

C u l t u r a l

彈音論樂

藉由多種面向的思考與討論
呈現音樂學領域的寬廣視野
和更多的研究與思考角度

◎輔仁大學音樂系／所 策劃
羅基敏 主編

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彈^音論樂

「音樂演出與音樂研究」學術會議論文集

◎輔仁大學音樂系／所 策劃

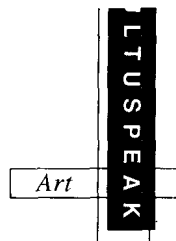
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Magic and Enchantment in Olivier Messiaen's *Catalogue d'oiseaux*

Theo Hirsbrunner

音樂演出與音樂研究學術會議論文集

彈 琴

Theo Hirsbrunner graduated from the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique, Paris, France, and studied with Pierre Boulez in Basel, Switzerland ; he was lecturer in musicology at the Konservatorium (Music Academy), Berne, Switzerland (1960-1987), and at the Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique, Paris (1989-1993).

Research and publications : *Debussy und seine Zeit* (1981), *Strawinsky in Paris* (1982), *Strawinsky-Studien* (1985), *Pierre Boulez* (1985), *Olivier Messiaen* (1988), *Maurice Ravel* (1989), *Die Musik in Frankreich im 20. Jahrhundert* (1995), *Von R. Wagner bis P. Boulez* (1997).

Olivier Messiaen drew his strength and the energy to live and compose from three sources: the Roman Catholic faith, his love of nature and the myth of »Tristan and Isolde«.¹ These three central ideas complemented each other: Without the conviction that nature was God's creation and that love between human beings was God's gift, he could not have believed in the omnipotence of the Church to which he remained loyal all his life.

Messiaen built the sounds of nature, the songs of birds, the roar and thunder of water, the proliferation of plants, the shapes of rocks and the brilliance of light into his music. He explicitly cited Hector Berlioz, Richard Wagner and Claude Debussy as going back to the same sources and openly declared himself a romantic. According to him, contemporary composers would do well to let themselves be »romanticised« since nineteenth-century composers knew the greatness of nature both in its beautiful and its overwhelming, awe-inspiring guises.² Messiaen abhorred big cities, although he was forced by professional necessity to live in Paris. He loved the colorful stained-glass windows of Notre-Dame and Sainte-Chapelle, but could not forget all the ugliness that clustered round this vast city.³

He spent his summers in the country or the mountains, unless he was giving courses or attending performances of his works in America or the Far East. At first he collected birdcalls out of mere curiosity, later he studied the chirping in trees, shrubs, brooks and rocks with scientific thoroughness and became an internationally renowned ornithologist.⁴ He usually noted the melodies by ear, but his wife Yvonne Loriod accompanied him with recording equipment and photographed the landscape in which they did their research. In order to provide a context for the many sounds of nature, it was important to have a record of the light, the sunrise, the sunset and the darkness of the night. Colors turned into sounds and sounds into colors. Thus, Messiaen improved on his painter-friend Blanc Gatti's synopsis. Gatti painted waves of color

¹ Claude Samuel, *Entretiens avec Olivier Messiaen*, Paris 1967, 11 ff.

² Samuel 1967, 28, 141.

³ Samuel 1967, 24.

⁴ Samuel 1967, 110.

streaming out of organ pipes, paintings which hung in Messiaen's music room in Paris.⁵ Messiaen did not want to be associated with Henri Michaux, the poet, who saw colors as sounds and sounds as colors in his mescaline dreams, but in his music he made us hear what we see.⁶ The power given to Messiaen has to be called magic, the power of enchantment. After Debussy, no other composer has sung the pantheistic wonders of nature with the same intensity.

The Catalogue d'oiseaux consists of 13 pieces symmetrically divided into 7 books. The titles of these pieces always refer to the birds that figure most prominently in them, but other birds join in and their names are carefully noted in the score. The result is a concert of many alternating and contrasting voices. The following list, which presents the length of individual piece, reveals the enormity of this work.

