

# *Recontextualising Messiaen's Early Career*

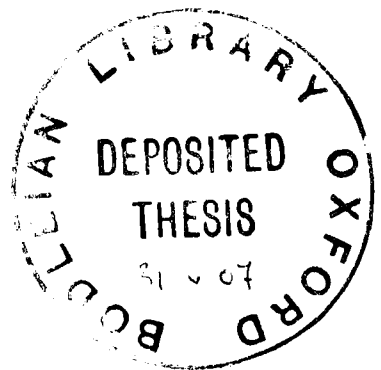
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## Abstract

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This thesis independently re-examines Messiaen's early career and development. It assesses his personal, professional and musical associations with early contemporaries – colleagues, teachers and critics – and places his aesthetic outlook in a wider context.

In his later life, a simplistic mythology of 'difference' grew up around Messiaen; he was perceived as a 'visionary' in a rational age and as a 'simple man of faith' in a complex and secular time. This mythology has given rise to an implicit misconception of Messiaen that places him apart from the main currents of the twentieth century. This misconception is encapsulated by the entry on Messiaen in the second edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, which begins: 'He was a musician apart'.

In themed essays, I reassess Messiaen's early career by considering in turn several contextual areas. After introducing the wider context, I consider how Messiaen positioned himself biographically and musically in his many writings, focussing on recurring themes (particularly those highlighted by Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz) and drawing on the composer's writings, established or newly discovered, as my main source. Then I examine Messiaen's relationship with his immediate contemporaries and, in particular, the group of fellow musicians with whom he forged his early career. I also discuss the role of Messiaen's first wife, Louise Justine Delbos (better known by her pseudonym Claire Delbos). Subsequently, I go on to explore Messiaen's relation to the French traditions of musical technique and history. Finally, I consider some French aesthetic disputes of the 1930s and examine Messiaen's role in these debates.

Throughout, I challenge the image of the 'musician apart'.

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## Preface

I gained my first experience of the music of Olivier Messiaen by learning two of the composer's simplest *Préludes*. My piano teacher had sensed my appetite for twentieth-century music whilst I was working on Debussy's *Cathédrale engloutie*, and proposed that Messiaen's *Préludes* would form a suitable progression from that work. Implicit in her suggestion was the idea that there was some connection between the two.

From the beginning, I found the nature of that connection very difficult to gauge. On the one hand, the music itself looked on the page like much of Debussy's, with its thick, richly resonant chords; dramatically (one might say, rhetorically) they seemed similar, and the enigmatic titles reinforced that impression. On the other hand, however, there was something radically different about these short pieces by Messiaen. Though I could hear that many of the chords Messiaen used were similar to Debussy's, the effect was quite different. Whilst Debussy's music seemed to me at that time to embody the old, even though I could recognise the new techniques he had developed, Messiaen's music seemed modern, space-age even, despite the equally recognisable retention of old techniques.

These early confusions inspired me to learn more of Messiaen and his music. In particular, I could not dispel the idea of a problematic connection with Debussy. When I ventured in search of books on the composer, I was struck by the detailed and fascinating analyses of Messiaen's music that had been published, together with the excellent expositions of his musical language. I enjoyed seeking out the various Hindu rhythms, isorhythmic pedals, birdsong and plainchant contours that are found in his compositions and was delighted when I first came across the translation of Messiaen's *Technique de mon langage musical*. In the copious acknowledgements in the introduction to this treatise, and the frequent citations of Debussy, Dukas, Dupré and others, I hoped finally to understand Messiaen's place in a wider musical context.

In this I was disappointed. For whilst Messiaen frequently acknowledged his predecessors in general ways and quoted his teachers' aphorisms, it was difficult to understand precisely what he gained from them, musically and aesthetically. At the same time, the available books on Messiaen seemed to gloss over the musical, cultural, aesthetic and political contexts within which Messiaen's ideas were formed, whilst those studies that

attempted a wider approach seemed to me to pose further, unanswered questions. And so the idea of this study gradually emerged.

\*

There are many people that I would like to thank for their assistance during my research. The late Dr. Robert Sherlaw Johnson was the author of the first significant work on Messiaen in the English language, and his monograph played a major part in orienting me towards the music of Messiaen. Although our approaches to the subject were often at variance, his quiet encouragement and thoughtful suggestions maintained me through the difficult initial stages of the thesis. I suspect he would be somewhat surprised at the fruit of our discussions, but not, I hope, disappointed. Professor Annegret Fauser took over the guidance of the thesis when work was already well underway, but her influence was decisive: the completion of the thesis owes a great debt to her constant encouragement. Professor Fauser's suggestions helped me tackle issues that were previously beyond my reach, and our lively discussions consistently opened new avenues for investigation. Special thanks are also due to Professor Nigel Simeone who gave enthusiastic guidance in the latter stages of work and allowed generous access to many documents in his private collection.

