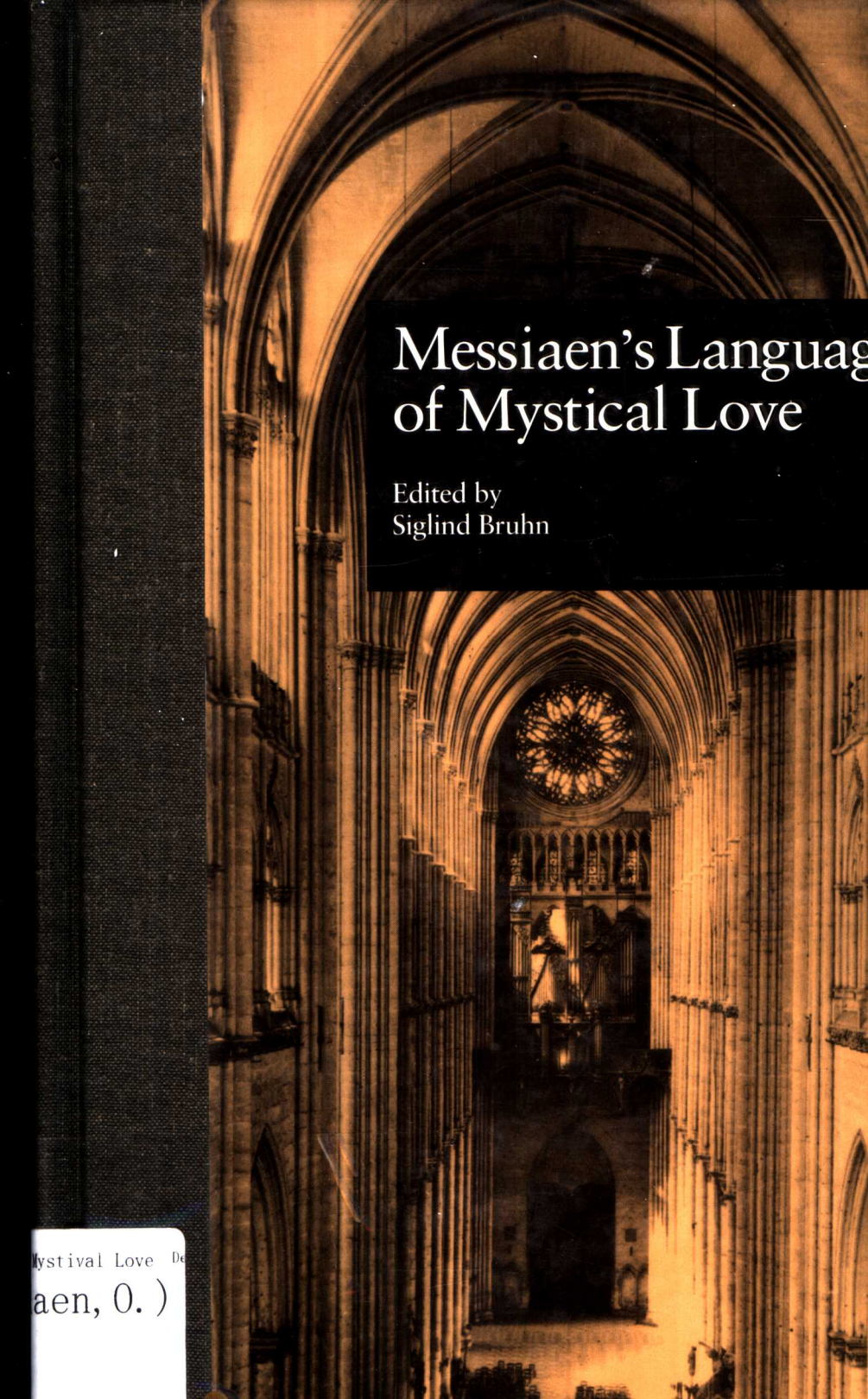

Introduction

Since the beginning of sacred music in the Christian tradition, composers have created musical symbols to express transcendental ideas. These included the use of certain keys and modes, the choice of specific intervals perceived as connected to religious concepts (from the chromaticism in laments over human sinfulness to the representation of God's perfection in the octave), the shaping of pitch lines for special images of visual symbols (see e.g. the manifold melodic outlines tracing the shape of the Cross), as well as the translation of Christian terms into their numerological equivalents and their embodiment in the form of rhythmic, metric, or otherwise countable units. This development reached its peak in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries when an already very elaborate musical rhetoric coincided with a heightened desire for mystical expression.