- Book 1: 1) *Le Chocard des Alpes* – The Alpine Chough (13:30 minutes)
- 2) *Le Loriot* – The Golden Oriole (9:30 minutes)
- 3) *Le Merle Bleu* – The Blue Rock Thrush (13:30 minutes)
- Book 2: 4) *Le Traquet stapazin* – The Black-Eared Wheatear (16 minutes)
- Book 3: 5) *La Chouette hulotte* – The Tawny Owl (8 minutes)
- 6) *L'Alouette Lulu* – The Wood Lark (9 minutes)
- Book 4: 7) *La Rousserolle effarvatte* – The Reed Warbler (30:30 minutes)
- Book 5: 8) *L'Alouette calandrelle* – The Short-Toed Lark (5:30 minutes)
- 9) *La Bouscarle* – The Cetti's Warbler (11:30 minutes)
- Book 6: 10) *Le Merle de roche* – The Rock Thrush (19 minutes)
- Book 7: 11) *La Buse variable* – The Buzzard (9:30 minutes)
- 12) *Le Traquet rieur* – The Black Wheatear (8:30 minutes)
- 13) *Le Courlis cendré* – The Curlew (11 minutes)

A performance of the whole cycle takes approximately 165 minutes. It was premiered by Yvonne Loriod, to whom it is dedicated, at the Salle Gaveau in Paris on 15th April 1959. Such performances are relatively rare. Anatol Ugorsky performed the cycle in several European cities, including Basle in autumn 1995. Individual pieces may also be performed out of context – it is a catalogue, which should also allow browsing. The

⁵ Samuel 1967, 30, 36.

⁶ Samuel 1967, 36.

symmetrical order, the number of pieces in the individual books, points to an overarching plan:

3 – 1 – 2 – 1 – 2 – 1 – 3

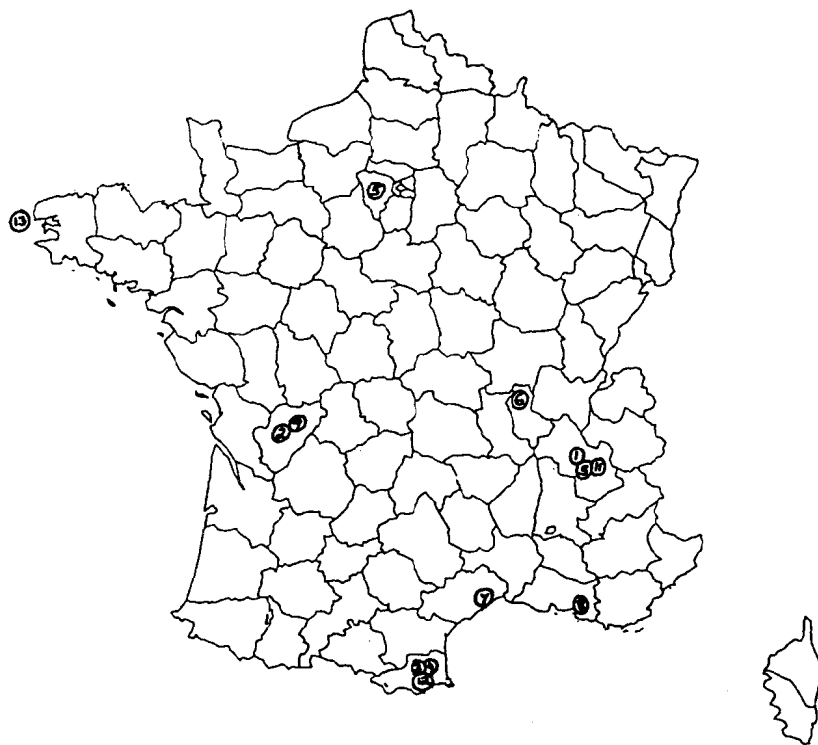
La Rousserolle effarvatte is right at the center, and, at the same time, the longest piece. Listening to the whole piece, we make a journey through France: *Le Chocard des Alpes* takes place in the high mountains around Grenoble, in the extreme east of France; *Le Courlis cendré* is set in Finistère, a part of Brittany that juts west into the Atlantic.

These two loci are symbolic: Messiaen claimed to be from Grenoble although he was born in Avignon. As a boy in Grenoble, living with his mother and grandmother while his father fought in the First World War, he made his first important musical experiences.⁷ At the other end, Finistère simply means the end of the earth; it is where not just France, but the whole world ends. Listening to the whole cycle, we move from Messiaen's birth as a musician to his anticipated death. At the same time, it takes us through many regions of France in homage to the country. The south, open towards the Mediterranean, is the most important, while the north is completely absent, probably because the devastation wrought by war and industry would have been alien to Messiaen's music.