The Scottish Executive funded my research through the award of a Major Scottish Studentship, and I also received financial assistance from the Charles and Barbara Tyre Trust, and the Vice-Chancellor's Fund (University of Oxford). I gratefully acknowledge my thanks to these bodies.

I should also like to thank the staffs of the various Oxford libraries in which I have worked: the Taylorian Institute Library, the Ashmolean Museum Library, the library of the Maison Française, the Indian Institute Library and the library of Worcester College. In particular the staffs of the music reading room at the Bodleian Library and the Faculty of Music library have aided me generously and cheerfully, often providing valuable bibliographic assistance. Special thanks especially to John Wagstaff, Librarian of the Faculty of Music (once described to me *in France* as 'the god of French music periodicals'), without whom much of Messiaen's journalism would likely have remained unknown for many more years.

Further afield, I have examined materials at the Département de la Musique at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; the Médiathèque of the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique, Paris; the Archives Nationales, Paris; and the Bibliotheek Koninklijk Conservatorium, Brussels. I should like to thank the staffs of these libraries for their kind assistance, especially in the face of linguistic inadequacy. In particular, thanks to Catherine Massip, *conservateur général* and director of the Département de la musique at the Bibliothèque Nationale, and Colette Marion of the Médiathèque du Conservatoire, for their insights and encouragement.

In the course of research many members of the Faculty of Music at the University of Oxford have provided advice and encouragement. In particular, I should like to thank Professor Peter Franklin, Dr. Nicholas Marston and Professor Roger Parker. My tutor at Worcester College, Dr. Robert Saxton, generously played a vital role by providing academic and moral support whenever it was needed – thank you.

Mlle Isabelle Uny read the translations of Messiaen's journalism and provided valuable advice, though any errors that remain are my own.

Many friends and colleagues have also aided me, formally and informally. I would particularly like to thank Delphine Mordey of King's College, Cambridge; Dr. Emma Hornby of Goldsmith's College, University of London; and Dr. Alexandra Wilson of Oxford Brookes University for their personal support and professional assistance.

Thanks also to Dr. Myra Soutar, for career advice and help with my initial proposal; to Celia Duffy, for making the final stages of work possible; and to Anne Crawford, the inspirational piano teacher who introduced me to the music of Olivier Messiaen.

I am most grateful to all of the above, and also, finally, to my family, to Nicola, and to Alexander – unimagined when this was begun.

## Notes

A good deal of new written material by Messiaen has been uncovered during this study, and a large proportion of Messiaen's early writing (1936-39) has not yet been subjected to study. Appendix I is an edition of this writing, edited and translated. Volume 1 (this volume) consists of the main text of the thesis and the bibliography; Volume 2 contains the appendices. The bibliography in Volume 1 includes material consulted in producing the appendices.

I have provided translations for all French quotations from source material immediately below the originals in the main body of the thesis, in order that the thesis is both readable and useful as a source for those sources that are not easily obtainable.

In the case of material that has been published in English translation, I have tried where possible to provide the original French, since the process of translation occasionally obscures important issues. In many cases, a published English translation is quoted directly, though occasionally, in clearly flagged cases, I have amended a translation. In short quotations in the main text, I use French with translation or English translation alone according to the context and source. In my own text, I have followed the transliterations from Russian suggested by *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. French transliterations from Sanskrit have, however, been retained throughout. In quotations, the transliteration of the original author is always preserved even when this provokes an inconsistency.

Messiaen's capitalisation in the titles of works is inconsistent, so I have followed the convention of capitalising the first letter of each word up to and including the first noun. Proper and 'theological' nouns are also capitalised (e.g. *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, not *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*). In two part titles, I apply the convention for each part of the title ('*Olivier Messiaen: Une Poétique du merveilleux*'). I also follow these rules in the case of journals (e.g. *La Revue musicale*, not *La Revue Musicale*), but retain the convention of capitalising the key words in the titles of organisations (e.g. Les Amis de L'Orgue, not Les Amis de l'orgue). Excepting the cedilla, I do not accent upper case letters. In quotations from English works, I retain inconsistent capitalisations.

Manuscript locations are given by conventional sigla. I refer to the 1999 reset (single volume) French edition of *Technique de mon langage musical* (which combines text and musical examples) and, because of the extra material it incorporates, to the 1999 edition of Claude Samuel's conversations with Messiaen, retitled as *Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen*.



