Olivier Messiaen and the Tristan Myth

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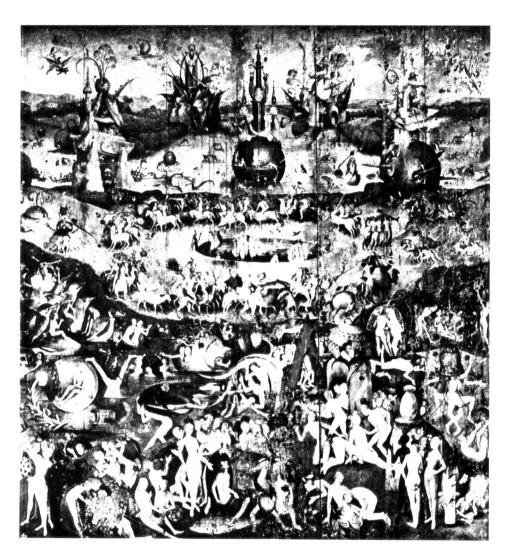


Figure 2. Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450–1516), central panel, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Museo del Prado, Madrid. Alinari/Art Resource, NY.

Figure 1. Roland Penrose, The Invisible Isle (1936).



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Preface

Olivier Messiaen's reputation as a giant among twentieth-century composers would not be what it is without his organ works, his *Quartet for the End of Time*, and the three works—*Harawi, Turangalîla-symphonie*, and *Cinq rechants*—which make up his Tristan trilogy. The organ works expressed his deep religious faith, while in the quartet this faith was joined with the terror of his personal experience in the concentration camp at Görlitz in 1940–41. The Tristan trilogy germinated after his release from imprisonment and his return to teaching, and, like the quartet, it represents his most mature work.

I first became aware of Messiaen's music thirty-five years ago when I was asked to translate into English an article on *La Nativité du Seigneur* by the German church composer Heinz Werner Zimmermann. Zimmermann observed in that article that "in Messiaen's method of constructing melodies, we find a technique of astonishing originality." Hearing Messiaen's organ works played by my friend and colleague the late Kathryn Loew confirmed the ingeniousness of his modal practice and his use of non-Western rhythms. Together we performed on one occasion the *Harawi* song cycle. And as a topic for my dissertation that would fit my need for a medieval-modern topic, Messiaen's Tristan trilogy seemed to be a natural choice. For my advisor, I was fortunate to have the late

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Johannes Riedel, who encouraged me and gave me the freedom I needed. The present book, written a quarter of a century later, could not have been produced without drawing on the work that I did for my dissertation.

My principal debt is to my husband, Clifford Davidson, who was virtually a collaborator in the present project. During a continuing period of my ill health, he not only has given support but has actively helped in essential ways. Although not a musician, he has brought his long experience as an editor to bear in invaluable ways. I have also received encouragement and assistance in various ways from many others. I cannot name them all, but I must mention Jeremy Ribando, who set up the musical examples on his computer, and David Collins, whose assistance with French texts was indispensable.

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The Composer and the Myth

The story of Tristan (Tristram) and Iseult (Isolde) concerns one of the most famous love triangles of all time. Derived from Celtic sources, it has retained its setting in Celtic lands—Brittany, Cornwall, and Ireland. Its earliest version is now lost, but the fundamental episodes were transmitted by Thomas of Brittany (1150–70), Béroul and Eilhart (1170–90), and Gottfried von Strassburg (ca. 1210).¹ The latter's uncompleted German poem is the principal source of Richard Wagner's music-drama *Tristan und Isolde*, which subsequently was a principal inspiration for Olivier Messiaen (1908–92) for three of his most remarkable compositions.

Though Messiaen is reported by his second wife, Yvonne Loriod, to have said, "I am a composer of the Middle Ages," the Tristan story is not one that we would expect to have appealed to him. Messiaen was known prior to 1945, the final year of World War II, primarily as a Catholic organist, the incumbent at the Church of the Holy Trinity in Paris, and as a composer of religious music. However, in June through September of that year he completed his first composition based on the Tristan story, *Harawi*, a song cycle and the first in a trilogy that ultimately would also include *Turangalîla-symphonie* and *Cinq rechants*, both completed in 1948. These represented a distinct departure in subject matter

from his previous compositions but would involve music that, up to this point, he regarded as some of his best work.⁴ Needless to say, Messiaen's Tristan trilogy not only revealed a surprising side of his character, but also meant the application of his own previously developed musical language to secular compositions of very great stature.

