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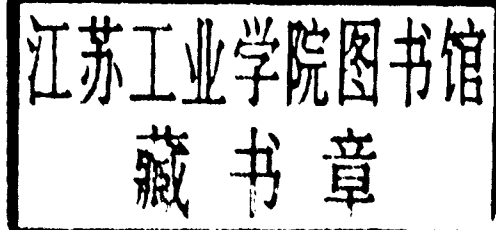
# YIER MESSIAEN Music and Color *Conversations with Claude Samuel*



with Claude Samuel  
(Messiaen, O.)

ter

*Olivier Messiaen*





OLIVIER MESSIAEN  
Music and Color  
Conversations with Claude Samuel

*Translated by E. Thomas Glasow*



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Frontispiece engraving of St. Francis receiving the stigmata, "Amor reciprocus Dei et D. Francisci [Mutual love of God and blessed Francis]" by J. Ch. Smiseck, Courtesy Museo Francescano, Rome.

*Endpaper illustration by Carla Magazino*

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*Photographs follow page 160*





*Dedicated to the memory of  
Olivier Messiaen  
1908–1992*



## Preface

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Olivier Messiaen had just attended the two premieres—first private (at the Sainte-Chapelle), then official (at Chartres Cathedral, in the presence of General de Gaulle)—of *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum*. He was immersed in the composition of the monumental *La Transfiguration de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ*, which the Gulbenkian Foundation had commissioned of him, making use of what little free time his teaching at the Paris Conservatory, rue de Madrid, left him. In Royan, he had recently chaired the jury of the first piano competition to which he had lent his name, and whose renaissance young artists from around the world still await. It was at this time that Olivier Messiaen, at the invitation of Pierre Belfond, agreed to take part in a more abstract exercise: a game of question-and-answer before the microphone, with a view to publication. I knew Messiaen well enough to know that he did nothing lightly, that his observations were always well founded, that he was more voluble about what he did know—which is to say, his creative work, the musical currents of our time, and the open-minded teaching that he still practiced—than about what he did not: namely, the superficial trends of our society. I discovered that his scrupulous professional conscience was a match for the gift of meticulous concentration he brought to the project. There was no adverb, no comma in that first book that he did not carefully weigh. Hence, its 236 pages—published in small format—were from then on accepted as gospel by those who wanted to know and repeat, write or comment upon Olivier Messiaen's truths. Eventually the book was translated into English and Japanese as well.

After attending the premiere of his *Transfiguration* in Lisbon, Messiaen renewed his ties to the organ and piano with *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* and *Fauvette des jardins*—the latter piece devoted entirely to one bird. He next orchestrated the magical colors of star-canopied Bryce Canyon and Zion Park for *Des canyons aux étoiles*, then plunged into the most unpredictable and demanding of

grand adventures: the composition of an opera on the life of Saint Francis of Assisi. It took eight years to complete the work, whose dimensions rival those of *Parsifal*. At the Palais Garnier on 28 November 1983, the musical world discovered—not without astonishment in an opera house whose usual fare ranged from the trivial to the vulgar: dramas of murders, betrayals, and tawdry love affairs—that divine grace might also find its way into the repertoire. To say that the traditional opera public got the message would be going too far, but thousands of music lovers were initiated, which helped to assure that the work would eventually reach dyed-in-the-wool *bel canto* audiences. Even in its television broadcast, *Saint François*—a story that holds its tremendous appeal—triumphed, becoming a milestone in the career of a composer whom the public, naturally slower in forming an opinion than the international experts, had taken a rather long time to discover.

During the eight years of its composition, *Saint François* had been Olivier Messiaen's only concern, his every day's task, his every night's anguish—and the result had to be what is called a "testament"—so much so that his admirers, those who eagerly looked forward to his latest works, wondered what the post-*Saint François* future might hold. They may be reassured. And all the better that Messiaen, far from hiding behind the honors heaped before him, agreed to add some chapters to this book, tracing eighteen years of nonstop work, talking about journeys and new reflections, a sign—if one be needed—of a vitality that is as private and discreet as it is unshakable.