# 1 Introduction

## The ‘Musician apart’

The entry on Olivier Messiaen in the second edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* begins simply: ‘He was a musician apart’.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Messiaen’s obituary in the *Times* proclaimed ‘He was [...] a man out of his time and place’.<sup>2</sup> These short statements encapsulate a key feature of the received view of Messiaen: he stood alone, curiously displaced from his own context. In a time of scepticism, he was a musical ‘visionary’; in an urban world he was the ‘ornithologist-composer’; in a complex and secular age he was a ‘simple man of faith’. Whilst few would earnestly propose that these simplistic labels are enough to understand Messiaen’s place in twentieth-century music, the entry in *The New Grove* and the *Times* obituary suggest that the image of the medieval man curiously transported to the modern age is nonetheless deeply ingrained. This may be confirmed by a survey of other comments on Messiaen.

Brigitte Massin’s 1989 book on the composer, which was the last ‘authorised’ book to be written before the composer’s death, is entitled *Olivier Messiaen: Une Poétique du merveilleux*.<sup>3</sup> The title ‘A Poetic of the Marvellous’ seems calculated to reinforce a sense of remoteness from the mundane – a remoteness that embraces both the music and its composer (poetry and poet).

Paul Griffiths is the author of one of the most well-known books on the composer, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, published in 1985 (he is also author of the *New Grove* article). As with Brigitte Massin’s book, the title underlines a sense of the extraordinary that includes man and music, whilst the opening of first chapter (which deals with Messiaen’s childhood) removes all doubt as to how we are to understand Messiaen when it begins ‘Enigmas of time start from before the beginning’.<sup>4</sup>

The phenomenon of ‘the composer apart’ is not a construct of Messiaen’s last decade: Alain Périer’s short book on the composer, published in 1979, has chapters with titles such as ‘Messiaen parmi nous’ (an audacious reference to the final, effervescent piece in *La Nativité*, which is entitled ‘Dieu parmi nous’, used to head up a chapter describing Messiaen’s

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Griffiths, ‘Messiaen’, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London, 2/2001), Vol. 16, 491.

<sup>2</sup> [unsigned], *Olivier Messiaen* [obituary], *The Times* (29 Apr 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Brigitte Massin, *Olivier Messiaen: Une Poétique du merveilleux* (Aix-en-Provence, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (London and Boston, 1985), 19.

teaching) and ‘L’Ascension’ (a reference to Messiaen’s work of the same name, dealing with Christ’s Ascension, but used here for the title of a chapter on the composer’s development: another daring allusion to make).<sup>5</sup>

The trend goes back further still. Pierrette Mari, writing 14 years before Périet, in 1965, sums up Messiaen with a particularly exotic metaphor:

Messiaen peut apparaître, aujourd’hui et peut-être même au regard des musiciens de l’avenir, comme un savant original, un homme de recherche et d’expérimentation dont la nature et la foi sont les laboratoires.<sup>6</sup>

Messiaen may seem, today and perhaps in the view of the musicians of the future, like an eccentric scholar, a researcher and experimenter whose laboratories are nature and faith.

David Drew, in the first extended account of Messiaen’s music to be published in English, a further ten years before Mari, was clearly aware of the difficulties his subject presented. He opened his series of articles by explaining that he would avoid an ‘attempt to “situate” him historically’, stating that ‘there are so many pitfalls that one is forced to take a quite different path’.<sup>7</sup> In concluding his study, which, as we shall see, examines many areas of similarity between Messiaen and his predecessors, he returns to the problem and comments on the difficulties of placing Messiaen in context:

One might try to side-step the issue by declaring him an isolated figure. I have tried to counteract this temptation by cross-reference to those of his predecessors who provide points of contact. Yet in one vital respect the method has failed; for not one of the composers I have cited – I shall refer to them again in conclusion – cast any light upon Messiaen’s essential creative self, the mysterious arches of his imagination and the hidden streams of his musical impulses. In these things, Messiaen stands apart from every other musician of his time and of the past.<sup>8</sup>

Despite a detailed exegesis of Messiaen’s work, Drew resorts in his final analysis to ‘mysterious arches’ and ‘hidden streams’. Seeming almost at a loss as to how to conclude his study, then draws a perceptive link between Messiaen’s musical style and the almost incantatory language of D. H. Lawrence. While this offers a persuasive way of placing

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<sup>5</sup> Alain Perrier, *Messiaen* (Paris, 1979), 3, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Pierrette Mari, *Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1965), 176.