Messiaen's work before 1945 reveals a composer whose life seems to have found its center in the expression of his Christian faith, which remained with him to the end of his life and which for him was associated with joy.5 The great work of his final years was his opera Saint François d'Assise, upon which he labored for eight years.6 Messiaen had said in an interview with Claude Samuel, "The first idea that I wanted to express ... is the existence of the truths of the Catholic faith." He added, "I was born a believer."7 In an address given upon his receipt of the Erasmus Prize in Amsterdam in 1971, he proclaimed his belief in God: "And because I believe in God, I believe likewise in the Holy Trinity and in the Holy Spirit ... and in the Son, the Word made Flesh, Jesus Christ (to whom I've dedicated a large part of my works)."8 His early organ works, which have been widely admired for the mystical qualities of their music, were given titles such as Le Banquet célèste (1928), L'Ascension (1933), La Nativité du Seigneur (1935), and Les Corps glorieux (1939). As a general rule, he either prefaced these works with his own explanations setting forth the programmatic nature of the music or provided appropriate biblical texts, which are intended to illuminate their intended theological and mystical associations. He aimed for dazzling coloristic effects in his religious music—the kind of music that "shakes our sensibilities into motion, pushes us to go beyond concepts, to approach that which is higher than reason and intuition, that is to say FAITH."9

But even in compositions not written for the organ—e.g., Quatuor pour la fin du temps (Quartet for the End of Time), composed in 1940–41 while he was in the German prison camp at Görlitz in Silesia—the religious implications are not abandoned. If anything, the programmatic basis of the quartet, which presents to us the apocalyptic angel who announces the end of Time (derived from Revelation 10:5–7), is even more urgently theological and eschatologically oriented. It is a sign of Messiaen's piety that the angel is more beloved than a figure of terror. The angel descends in the second movement of the quartet against the background of the "impalpable harmonies of heaven"; he is "clothed with a cloud: and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the sun, and his feet on the sea and the earth" (Rev. 10:1). In the seventh move-

ment, the angel is spectacularly enveloped by a rainbow, which is symbolic of peace, wisdom, and "all luminous and sonorous vibrations."¹¹

The sacred intrudes even in the three secular vocal cycles written by Messiaen before World War II. Trois Mélodies (1930), which includes a setting of a poem, "Le sourire," by his mother as the central songframed by his own verses at the beginning and end of the cycle-concludes in his final song, "La fiancée perdue," with a cry to Jesus to bless the lost one and to give her repose. Poèmes pour Mi (1936-37) was written for his first wife, Claire Delbos, whom he had given the nickname "Mi."12 Here Messiaen speaks of love between man and woman, of the sacrament of marriage, of the birth of a child, and of the relationship between God and man. Thus in his religious faith he, like the medieval artisans who were totally enveloped by their religious experience, had made what would seem to be a wholeness of his life and art. No artificial line could be drawn between sacred and profane. All aspects of human lifeindeed, all human relationships—are ultimately held in God's hand, as in Auguste Rodin's Hand of God sculpture (1898).13 However, closer scrutiny of the poems and music does not always seem to bear out this integrated vision. One notices the surrealistic and even nightmarish quality of the poems, especially "Épouvante," which begins and ends with a demonic laugh. Tremendous anxiety is evidenced here as in the words "Des lambeaux sanglants te suivraient dans les ténébres" ("The bloody shreds would follow you into the dark").14 Antoine Goléa has commented that this song "has the look of a medieval treatise on sorcery where one confuses the wounds, physically inflicted on the body by the loved one, with the marks of the devil."15

It would appear that for Messiaen at this time, marriage and its relationship between a man and a woman involved not only peaceful moments but also an anguished fear of loss of love. Then at the end of the cycle he seems to escape altogether from such negative feelings: the husband stands alone in prayer before God, to whom he appeals for the healing of his own soul. Likewise, the final song in *Chants de Terre et de Ciel* (1938) draws back from the physical relationships of the earlier part of the cycle. The movement is toward the transcendent, even the mystical. Messiaen's poetry here speaks of Christ's Resurrection, the angel seated at the empty tomb, and the divinely resurrected Son of God who sings praises to the Father as he surrealistically ascends to him. Musically, at this point in the cycle, a very sophisticated kind of word painting appears that indicates upward movement.

