Japan and North America as well to catalog the native birdsongs. Messiaen's former student at the Paris Conservatory and eventual second wife, Yvonne Loriod, would often travel along with him to assist in the documentation of the tunes. The systematic collection began in 1952, and Messiaen amassed a library of around two hundred notebooks of the aurally notated birdsongs and musical sketches based on the notated songs.¹ Although Messiaen would make his first birdsong notations by completely by ear, Loriod would record the birds on a tape recorder so he could later revise his first copy to improve accuracy to the original.² Even though Messiaen's transcriptions were more faithful to the birds' actual songs than most previous composers had been, even he had to adapt his versions from the originals just as the other composers had done before. The birdsongs were modified so that instruments would

¹ Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 204.

² *Ibid.*, 208.

be able to play the songs within their technical limitations of range, pitch tuning, and speed of performance. The range was often dropped by several octaves, intervals were changed from a few cents to semitones and whole steps to thirds respectively, and tempo was greatly reduced. The birdsongs were generally used in two manners within a composition. One way was to showcase a particular species, including a feeling for its native habitat (including sounds like the wind and nearby water sources) and neighboring species of birds, and the second method was a less structured treatment with songs from various bird species of different countries or natural habitats all combined in one piece. These uses of birdsong are shown in both *Quatour pour la fin du temps* and *Des canyons aux étoiles*.

Quatour pour la fin du temps, or *Quartet for the End of Time*, was written while Messiaen was a prisoner of war during World War II. Messiaen continued his study of birdsong with the aid of the man who would become his cellist in the quartet, Etienne Pasquier. Pasquier, a fellow camp prisoner and Paris Conservatory first prize winner, was in charge of distributing camp duties, so Messiaen requested the dawn watch for the two of them in order that they might listen to the morning chorus of birds.³ This further observation led to the first inclusion of species identifiable birdsongs in Messiaen's music, the songs of the blackbird and the nightingale; these two species' songs became the ones most frequently used in his later works.⁴ The *Quatour* illustrates the first example of Messiaen's use of birdsong, in this case, mostly in the high register clarinet and violin parts. The other two eventual performers of the quartet, Henri Akoka (the clarinetist and also a Paris Conservatory first prize winner) and Jean Le Boulaire (the

³ Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 10.

⁴ Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), 116-118.

violinist), were also prisoners of war in the same prison camp, Stalag VIII A. Messiaen would perform the fourth part, the piano part, himself.

The second example is *Des canyons aux étoiles*, or *From the Canyons to the Stars*. This piece was commissioned for the bicentennial celebration of the United States of America. As it was intended for an American event, Messiaen traveled to Utah, specifically Bryce Canyon, to gain inspiration and to gather materials from the scenery there to incorporate into the orchestral work. The commission made use of a great variety of bird species from the cañon wren and the mockingbird to both the Chinese thrush and the American wood thrush.⁵ A specific example is presented in the sixth movement, *Appel Interstellaire*, or *Interstellar Call*, an unaccompanied horn solo. The horn is required to twice imitate the call of a Chinese thrush and is also called upon to portray the cañon wren in a short call. As one might imagine, it can be a difficult task for a horn player to convincingly imitate a high-pitched, rapid bird call, due to the range and technical speed limitations of the instrument. As this is a piece from the latter years of Messiaen's life, the use of such a range of bird species shows the development of the birdsong inclusion in his work from the first example in the *Quatour*.

As a faithful Catholic, Messiaen also included many examples of Christian spirituality in his pieces. This symbolism is present in the majority of his music composed between 1928 and 1944, along with a few examples during his later years. Messiaen insisted that his symbolism is theological, referring to the relationship between God and man and the redemption of the human race through Christ's sacrifice to take the punishment for the sins of the world, rather than a mystical orientation. Symbolism is also present through the use of numbers with specific spiritual connotations. The number three signifies the Holy Trinity of God the Father, God the

⁵ Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 227-229.