Olivier Messiaen (Avignon 1908 – Paris 1992), while undoubtedly an heir to this tradition, has created a musical language that is highly idiosyncratic. Influenced by mystics like Saint John of the Cross and Sainte Thérèse de Lisieux, his spirituality permeates all his works, from the explicitly sacred to the allegedly secular. As he never tired of telling his interviewers, his music can be subsumed under three themes: God's Love as it is extended to the world through the birth of His Son (the Incarnation), the human emulation of God's Love (the myth of Tristan and Isolde as the epitome of idealized love which, even in its most exemplary form, is only a poor and blurred reflection of divine love), and the glorification of God in his non-human creatures (bird song, both as a manifestation of God's love as expressed in nature and of the praise that God's creation offers its creator).

This volume of essays aims to explore the various aspects of Messiaen's spiritually committed musical language, drawing on his own remarks in subheadings and prefaces, his biblical and theological citations, his allusions to works of visual art, and on the language spoken more indirectly by the musical tropes themselves.

The two essays in the first part introduce the person behind the music: Messiaen the teacher who never formed a 'school', the humanist

who coached widely different creative talents, encouraging each to become more fully him- or herself, and the theologian who drew on complex mathematics to transform his rhetorical message into music. Part II follows with three investigations into the principal aspects of his compositional technique and their relationship to his religiously based concept of restraint. The three essays in Part III focus specifically on the celebratory angle of the subject matter Messiaen's music explored: the combination of humility and glorious praise of God in Franciscan spirituality and the song of birds. The volume concludes with three inquiries into language and structure in the broader sense, and into the spiritual motivation that underlies a spectrum that spans from a musical alphabet through the complex symmetrical design of a cyclic composition to the composer's own poetry.

Soliciting essays for a volume dedicated to a composer whose music, thought, and spiritual attitude have for many years been a major inspiration for me has been challenging and richly rewarding. Working with an international team of authors and editing their thought-provoking articles for publication has been a wonderful experience and a great pleasure. I wish to extend my sincere gratitude to all contributors for making this volume possible. My particular thanks go to Joseph Auner, general editor of the series on "Studies in Twentieth-Century Music" of which this book forms a part, for his very prompt, always enlightening, and invariably kindly advice and support.

As can be expected when several scholars discuss a single composer, the essays collected here contain some points of overlap. Where observations made in one article were repeated in another, such repetitions have been eliminated. Thus Ian Darbyshire, e.g., has kindly agreed to cut out substantial documentation for points made in his essay since the examples are discussed in extensive detail elsewhere, and Roberto Fabbi has consented to limit himself to merely touching upon the issue of synaesthesia, since this is central in Jean Marie Wu's contribution. In other cases, however, both the series editor and I felt that the various treatments of the same material can be a strength rather than a weakness, since recapitulations of a topic in different contexts often create a cumulative effect.

Much thought has been given to Messiaen's specific terminology and its rendering by various authors. While several contributors grant the composer the right to idiosyncrasies of language, others feel strongly that traditions of the English language should have priority; thus you will find Ian Darbyshire arguing against the use of the word "interversion" while other authors saw no reason to deviate from Messiaen's choice of term. However, spelling and capitalization in the titles of

Messiaen's works have been standardized throughout this collection in accordance with the article on Messiaen in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians,* ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1980). Transliterations of Indian rhythms follow the "Table of 120 *deçi-tâlas* according to Sharngadeva" in Appendix II of Robert Sherlaw Johnson's *Messiaen* (London: J.M. Dent and Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974 and 1989; now Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Ann Arbor, July 1997
Siglind Bruhn

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PART ONE

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Messiaen's Teaching at the Paris Conservatoire: A Humanist's Legacy

Jean Boivin

In his foreword to the first volume of Messiaen's long-awaited *Traité de rythme, de couleur et d'ornithologie*, French composer Alain Louvier recognizes his teacher's contribution to contemporary music thinking:

> To read this treatise is to marvel at the genius of Olivier Messiaen, at his universal spirit, curious about everything, which brings to the waning days of our century a great gust of divine inspiration. The work is that of a Renaissance Man, of a Leonardo da Vinci, free of the chore of pleasing princes, whose rhythmic invention disdains passing fashions in order to partake exclusively of the glories of God, Nature, Time and Space.[1]

The three volumes of Messiaen's posthumous treatise available by March 1997 already reached a total of over 1,300 pages. The complete seven-volume set will be immense, nourished by Messiaen's thirty-seven years of teaching at the Paris Conservatoire (1941–78) and a lifetime of research in the fields of music analysis, composition, rhythms both ancient and modern, bird songs, and theology. The thorough reader will share Alain Louvier's admiration for Messiaen's cultural openness and his vast knowledge of the musical repertoire, from the Middle Ages to the avant-garde. The introduction to the treatise (the first two chapters of the first volume) is devoted to definitions of rhythm and time. It brings together, strikingly, a variety of approaches as shown by the broad and far-reaching list of references proposed to the reader, which includes: Confucius, Pythagoras, Dürer, Victor Hugo, Saint Paul, Teilhard de Chardin, Shakespeare, Einstein, Virgil, Shri Aurobindo, Edith Piaf, and H.G. Wells. One should think that Leonardo da Vinci might not have been offended by Louvier's audacious pairing.