A bit of touching up allowed the composer of the *Turangalîla-symphonie* to review his confidences, to clarify some details, and to reconsider judgments in the light of recent musical developments, inspired, after the gradual demise of the serial system in the late 1960s, by computer science. But the essence, the broad outline, is preserved almost verbatim. There are the musical resources of his ornithological quest; his mysterious resonances with the world of color—so dear to my interlocutor that he decided to incorporate it in the book's title; the implications of rediscovered rhythms (Greek, Hindu); but more important, the ultimate driving force behind his creations—his indomitable religious faith. His discourse on any and all of these topics remains a model of consistency, which (whatever may be said about the value of "revised thoughts") is the mark of a great mind. The new chapters—nearly half the book—do not contradict the major convictions and ideas embodied in other scores; his mode of expression is refined without the slightest deviation—artistic or spiritual—from the main path.

From these dialogues Messiaen emerges as a man of firm convictions. At a time when he has achieved many victories—worldly ones, no doubt, but nevertheless quite tangible—Olivier Messiaen maintains the same standards, the same fervor, and occasionally the same reluctance in expressing his opinions of others. He maintains the same indifference, too, toward celebrations of fame—acknowledgments of appreciation given to those concerned with such things—which his attitude is unable to mask. Having proudly divided and patiently reconstructed and investigated time in all its dimensions, Olivier Messiaen transcends time. He has ushered in silent revolutions (or revolutions silently) and takes them on without fear of consequence.

Just as for inspiration Messiaen reaches far beyond those specialized institutions where musical works and legacies are measured by the complexity—or naiveté—of pedantic edicts, I would like to head for the open sea, beyond the pollution of civilization, and give him the title (though he may object to my having borrowed it from Schumann) of *Bird Prophet*.

Claude Samuel  
Paris



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## Musical Expectations

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**Claude Samuel:** You frequently mention the influence of your mother on the development of your personality, notably, the prophetic nature of *L'âme en bourgeon* [The Burgeoning Soul], the collection of poems your mother, Cécile Sauvage, wrote while she was carrying you.

**Olivier Messiaen:** Yes, I have always believed and I believe more and more in the determining role of that maternal collection. Salvador Dali, an eccentric by nature, often spoke of his "intrauterine memories." Without going as far as that, I still believe a child exists from the moment of conception. That is why the Catholic Church is so violently opposed to abortion, which it considers a crime. Because from the very first moment of conception, the child is himself—the future artist or future murderer, the future factory worker or future president of the republic.

**C.S.** Such determinism is frightening!

**O.M.** Consider the beehive, with some bees destined to be workers, drones that exist to assure fertilization, and the queen, whose only activity is laying eggs. There, too, determinism is frightening!

**C.S.** You'll permit me to give more credence to the free will of men than to that of bees.

**O.M.** Granted, man has free will and is capable of modifying his personality. I've forgotten which saint said, "There were two of us; I threw the other one out the window." Nevertheless, the personality of the child is formed in the womb. There is a permanent exchange between mother and child, and the latter can pick up exterior emotions. You know, some children move inside the womb when the

mother listens to music and react differently, depending on the music. I remember, for example, one of my wife's nieces, whose baby, before it was born, kicked whenever its mother listened to contemporary music, whereas Bach soothed it. A similar phenomenon is mentioned in the Bible, in fact: the extraordinary moment of the Visitation. Mary, pregnant with Christ, pays a visit to Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist. Now, at the moment Mary greets her, Elizabeth's child shifts position and genuflects. He is baptized in his mother's womb. Then Elizabeth says to the Virgin, "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." That's the origin of one of the most well-known prayers.

C.S. It's a symbolic gesture.

O.M. No, it's not a question of symbolism. The child really moved. It's a unique case, but he was truly baptized in his mother's womb. That's why Christ said, "Among those born of women, none is greater than John the Baptist." In other words, an exchange occurs between mother and child during pregnancy; and the mother, in turn, is transformed. The moment of birth is tragic—tragic for the child whose first mouthful of air is brutal, painful—but also tragic for the mother, who loses a part of herself after the longest and most intimate of human relationships. All these things, so difficult to express, were communicated by my mother in the book of verse entitled *L'âme en bourgeon*. She said them magnificently, with well-chosen imagery, a very keen sense of natural beauty, and, above all, exquisite modesty. Certainly, many women have written poems, but none has spoken of the mystery of giving birth. However, some of them—from Sappho to Anna de Noailles, from Louise Labé to Marceline Desbordes-Valmore—were wonderful writers, as were the novelists Madame de La Fayette, who evokes the pleasures of love, and Emily Brontë, who describes its torments. Then there is the one I consider the greatest, Madame d'Aulnoy, author of numerous fairy tales in which love and the fantastic are combined in a frenzy of invention that foreshadows surrealism. Certain poems of Éluard and films of Jean Cocteau wouldn't have existed without these stories by Madame d'Aulnoy, *La chatte blanche*, *Le Prince Mouton*, and *La Princesse Carpillon*. Though amazing for their time, they unfortunately have been forgotten.