Messiaen's musical technique in these two song cycles is already well formed and mature in his use of modes, nonretrogradable and added rhythms, favorite melodic intervals including the tritone, chords of superpositions, and chords with added notes. In *The Technique of My Musical Language* (1944) he wrote: "The two cycles for voice and piano entitled *Poèmes pour Mi* and *Chants de Terre et de Ciel* have unfortunately been quoted very little in the present work. Since they are particularly 'true' in sentiment and typical of my manner, I advise the reader who desires to understand my music better to begin by reading them." ¹⁶ While the composer's art foreshadows what was to come, there is no unfolding of emotion and no development of a large mythic structure such as he was to produce in his Tristan trilogy.

Retrospective examination of these earlier works, then, presents signs of the ensuing abrupt change in Messiaen's consciousness that would be revealed in his Tristan trilogy. Already there was the tortured expression of physical love, which seemed then merely to interrupt or impair the relationship between man and the divine. In his previous desire to escape from the physical to a metaphysical existence, he had proclaimed that life in its most carnal sense was a problem to be solved or transcended. The language of psychology speaks of repression that gives way to a surge of emotion that breaks through into a new experience after which nothing can be quite the same. A metamorphosis from such strict and ascetic religiosity that makes love difficult on a purely human level, to a glorification of human passions such as we have in the Tristan story, is perhaps in these terms not to be seen as particularly unusual. But why did he find his aesthetic solution, the objective correlative for his emotion, in the myth of Tristan and Iseult? For here is a medieval story that hardly can be considered to be within the religious framework of Christianity. Here sin and guilt would seem to dominate—not resurrected and glorified bodies. It seems a strange subject for one who continued to say of himself, "I am above all a Catholic musician. All my works, religious or not, are an act of faith and glorify the mystery of Christ."17 "I have wanted," he said elsewhere, "to express the marvels of Faith." But from the standpoint of a strictly Catholic moral theology, it would seem that Tristan and Iseult must be labeled immoral; their behavior as described in the medieval accounts would appear antithetical to the deep faith, liturgical piety, and strict morality espoused by Messiaen. Dante, the great Catholic poet, explicitly placed Tristan with the lustful in the second circle of hell (Inferno, 5:67), where he nevertheless swoons with pity for the lovers at the end of the canto. Yet the story of Tristan and Iseult as it appears traditionally is not entirely unrelated to the religious point of view, for a deep sense of guilt or sin can exist only if one has lived within the structure of a strong personal ethic, whether or not that ethic is Christian.

The change in Messiaen's life that made possible his Tristan trilogy coincided with a personal crisis. Tanneguy de Quénetain has written that, while Messiaen hated any probing of his privacy during his lifetime, his personal life is relevant to a discussion of his composition:

But can one really bypass completely the drama of his personal life and problems if one wants to grasp the true nature of the man and his work? The fact is that, during the war, his wife fell ill with a serious disease of the brain which first attacked her mental faculties. Transferred to a nursing home she slowly wasted away, and by 1959 all her faculties, including those of hearing, sight and the ability to move her limbs, had gone.

Absolutely cut off from his wife by this illness, but indissolubly tied to her by the marriage sacrament (Messiaen's religious convictions were... very strict), he met in his class at the Conservatoire "an inspired, sublime and unique pianist": Yvonne Loriod. It was then that he composed his great works for the piano.... In addition,... he composed the *Harawi, chant d'amour et de mort*, the *Turangalîla-symphonie* and the *Cinq rechants*, three works glorifying profane love that drew inspiration from the Tristan myth—the supreme myth of passionate love which a transcendent veto causes to remain unconsummated, and which inds fulfillment only in death. 19

While the medieval accounts of such writers as Thomas of Brittany, Béroul and Eilhart, and Gottfried von Strassburg emphasized the sensuality of the lovers, Messiaen, in an interview with Claude Samuel, insisted upon the unconsummated nature of the love between his Tristan and Iseult. He insisted that in his work he had treated "a greater and purer love"—a love in which the lovers are entrapped and which may not lead to satisfaction of their desire. "I'm thinking," said Messiaen, "of the enchanted tower in which Vivian imprisons Merlin." Such remarks, however, seem to apply better to *Harawi* or *Cinq rechants* than to the *Turangalila-symphonie*. The fifth movement of the symphony celebrates an ecstatic and even orgiastic expression of love.