<sup>7</sup> David Drew, ‘Messiaen – a Provisional Study’, [part one], *The Score* (Dec 1954), 34.

<sup>8</sup> David Drew, ‘Messiaen – a Provisional Study’, [part three], *The Score* (Dec 1955), 57-58.

Messiaen in a (much) wider artistic context, the fact that Drew is forced to abandon the musical world in search of a tenable comparison serves only to underline the conclusion that he has already, unwillingly, reached: ‘Messiaen stands apart from every other musician of his time’.

The image of Messiaen, so neatly summed up in *The New Grove*’s ‘musician apart’, has, then, a long pedigree stretching back at least to the mid-1950s, but it remains potent at the time of writing. In 1999, an article by Michael White for the *Independent on Sunday* carried the following headline:

Her maître’s voice: we all know the Messiaen was a giant of modern music. But why do hey say he was ‘a saint’? His wife explains to Michael White.<sup>9</sup>

Whilst White’s article attempts a sceptical tone, it nonetheless goes on to catalogue and retransmit a wide range of anecdotes that support the received image:

In truth, little about Messiaen was ever orthodox. [...] Messiaen’s synaesthetic ability to relate sound to colour: in other words, he could play a prism. [...] It was like composing in stained glass. [...] Birdsong [...] takes its place in a parade of found objects (a snatch of plainchant, a tone-cluster, a number-game) laid out like precious items on a nursery school study-table and with much the same degree of innocence. [...] *Turangalila* [sic] is a great romp of love: peculiarly gallic and bizarrely passionate for a beret-wearing bird-watcher in outsized collars.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, the ‘musician apart’ is a theme that is widespread, longlived and subject to considerable slippage, referring sometimes to the music, sometimes to the man, and often to both.

## Messiaen Scholarship

The survey of Messiaenia above could be criticised for dwelling largely on writing that takes a more (White) or less (Drew) journalistic approach. Surely, we might think, scholarly writers will have come to a more considered view of the composer? Whilst some successful work has been undertaken, Messiaen scholarship is, in fact, a relatively small field when compared to the stature that Messiaen himself achieved as a composer and the large lay-following that he,

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<sup>9</sup> Michael White, ‘Her maître’s voice’, *Independent on Sunday* (10 Jan 1999), 4.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, 4.

unusually for a composer of his generation, attracted. A quick keyword search on RILM allows an informal comparison with other fields of study: at the time of writing, 915 publications mentioning Messiaen in the title have been recorded since 1969, compared with 1547 for John Cage, 1502 for Anton Webern and 4237 for Arnold Schoenberg. But a bland count of the meta-data, though indicative of the size of the field, may be misleading as it includes the more journalistic writing I quoted above.

More or less journalistic writing on Messiaen has already been discussed, and the image of the ‘musician apart’ traced back for nearly fifty years. But what of other kinds of writing on the composer? Some successful analytical studies have been undertaken: Messiaen himself indicated Robert Sherlaw Johnson’s study as the most complete technical account of the music, but there are others worth mentioning among which are Michèle Reverdy’s analyses of the composer’s piano and orchestral music.<sup>11</sup> To these might be added the studies of individual works that have been made, like David Morris’s fascinating semiotic analysis of ‘Abîme des oiseaux’ (the third movement of the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*).<sup>12</sup>

The primary focus of this thesis is historical, and it is in this area that Messiaen scholarship is, perhaps, least developed.<sup>13</sup> This becomes clear when one considers how work on the composer has proceeded: most writers on Messiaen have taken an approach that reflects their own preoccupations, be they analytical, performance-based or journalistic. At the same time, however, none of these approaches can escape dealing with historical concerns entirely, so they are forced to plot a difficult course between being overburdened with historical issues that are not central to the matters in hand, or giving such little regard to these issues that the composer becomes understood primarily through sketches and shorthand labels. This course has not, on the whole, been well plotted, and even in analytical work, the narrative of ‘difference’ is discernible.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See: Almut Rößler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen* (Duisberg, 1986), 111. Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen* (London, 2/1989); Michèle Reverdy, *L'Œuvre pour piano d'Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1978); Michèle Reverdy, *L'Œuvre pour orchestre d'Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> David Morris, ‘A semiotic investigation of Messiaen’s ‘Abîme des oiseaux’’, *Music Analysis* 8 (1989), 125-158.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone’s magisterial biography of Messiaen, published as this thesis was being finalised, changes the landscape of Messiaen writing and is a superb source of detail, as well as giving a convincing and rounded sense of Messiaen as a person. See: Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (Cambridge, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> In her study of Messiaen’s piano music, for example, Michèle Reverdy introduces the *Catalogue d'oiseaux* with these words: ‘Il n’a cessé de prendre en notes d’innombrables chants d’oiseaux. Car, de même qu’O. Messiaen a déjà refusé de se contenter des rythmes artificiels de l’Occident, de même il repoussera les mélodies fabriquées de notre civilisation.’ (‘He never ceased taking innumerable notes from bird song. For, just as O. Messiaen had already refused to content himself with the artificial rhythms of the West, so he rejected the melodies of our civilisation’) [Michèle Reverdy, *L'Œuvre pour piano d'Olivier Messiaen*, 72.]