Son, and God the Holy Spirit, the number five is the number of the Indian god Shiva (Messiaen made use of Indian rhythmic patterns.), and the number seven is the number of days for creation of the world including the first Sabbath.⁶ This symbolism is present in the titles of many of his works and individual movements of those pieces, such as the sixth movement of the *Quatour*, which is entitled *Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes*, or the *Dance of Fury, for the Seven Trumpets*.

Quatour pour la fin du temps has a great deal of Christian symbolism attached to it. First of all, the piece is based on a passage from the Biblical book of Revelation, Chapter Ten. The selected verses describe the coming of the Apocalypse, complete with “a mighty angel” and “no more time.” It is then quite clear where the title of the piece originated with “the end of time.” Movement titles also take their names from other symbols present in the passage, such as the seven trumpets previously mentioned and a rainbow adorning the angel’s head.⁷ Although this piece was composed while Messiaen was a war prisoner in miserable conditions, he stated that he wished to portray the end of time as a part of eternal life and not the Apocalypse, as it might seem during those circumstances.⁸ Messiaen also used the number symbolism in the formation of the structure of this piece. There are eight movements, seven for the creation and Sabbath period and the last one to symbolize time stretching on into eternity. This “end of time” is further depicted through the structure of the last two movements. The seventh movement is a cello solo with piano accompaniment that sounds like it should be the finale of the piece, but then the work continues in the eighth movement with the true finale in an accompanied violin solo,

⁶ Johnson, *Messiaen*, 40-41.

⁷ Peter Hill, ed., *The Messiaen Companion* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1995), 235.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 236.

signifying an open-ended eternity.⁹ The extent of Christian symbolism, especially the uplifting slant to the symbolism, in a piece written as prisoner amidst a world war shows the strength of Messiaen's Catholic faith.

The Christian symbolism carried through the rest of Messiaen's career, although maybe not to the extent that it was at during his middle years. *Des canyons aux étoiles* also portrayed the religious factor that was present in so many of his former works. The piece was based off of what Messiaen saw and heard on his trip to Utah, from the scenery of canyons and mountains to the voices of birds. The work as a whole portrayed the connection between heaven and earth. For example, Messiaen noticed while gazing at the canyons that "one progresses from the deepest bowels of the earth and ascends towards the stars".¹⁰ There are specific examples, again from the sixth movement *Appel Interstellaire*. In this movement, the horn opens with a heartrending call asking for help from above. Long pauses are interspersed to signify waiting for a response from God. In the author's opinion, the middle lyrical sections that hint at tonality (or at least a system of organized pitches) are the periods where the piece shows acceptance of God's decision and contentment. The fear creeps back in with further loud dissonant cries, rapid passages, and questioning phrases. After another long pause, acceptance again appears through the altered reappearance of the lyrical section. Following a final expression of remaining frustration, God's reassuring presence is felt in the ending phrase, which is just one pitch played with the horn valves halfway depressed and the instructions to oscillate on the pitch to create an unreal or ethereal sound. In the overall piece, Messiaen also made use of textual symbolism. He assigned each letter of the alphabet its own pitch, duration, chord, and instrumentation and then spelled

⁹ Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen*, 101.

¹⁰ Hill, *The Messiaen Companion*, 466.

out three Greek invocations and another Biblical phrase of significance.¹¹ The spirituality present in *Des canyons*, while perhaps not to the same level as in the *Quatour*, gives a further look at the ways in which Messiaen incorporated his faith into his work with varied emotions and situations.

The distinctive compositional traits of including birdsong and Catholic symbolism that are heavily associated with Olivier Messiaen are portrayed through his pieces *Quatour pour la fin du temps* and *Des canyons aux étoiles*. Although these pieces were composed during dramatically different time periods and circumstances of his life, both exemplify the use of the birdsong and Christian symbolism as well as the variance and growth in their uses over time. With the number of specific bird songs and implied spiritualism included in *Des canyons* to the religious importance and beginning birdsong traits of the *Quatour*, Messiaen has proven that he is the master of these two distinctive compositional techniques.

¹¹ Hill, *The Messiaen Companion*, 467.

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