Messiaen's treatise confirms what has long been said about him as a pedagogue. Former students of amazingly diverse aesthetic allegiances have pointed out the French composer's rare ability to reach beyond technique or theory to the universal questions of creativity and inspiration. Among those who have celebrated Messiaen's uncommon teaching qualities are Pierre Henry, pioneer of musique concrete; Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, post-Webernian serialists; Iannis Xenakis, strongly opposed to serialism and inventor of stochastics; François-Bernard Mâche, who joined forces with Pierre Schaeffer to explore the "objet sonore"; Tristan Murail and Gérard Grisey, two younger members of the so-called Parisian "spectral" school. The list could go on and on. In one extraordinary statement, Iannis Xenakis regards his meeting with Messiaen (in the early fifties) as a most challenging spiritual encounter.

> At last I had found the man I had been searching for by the feeble glow of my dark lantern. And more than a man; this was a sort of sunshine which lit up music, of the past as well as the future, with the same generous beatific light as in those stained-glass rainbows he so cherished. The most dazzling truth he revealed in his teaching and in his works was that everything is possible in music (as, of course, in all the arts and sciences) on one condition: that creation proceed from a rich, full inner necessity, untouched by aesthetic dogmas and ideologies, guided by a talent in which reason and intuition commingle.[2]

In an earlier publication,[3] drawing on exclusive interviews with nearly a hundred of Messiaen's former students, I have described his approach to teaching and its historical impact on contemporary music (European and non-European alike). In the following pages, I will further argue that Messiaen's rare human profile can help explain his undeniable influence as a teacher and thus illuminate his major contribution to twentieth-century musical life.

PORTRAIT OF THE TEACHER AS A HUMANIST

Messiaen was officially designated head of a harmony class at the Paris Conservatoire in 1942. He had started in this function in the late spring of the previous year, only a few months after being freed from a prisoner's camp in Silesia, where he had suffered severe physical and spiritual privations. War-time Paris was occupied by the German army with Nazi-approved entertainment dominating the cultural scene. Many

male students of the Conservatoire were held prisoner in work camps; some Jewish teachers had lost their jobs. Despite the demanding task of teaching harmonic progressions and voice-leading in such difficult conditions, Messiaen felt the inner need to reunite, in private, a small group of disciples he had regularly seen before the war. Those were now joined by some of Messiaen's better students at the Conservatoire (e.g., Pierre Boulez and pianist Yvonne Loriod[4]). With them Messiaen could discuss musical questions closer to his own creative preoccupations, such as ancient Greek meter and new symmetric scales, which he called "modes of limited transposition." United in the same breath were reflections on plainchant and bird songs, harmony and colors, series of durations, and the splendors of God's creation.

Other Conservatory teachers chose music examples from academic treatises by revered fellow members of their institution. Messiaen, barely into his mid-thirties, preferred to extract the rules of perfect harmonization directly from scores by great masters, such as Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. He would sit at the piano and analyze the successive and distinct appearances of the famous flute theme. He pointed out the formal links of the music with Mallarmé's symbolic verses and gave ample comments on the refined orchestration. In order to isolate characteristic traits in the melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic writing, Messiaen referred liberally to Debussy's later scores as well as to a large pool of works, ranging from Rameau's opéra-ballet *Castor et Pollux* to Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit*. Each exercise in harmonization was to be written in the style of a given composer whose works had been discussed in class. Above all, it was to be truly composed and mentally heard.[5] Students coming from more traditional classes were amazed to suddenly "talk Music"; as the musical language of one famous composer after another was deciphered and discussed, Messiaen seemed to engage, across the time barrier, in a stimulating debate with each one of them, recomposing as it were the work at hand.

Even at this early stage of his career as a pedagogue, Messiaen's inquiries into the repertoire ranged widely, including Claude le Jeune's *Le Printemps* (a Renaissance choral work based on Greek principles of poetic declamation), Machaut's *Notre-Dame Mass*, François Couperin's harpsichord pieces, Mozart's instrumental works and operas, Chopin's *Études*, Wagner's *Ring*, Albeniz's *Iberia*, and Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, among others. The young teacher ventured as far as Bartok's violin sonatas, Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*, Webern's early works, and Berg's *Violin Concerto* at a time when these composers were almost absent from the French music scene.