C.S. Do they interest you specifically because they foreshadow surrealism?

O.M. Perhaps. I'm partial to the fantastic side of surrealism, to the sort of science fiction that goes beyond reality and science itself. I was in

Israel recently and, at the end of a conversation with a great scientist, I timidly admitted my admiration for H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. He replied, "Don't be afraid to say it, because that book is a masterpiece, and Wells anticipated discoveries that science is only now beginning to understand."

C.S. But it's the poetic message of science fiction that touches you. Let's call it its poetic intuition.

O.M. I like that expression: indeed, it is poetic intuition. While expecting me, my mother had poetic intuitions. That's why she said, without knowing I would become a composer, "*Je souffre d'un lointain musical que j'ignore* [I suffer from an unknown, distant music]." And also, "*Voici tout l'Orient qui chante dans mon être—avec ses oiseaux bleus, avec ses papillons* [All the Orient is singing here within me—with its blue birds, with its butterflies]." How could she know that I would be an ornithologist and that Japan would fascinate me? Finally, in an era when predicting a child's sex in utero was impossible, she always addressed me as a boy. This is quite an example of premonition. She died before I actually embarked on a musical career, but I'm convinced that I owe my career to that musical expectancy. It was my mother who pointed me, before I was born, toward nature and art. She did it in poetic terms; being a composer, I translated them later into music.

I would like to read to you four lines by Cécile Sauvage that strikingly describe the envelopment of the child by the mother:

*Je suis autour de toi comme l'amande verte  
Qui ferme son écrin sur l'amandon laiteux,  
Comme la cosse molle aux replis cotonneux  
Dont la graine enfantine et soyeuse est couverte.*

I am around you like the green almond  
Which wraps its casing 'round the milky nut,  
Like the soft pod with cottony folds  
Covering the silky, infant seed.

That poem, whose imagery is so appropriate, was published in 1909, one year after I was born. My mother wrote essentially two books, both published by Mercure de France. The first is entitled *Tandis que la terre tourne* [As the World Turns]—and *L'âme en bourgeon* is its last chapter. The second, *Le vallon* [The Valley], is more melancholy; it describes birds and flowers, but no longer the sun of Provence which my mother loved so much and never got over having left. Then a great misfortune occurred: between 1914 and 1918, my mother

wrote an epic, set between earth and heaven, that presented characters from the First World War: the soldiers, but also the corpses, while a sort of goddess, Hémérocalle, the title character, observed the events. It was a drama in verse, three or four hundred pages long, but the manuscript disappeared following several moves from one house to another—

C.S. Did your mother consider herself a *femme de lettres*?

O.M. No, she didn't tell anyone about what she was writing. She was modest and carried a sort of hidden despair within her—perhaps because she was to die young, perhaps because she wasn't a believer. In fact, she was unhappy.

C.S. Your parents weren't believers, yet you always insist that you were born a believer. Can you remember the moment when your religious faith was consciously revealed to you?

O.M. It's true that my parents were not believers. That doesn't mean they weren't worried about the beyond. On this subject, I'd like to tell you about André Malraux, whom I knew well: you know that he considered himself an atheist or, to use the less radical term, an agnostic, but every time we met, he'd converse about death and what follows it, and he even commissioned a work from me on the subject of death, which became a work on the Resurrection: *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum*.

C.S. Do you mean that nonbelievers are worried?

O.M. I will say that they're believers in their own way. They're "reverse believers."

C.S. But you haven't answered my question: how did you become aware of your own religious faith?

O.M. I didn't have a sudden conversion, as did Blaise Pascal or Paul Claudel. You know, Claudel had a sudden flash of inspiration, one day in Paris's Notre Dame, and it was in the middle of the night that Blaise Pascal had his extraordinary revelation and wrote the word "fire" at the start of his *Mémorial*. For me, there was nothing of the kind. I've always been a believer, pure and simple. Little by little I've read books that have strengthened my faith, and I've studied theology, on my own, through my personal reading. I've read almost all the *Summa Theologica* of Saint Thomas Aquinas. I've also studied