Messiaen's personal experiences, whatever they were, thus meant a

discovery of his own humanity. His own words are revealing: "The illumination of the theological truths of the Catholic faith is the first aspect of my work.... But I am a human being, and like all others I am susceptible to human love, which I wished to express in three of my works that incorporate the greatest myth of human love, that of Tristan and Iseult."21 The myth adopted by him involved the distancing of material that is thus made impersonal, and it made possible his engagement with the problems of love leading to death—and involving sacrifice and renunciation. This love, which derives from the deepest resources of the human personality and which grasps one with a force beyond one's will—a force symbolized in the ancient story by the love potion—is marked by anguish as well as joy. The concept of the "abyss," with which he had been earlier fascinated in his Quatuor pour la fin du temps, now in the Tristan trilogy becomes a complex symbol; among other significations, it implies despair and anguish as the lover is caught in the triangle of love. The anguish was both personal and expressed in his art, as he seems to have admitted when he said, "I have had plenty of unhappiness in my life, plenty."22 The abyss, as visualized so dramatically, for example, in Turangalila-symphonie, is an archetypal symbol for the most primitive level of man's experience;²³ in Messiaen's work it clearly is a highly complicated piece of symbolism. But certainly for him it is something that can hardly be miraculously escaped from or avoided; rather, a "coming through" the abyss is demanded—a "coming through" that eventually means a kind of healing experience after long pain.

Messiaen's primary source for the Tristan and Iseult myth seems not to have been the early romances, though he knew something of the authentic medieval versions of the story, but rather the artist whom Mallarmé had called "Le dieu Richard Wagner irradiant un sacre." The texts that Messiaen himself created for *Harawi* and *Cinq rechants* are, however, not structured as a narrative. Instead the verses which he provided involve a poetry that, like symbolist and Surrealist poetry as well as Surrealist painting, arranges seemingly disjunctive images around a central mythic or archetypal idea. He thus finds his place in the mainstream of French artistic practice of the preceding hundred years:

Already in the nineteenth century Rimbaud had attempted to separate words from their intellectual functions and conventional meanings.... Then Mallarmé... further liberated words from their conventional senses. Enormously influential in modern European literature, Mallarmé distinguished between "immediate speech"—

for the rational uses of everyday existence—and "essential speech" to deal with the essence of things.... Mallarmé attempted to use words and syllables, free of "worn-out, rational meanings," to give "a purer sense to the words of the tribe" and to affect readers in a nonrational way. He attempted consciously to use language in poetry as composers use sound in music, and not for sound alone but ... as "emotional metaphors."

In *Harawi* and *Cinq rechants* Messian thus not only attempted to make fresh connections between words already in the French language but also borrowed from other languages—Quechua and Sanskrit. Furthermore, especially in *Cinq rechants*, he even made up his own language; for example, he invented words such as "hayoma kapritama,"²⁷ which appear to be made up of Quechua or Sanskrit syllables but which are in fact entirely synthetic. But it is in a larger sense that these compositions—and *Turangalîla-symphonie* as well—are Surrealistic masterpieces, for they were as disruptive with regard to the proprieties of the concert hall as was the poetry of the Surrealist poets to the prevailing academic understanding of the nature of poetry.²⁸

Messiaen alternately denied and admitted his affinities with the Surrealist movement. He preferred the French term *surnaturel* to describe his work: "there are three categories [of styles]—the *real*, the *surreal*, and the *supernatural* [*surnaturel*], and I think I have passed these others and have attained the supernatural."²⁹ But elsewhere he more frankly admitted the affinities at least between his verse and the Surrealist style. "I have been a great reader and admirer of Pierre Reverdy and Paul Éluard," he said; "I am, therefore, some sort of surrealist in the poems for my works, if not in my music."³⁰

From the Surrealists Messiaen apparently took his practice of linking together seemingly unrelated images (e.g., the stringing together of the images of water, time, and heaven in "L'escalier redit, gestes du soleil," Song 9 in *Harawi*). The Surrealists had developed this linking technique from the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, whose ideas about the subconscious mind and about the use of free association to probe that previously unexplored area became very influential in the arts. The Surrealist painters and poets, under Freud's influence, wanted to tap the resources of their own unconscious minds and of their dreams and to use that material in their art. André Breton, whom Messiaen greatly admired,³¹ even attempted automatic writing. Others turned to their fantasies and dreams as sources for visual images. They distrusted rational,

logical ways of linking words and symbolic images and looked instead to their inner selves and their emotions for their poetic and painterly insights.