Messiaen is radical in his exclusions. In the commentaries that precede each of the 13 pieces, human beings are almost completely absent. These commentaries follow the music and describe the events on which it is based. Only once does Messiaen speak about his feelings in the first person, in *La Chouette hulotte*. Cities and villages are mentioned, but they remain remote and do not seem to be inhabited. Only an exotic fairy tale prince and the smile of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa are mentioned in *Le Lorient*; ordinary human being does not appear. Sometimes the observer's gaze sweeps over terraced vineyards, but no one is at work in them. In *Le Merle de roche*, the rocks with their grotesque shapes remind Messiaen of the painter, Max Ernst, and his surrealist figures. In *Le Courlis cendré*, the foghorn is heard across the sea – it is the only man-made implement mentioned. On the other hand, a lot of space is devoted to the moods of nature, the color of the sky and the sea. The times of the day and the seasons are carefully given.

⁷ Samuel 1967, 9 ff.

Ex. 1: Map of France with all its *départements*



Messiaen's France and His Birds

- (1) *Le Chocard des Alpes* – The Alpine Chough
- (2) *Le Lorient* – The Golden Oriole
- (3) *Le Merle Bleu* – The Blue Rock Thrush
- (4) *Le Traquet stapazin* – The Black-Eared Wheatear
- (5) *La Chouette hulotte* – The Tawny Owl
- (6) *L'Alouette Lulu* – The Wood Lark
- (7) *La Rousserolle effarvatte* – The Reed Warbler
- (8) *L'Alouette calandrelle* – The Short-Toed Lark
- (9) *La Bouscarle* – The Cetti's Warbler
- (10) *Le Merle de roche* – The Rock Thrush
- (11) *La Buse variable* – The Buzzard
- (12) *Le Traquet rieur* – The Black Wheatear
- (13) *Le Courlis cendré* – The Curlew

Not only are there no human beings, but God's name is never mentioned, which is astonishing given that Messiaen is considered a deeply religious artist who wrote all his compositions for the greater glory of God. Even in later years, when he had become very famous and was invited to the United States and Japan, he never missed an opportunity to accompany the service on the organ at the La Sainte Trinité Church in Paris. Although he collected honours all over the world, he did not consider himself above this humble duty. I will return to this issue by the end of this essay and show that God is always present in the creatures of nature and the play of the elements.

But first: why does Messiaen precede his compositions by commentaries? Would it not have been better to leave the listeners to their own ideas and fantasies? Are not Ludwig van Beethoven's symphonies considered great just because they are purely instrumental and thus evoke more profound emotions than verbal communication? Why those explanations in the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, which can only circumscribe and hamper the music lovers' imagination? These questions are legitimate and cannot simply be disposed of by noting that there are commentaries in all of Messiaen's works. He does not conceal the extramusical relations that his work has. Neither does he make a secret of his compositional techniques, in marked contrast to many of his contemporaries who did not want the sources of their inspiration and their techniques to be revealed. We must assume that for him music was a mere tool with which to sing God's greatness as revealed in nature and human love. That is why he does not use the hustle and bustle of life in the big cities as material and composes, in the *Catalogue d'oiseaux* and many other works, music to which we have to give up ourselves completely if we want to forget time.

Another point should be remembered: Messiaen was an excellent teacher who took pleasure in passing on his knowledge to young people. He was untiring: He spent hours and days going through the eight scores for his opera *Saint François d'Assise* with me; he always had time in a world that might have made him vain and self-importantly busy. In the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, Messiaen invites us to a quiet meditation. We can look at the pictures of the birds on the title pages of the individual books, read commentaries, which are almost prose poems, and then lose ourselves in the music, which transports us to the magical theatre of nature. But do not expect the quick-motion effects of Walt Disney films where natural events that take days in reality are compressed into minutes. Once again: Messiaen takes his time and gives us – blissful – time.

*

In the following, I would like to go through the 13 movements of the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, summarize the commentaries, and analyze the composition of music.