Messiaen's apparently eclectic choice of models set him apart instantly. Most of his colleagues at the Conservatoire prudently stayed close to the *esprit français* and warned their easily impressed pupils not to go beyond Fauré's or, at the most, the young Ravel's modal harmonic conceptions. In the thirties, Messiaen already stood head and shoulders above that "horrible neo-classical music" so favored at the time.[6] From the start, an unbridgeable gap separated Messiaen, fundamentally a harmonist and a rhythmician, from that other influential French pedagogue, Nadia Boulanger, who deeply revered Renaissance polyphonists, Monteverdi's madrigals, and J.S. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Messiaen's constructive approach also stood miles apart from the pessimistic vision of modern music expressed by Arthur Honegger, once associated with the Groupe des Six, who taught for some years at the École Normale.

By then, Messiaen had already written imposing works such as two organ frescoes (*La Nativité du Seigneur*, 1935, and *Les Corps glorieux*, 1939), two extraordinary song cycles (*Poèmes pour Mi*, 1936-37, *Chant de Terre et de Ciel*, 1938), and some orchestral works (*Les Offrandes oubliées*, 1930, and *L'Ascension*, 1934). His instrumental music was noted for its often ecstatic slow pace, the strange modal melodic contours, the sensuous harmonies, unheard-of timbres and registrations, and exotic rhythmic formulae. In the vocal works, all of these elements supported the composer's own curiously personal yet effective poetry.

Interestingly enough, and unlike many other composers of the period, Messiaen was more than willing to answer any serious questions that his personal style might raise. The treatise *Technique de mon langage musical*, written in 1942,[7] served as a textbook for some of his most eager students, famished by years of Nazi propaganda and general condemnation of the subversive avant-garde, French or foreign. Even if one disregards the fact that Messiaen was barely thirty-three years old at the time and only starting to be recognized, this detailed summing up of his musical idiom was—and remains—an astonishing statement of confidence. Every aspect of the music had been given much thought. Numerous recent works were lavishly quoted to illustrate each theoretical point. Though the comforting names of Mussorgsky, Grieg, and Debussy were invoked in the text, and plainchant offered as a melodic model, the whole process seemed unbelievably, *eccentrically*, modern. Any daredevil who would follow this path could never claim the Prix de Rome, the supreme goal to which all the teaching efforts of the author's colleagues at the Conservatoire were directed. Yet Messiaen's open mind and far-reaching investigations of Greek meters, modality, and palindromic rhythmic motifs, sowed precious seeds in the minds of such

fast-emerging musicians as Jean-Louis Martinet, Pierre Henry, Maurice Le Roux, and Pierre Boulez. One can say, together with Serge Nigg, that the post-war European musical revolution had already started:

> [...] it was during the darkest and most sinister years of the war, when hope of any kind seemed chimerical, that was most deeply felt the obscure sensation of an artistic Renaissance: this intellectual freshness experienced by those who take active part in a RENEWAL.[8]

The Parisian premiere in April 1945 of the *Trois petites Liturgies de la Présence Divine*, written on the eve of the Liberation, brought Messiaen instant fame. As is often the case, public success came with the critics' wrath. Both reactions added a new attractiveness to Messiaen's class at the Conservatoire, already smacking of heresy and "sulphur," to quote Boulez.[9] Controversy has its price, however. In 1946, a vacant position as head of a composition class was not granted to Messiaen, despite the wish of a delegation of students led by the untamed Boulez. Official recognition was offered instead to the older, more "artistically correct" Darius Milhaud. The conservative members of the Institut de France, responsible for the nomination, had feared Messiaen's harmful influence on young musicians. But thanks to the visionary advice of Conservatoire director Claude Delvincourt, the unorthodox organist was instead offered a tailored-to-measure analysis class that rapidly became the *rendez-vous* for non-conformist composers-to-be. Many of these young lions could not adjust to the Conservatoire's strict curriculum and Messiaen's class was the only one they freely attended. This explains why the names of Stockhausen and Xenakis, two famous composers deeply marked by Messiaen's unique approach, do not appear on any official lists.