The way had been well prepared for the Surrealist method of working by the earlier symbolist poets, especially by Mallarmé, who believed that "to name an object is to destroy three-quarters of the enjoyment of a poem, which is made up of the pleasure of guessing little by little; to suggest it—that is the ideal."³² His creative practice seems to have fore-shadowed both Messiaen's practice of making word associations and of creating musical connections. "I have found," said Mallarmé, "an intimate and peculiar manner of depicting and setting down very fugitive impressions. What is frightening is that all these impressions are required to be woven together as in a symphony, and that I often spend whole days wondering whether one idea can be associated with another, what the relationship between them may be, and what effect they will create."³³

Many of Messiaen's images in the Tristan trilogy are ones that appear over and over in Surrealist painting and poetry. For example, the bird, one of his most significant images, was also important as a symbol for Max Ernst—so important that the painter called himself "Loplop, Superior of the Birds." Stars appear again and again in Messiaen's verses and in the Surrealists' paintings. Blue skies with cottony clouds are juxtaposed with soft watches crawling with bugs in Salvador Dali's well-known *Persistence of Memory*—a juxtaposition echoed in Messiaen's linkage of "Ciel" and "Temps." Hands and heads are also important in Messiaen's work, especially in Sone 10 of *Harawi*, "Amour oiseau d'étoile," which was inspired by an illustration in a Swiss journal showing a Surrealist painting, Roland Penrose's lost *The Invisible Isle* (see Figure 1, located after Preface).

Nahma Sandrow observes that the "drive basic to surrealism is toward ... a reconciliation of opposites" such as irrationality and higher rational order. Thus in the poetry of *Harawi*, the finite and infinite, the irrational and rational are brought together. In Song 11, Messiaen, in a nonsyntactical construction, writes, "Katchikatchi les étoiles" ("grasshopper the stars"), hence transferring the dancing and leaping (*sauter*) quality of these insects to the stars. At the same time, underneath these images is a larger reconciliation: the lovers, who have previously experienced anguish as well as joy, now are transformed into joyful stars, which exist beyond anxiety and discomfort. For Messiaen as well as the Surrealists, "reconciliation [is] an intensification in time as well as in spirit, a way

to assimilate Bergsonian duration in time. The tension inherent in the willed unification of opposites which are straining apart [lends] a kind of quivering energy."³⁶

Messiaen was very modest about the quality of his verse: "My poems are made with the music and for the music. They have no other literary pretensions." Yet it should be noted that his family had been talented in literature. His mother, the poet Cécile Sauvage, had even written a cycle of poems entitled *L'Ame en bourgeon* before his birth in which she had spoken in lyrical terms of the coming into existence of a new life: "Des cheveux blonds sur front bombé, des yeux noisette, des yeux riants, parlants, chantants, pensants, un drôle de petit nez carré, une belle fossette... sur la joue." His father was a teacher of English literature and a translator of Shakespeare, while his brother Alain was also a poet. Olivier Messiaen's own verse has, to be sure, received little praise from critics. It is a poetry, however, that is not expected to stand alone. His verse, as he himself explains, is secondary to the music—but it is nevertheless essential to its expression.

While Messiaen's verse proceeds in an apparently non-narrative fashion, it nevertheless provides the necessary verbal referents that point to given elements of the myth utilized in the Tristan trilogy. Unlike other composers who worked with a previously completed libretto or poetic text, Messiaen here and elsewhere normally composed the music and wrote the words simultaneously. In an interview with the German composer Heinz Werner Zimmermann, he explained that "in his vocal music, text and musical setting are produced at the same time, whereby the music sensitively takes into account the word accents."39 Both text and music therefore are in a sense wound around the myth in a kind of analysis of the myth. The words and music together serve to mediate between the myth and a logical explanation of it.40 A logical explanation would lay it out flat, like making a flat map out of a globe. Messiaen's way was to wrap words and music around the armature of the myth, hence proceeding in a way analogous to the sculptor creating a piece of additive sculpture. The result, then, is a composition that is intended accurately to show off the design and the contours of the essential myth at the center.

The *musical* procedure adopted by Messiaen in the Tristan trilogy actually owes much more than its story to Wagner. It has been claimed that Wagner was "the undeniable originator of the structural analysis of myths... in *music*," and that he made the "discovery that the structure of myths can be revealed through a musical score." But Messiaen goes