1. Le Chocard des Alpes – The Alpine Chough

We are in the Dauphiné Alps in the extreme east of France, near Italy to be precise – in the rocks and cliffs of the Meidje, near Grenoble. The Meidje, 3,983 metres high, was Messiaen's holy mountain; he liked to retire to its foothills to compose his works facing the glaciers. He would have liked his later work *Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum* to be performed not only in cathedrals, but on the open mountainside, on the slopes of the Meidje. There, as I said before, Messiaen became aware of his vocation to become a composer. In *Le Chocard des Alpes* the grandiose landscape of the Meidje is represented in relentless and massive chords. After a long pause, we hear the cries of the birds – alpine choughs and ravens. Harsh and hideous, they soar over the abysses until the golden eagle rises majestically, carried up into the sky by the winds. The whole grandeur of the mountain is caught in this piece. They are inimical to human beings, but Messiaen is not afraid of them; he carefully gives the names of different rock formations, which he climbed himself when he was young.

2. Le Lorient – The Golden Oriole

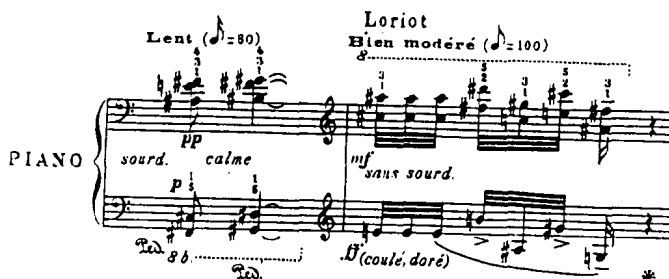
The following piece, featuring the golden oriole, is cheerful and light. We are in the Charente, in the »préfecture« of Angoulême, very near the Atlantic. The oriole – an exotic prince from Africa or Asia – starts to sing at 5:30 and is soon joined by the wren, the song thrush, the garden warbler and many others. Their boisterous warbling is only rarely interrupted by a solemn and soothing clarity when the sun with its golden light stands in the south. In French, *Lorient* is pronounced the same way as *Loriod* – Messiaen's second wife's name was Yvonne Loriod, and she, as I mentioned, first performed the whole cycle and it is dedicated to her. It is safe to assume that in this piece Messiaen wanted to pay homage to his love. The homage is covert, only connoisseurs will notice it, but it is testimony to the happiness, which she brought into Messiaen's life during

his first wife's incurable illness. After years of despair he found peace, was again able to appreciate the beauty of life.

It is not my intention to present a comprehensive analysis of the compositional technique of this work. Some basic comment will have to suffice:

In *Le Lorient*, different stylistic levels coexist. Bar 1, with its dominant sevenths moving in parallel, could have been composed by Debussy or Ravel, while the subsequent bird call is bitonal. The left hand, playing fortissimo, is dominant, while the right hand in mezzoforte is merely there to provide colour.

Ex. 2: *Le Lorient*, p.1, bar 1-2, Leduc



On the second page, black and white keys are set against each other, a method we find already in Stravinsky around 1910; this is followed by unhurried chords that could have been written by Ravel and end on an E major chord. In the fifties, such polystylistic enabled Messiaen to break away from serialism, which favoured radical atonality.

Ex. 3: *Le Lorient*, p.2, bar 2-3, Leduc

3. *Le Merle bleu* – *The Blue Thrush*

The blue rock thrush, singing on the shore of the Mediterranean in Roussillon, near the Spanish border, sounds optimistic as well. The cliffs fall in a sheer drop to the water, azure under the sun. The vastness of the horizon encourages tranquil meditation. Waves slap and sparkle against the beach intermittently. The soft song of the blue rock thrush is interrupted by the shrill cries of the herring gull.

Again, I would like to make some analytic comments: the blue rock thrush sings pentatonically, but again the main voice in forte is surrounded and coloured by dissonances. These are followed by chords that have to be played very roughly, representing the descending cliffs. They end in a triple forte, again accompanied by birdcalls, but this time the calls are very shrill and dissonant.

Ex. 4: *Le Merle Bleu*, p.3, bar 1-7, Leduc

The musical score is for the piece "Le Merle bleu" (The Blue Thrush) from Messiaen's "Catalogue d'oiseaux". It is in G major and 3/4 time. The score is divided into three systems. The first system is for "Merle bleu" (Presque lent, quarter note = 63) and "Modéré" (quarter note = 118). The second system continues the "Modéré" section. The third system is for "Martinets noirs" (16 measures, mezzo-forte, strident). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Merle bleu
Presque lent (♩ = 63)

Modéré (♩ = 118)

ff (rude)
(les falaises)

Martinets noirs
16 *mf* *mf* *mf* *mf* *mf*
(strident)

Again, we got the polystylistics with which Messiaen distanced himself from serialism and also from Arnold Schönberg who, in his dodecaphonic works avoided all suggestions of tonality. This is why Messiaen called him a destroyer who was arguably necessary, but took the liberty of falling back on material that was long out of date.