AN INTERNATIONAL FIGURE

From the end of the forties, "Messiaen's class" (the name has become a reference in itself) attracted a large number of composers: Marius Constant, Gilbert Amy, Betsy Jolas, Alexander Goehr, Michaël Lévinas, and George Benjamin, to name but a few of those who reached international stature. Messiaen also occasionally taught abroad during summer months: in Budapest (1947), Tanglewood (1947 and 1949), Darmstadt (in 1949, 1952, 1953, and 1961), Saarbrücken (1953), and Buenos Aires (1963).[10] These teaching sessions were often coupled with important performances of his major works. As a consequence, young

composers of many nationalities, including some Americans,[11] were attracted to Messiaen's class at the Paris Conservatoire. While some only paid visits ranging from a few weeks to a few months in length (as in the case of Peter Maxwell-Davies, Mikis Theodorakis, György Kurtag, and William Bolcolm), others took a complete three-year commitment. Slowly but surely, Messiaen became a world-wide celebrity through both his music and his teaching. Those two dimensions of his musical career had become inseparable.

To limit the list of Messiaen's students to composers would be misleading. A complex net of organists, pianists, and conductors has assured for many years to come a living tradition of performing Messiaen's music throughout the world. His thought-provoking ideas on music and creation have been transmitted to younger generations through both the teaching of his earlier students and the writings of commentators who sat in his class, including Odile Vivier (author of the first French monograph on Edgar Varèse), Serge Gut (a renowned Liszt specialist), and Daniel Charles (exegete of John Cage). At least four authors of significant books on Messiaen are former students: Harry Halbreich, Alain Périer, Pierrette Mari, and Michèle Reverdy. More popular sectors of "functional" music creation, such as music for film and theater, are represented as well. This makes for fascinating study.[12]

In 1966, long after he had gained international celebrity, Messiaen was deservedly nominated head of a true composition class. Interestingly enough, the nearly sixty-year-old composer was then still perceived by many talented young musicians as a free-thinking artist and a true master of his craft. He had managed to evolve constantly while remaining true to himself. As such, he stood almost alone among composers of his generation, having survived radical transformations in taste and conceptions of what modern music is or should be about. His works were regularly played in such progressive events as the *Domaine musical* concerts (created in Paris by Boulez), as well as by more conservative ensembles dispersed around the world. A few titles (e.g., the *Quartet for the End of Time* and the *Turangalîla-Symphonie*) had even become real "classics" of the concert repertoire—a rarity in non-tonal twentieth-century music. Still, the mature composer now and again created commotions (a famous instance being the uproar of the Donaueschingen premiere of *Chronochromie* in 1960, followed by a similar scandal in Paris a year later). This man could definitely not be ignored.

In the mid-seventies, a few years before his retirement, a group of Messiaen's composition students formed a Parisian performance collective baptized L'Itinéraire. The founders (among others Michaël Lévinas,

Tristan Murail, Gérard Grisey, François Bousch, and Michel Zbar) were devoted to exploring the realm of harmonic resonance and electronic transformations of timbre, often resulting in a slow-moving static sound continuum. They viewed the author of *La Transfiguration de notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ*, together with György Ligeti and the recently-discovered Italian composer Giacinto Scelsi, as their spiritual guides. Till the end of his career, Messiaen's discourse still stirred creative minds. Through years of teaching, he had won the respect of a large public and of almost three generations of younger composers. No other composer-teacher in the century could claim the same, not even Schoenberg or Boulanger, strongly associated as they were with exclusive trends (serialism for the former, Stravinskian neoclassicism for the latter).

"LE VENT DE L'ESPRIT"[13]

So what was it, one can aptly ask, that was so striking about Messiaen's class? What did he have to say about music that was to attract as it did such a broad spectrum of musicians? How did he engage and inspire composers of such varying and even opposing aesthetics? The answer is not a simple one since Messiaen possessed many remarkable and complementary talents that all seemed to resonate when he addressed a group of students as one complex and vibrating colored chord.

First, Messiaen, whose reputation as an organist was deservedly well-established, also proved to be a remarkable pianist, as attested notably by his recordings of the *Quartet for the End of Time* and of the *Visions de l'Amen* (in duet with Yvonne Loriod).[14] His class renditions of Mozart's concertos or of Debussy's *Préludes* have been highly praised; for many students they remain unforgettable. His sight-reading talents were equally extraordinary. In his childhood and adolescence he enjoyed running through operatic scores like Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust,* Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, Wagner's *Tristan,* and Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande.* Such fine works were to define both his lifelong musical taste and his approach to the keyboard. So colorful and orchestral was his pianistic touch that former student Alain Louvier swears he could actually hear the horns, even the crossed or uncrossed flute and clarinet parts, as Messiaen worked through the highly complex orchestral scores of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, Debussy's *La Mer,* Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*, or Berg's *Wozzeck.*

This rare instrumental ability was incessantly called upon to serve a remarkable memory. One might truly assume that Messiaen's acclaimed