4. *Le Traquet stapazin – The Black-Eared Wheatear*

Messiaen particularly loved the region of Banyuls in Roussillon because it is the home to the black-eared wheatear. Instead of cliffs, there are terraced vineyards descending towards the path where this bird sings. Its song sounds capricious like that of the goldfinch, but the herring gull interrupts it with its unmelodious screech. Suddenly the red and gold ball of the sun rises from the sea with sonorous chords across the whole range of the piano. The brighter the sun gets, the more majestic the piano sounds. It is hard to believe that a single instrument is capable of such violence, until the sun sets dark crimson behind the Pyrenees. In the dusk, far away over the black sea the herring gull is heard again. After a full day in a vibrant landscape, the piece ends with the soft song of the spectacled warbler.

5. *La Chouette hulotte – The Tawny Owl*

The next piece is completely different. The tawny owl and its relatives, the eagle owl and the long-eared owl, only sing at night in the woods of Saint Germain en Laye (to the west of Paris) and in Petichet near Grenoble. Messiaen is eloquent in his description of the fear that the cries of these birds inspired in him. The night did nothing to soothe his nerves and is here rendered with inhuman, eerie music.

This uncanny music is set in a technique that Messiaen first used in 1950, in *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*, and with which he paradoxically gave serialism a decisive impulse.

Ex. 5: *La Chouette hulotte*, p.1, bar 1-4, Leduc

Un peu vite (♩ = 120)
(la nuit)*

PIANO

8va bassa
(avec un peu de pédale)

The pitch, duration and volume of each note remain strictly the same, it is only the exact moment »when« the note occurs in this composition for three continuous voices that vary. This is how Messiaen mimics the secret of the night; for him, technique is only a means to an end. He does not derive from it any universal laws, unlike his pupil Pierre Boulez for whom *Structures I* for two pianos began a new era around 1950. In this piece, Boulez generalized Messiaen's technique, which I have described here, and declared it to be the only legitimate one.

6. *L'Alouette Lulu – The Wood Lark*

This is also a night piece. But now we are in the Massif Central, where the Loire has its source, and the dark feels no longer threatening. The wood lark is softly and melodiously answered by the nightingale; the calls come from far and near, interrupted by some soothing pianissimo chords. The vastness of the black sky promises safety after the excitements of the day.

7. *La Rousserolle effarvatte – The Reed Warbler*

While in the preceding pieces the impressions of a whole day or a whole night were captured, the piece under discussion now covers a whole day »and« a whole night, from three o'clock in the morning to three o'clock in the morning, and is thus the longest and most important of the cycle, which it bisects. The scene is the »département« of Hérault, west of the Rhone estuary on the Mediterranean. The »préfecture« is Montpellier. On the edge of a pond, whose mysterious sounds we hear, various birds sing in the solemnity of the night which is gradually dispersed by the rising sun. The music is even more mysterious, more subdued than in *Traquet stapazin* and takes its time. Nowhere else in this

work is the slowness of natural events as clear as here; no human intervention disturbs the music which at the end turns to its starting point like the cycle of time. The mirror of the pond, the setting for these events, is thus a magical mirror where, held in a trance, we feel things that escape our comprehension.

In order to mimic the sounds of a pond at midnight, Messiaen applies a very simple mathematical procedure: in the right hand, he uses two alternating chords. In the beginning, the first chord is played only once and subsequently increases to thirteen, then the second chord begins with thirteen and decreases to one. In the left hand, these chords are accompanied by a rhythmical supple ostinato with an unchanging chord sequence.

Ex. 6: *La Rousserolle effarvée*, p.1, bar 1-3, Leduc

Musique des étangs (minuit)
 (les notes accentuées de main droite: comme un xylophone)
 Bien modéré (♩=100)
 16?

PIANO

(mystérieux)

This procedure can be traced back to Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps* of 1913 where various ostinati of different durations overlap.