In his introduction to the problems of music historiography, Carl Dahlhaus sums up a basic problem in the writing of music history:

Music history, being the history of an art form, seems doomed to failure: on the one side it is flanked by the dictates of 'aesthetic autonomy', on the other by a theory of history that clings to the concept of 'continuity'. Music history fails either as history by being a collection of structural analyses of separate works, or as a history of art by reverting from musical works to occurrences in social or intellectual history.<sup>15</sup>

The analytical studies of Messiaen's music mentioned above succeed because they make sense of the individual aesthetic objects that comprise Messiaen's *œuvre*. But they fall firmly on the analytical side of the dichotomy that Dahlhaus identifies, dealing with historical issues (in the admittedly problematic sense of 'continuity') less well.

## Messiaen History

There are other studies that have sought with greater or lesser success to address the notion of 'continuity' by attempting to consider the wider issues that arise from considering Messiaen's music. These have been less successful, on the whole, for various reasons.

A short but well-known study that attempts to examine Messiaen's relationship to another composer is Roger Smalley's article 'Debussy and Messiaen'.<sup>16</sup> Smalley has understood Messiaen's curious relationship with Debussy through the mediation of Wagner, concluding that in Messiaen's music, 'The emotional scope of Wagner is wedded to a musical language derived from Debussy'.<sup>17</sup> This seems an attractive way of explaining the differences between Messiaen and Debussy, but his argument that Messiaen's language is 'derived from Debussy' is less convincing, being based on an uncritical reading of the composer's *Technique de mon langage musical* (1944). Those approaching Messiaen's music from an analytical perspective have not generally taken Messiaen's accounts of his music at face value, but Smalley does and among writers who have taken a broadly historical approach, he is not alone.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Grundlagen der Musikgeschichte* (Cologne, 1977); Eng. Edn., *Foundations of Music History* tr. J B Robinson (Cambridge, 1983), 19.

<sup>16</sup> Roger Smalley, 'Debussy and Messiaen', *Musical Times* 119 (Feb 1968), 128-131.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, 128.

<sup>18</sup> See: *ibid.* Other examples include: Carla Huston Bell, *Messiaen* (Boston MA, 1984); particularly chapters 1 and 2.

David Drew's series of articles on Messiaen make a conscious effort to provide a context for Messiaen's music.<sup>19</sup> To this end, Drew draws a large number of comparisons between aspects of Messiaen's music and that of other composers. He compares, for example, Messiaen's 'free use of the triad' with that of Satie in his 'Rose Croix' period.<sup>20</sup> This attempt to provide a contextual framework for Messiaen's music draws out some fascinating ideas, but it is undermined by its focus on what might be called the 'surface detail' of the music. This is exemplified by the Satie comparison, which was the subject of some debate at the time of the publication of Robert Sherlaw Johnson's book. It is known that Messiaen deeply disapproved of his predecessor's music,<sup>21</sup> and for Sherlaw Johnson, this made Drew's comparison untenable. Without wider historical and aesthetic contextualisation there is a danger that such comparisons will fall foul of the problem with notions of musical 'influence' that Leo Treitler has eloquently expressed in his critique of 'the shallow concept of influence as an internal moving force of historical development, [...] switched on at the first sight of musical resemblances'.<sup>22</sup>

There is a full-length study that claims to deal with 'influences' on Messiaen and to combine an analytical and historical approach. *Olivier Messiaen, the Musical Mediator* by pianist Madeleine Hsu is described by the author as 'a study of the influence of Liszt, Debussy and Bartók' and takes the form of a series of 'style analyses' and historical sketches that are designed to offer guidance to the performer of some of Messiaen's piano music.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, Hsu does not deal effectively with the question of 'influence' and context, falling foul of Treitler's 'shallow concept of influence'; indeed very little of the book deals with the 'mediation' to which she refers in her title, and that part that does focuses almost

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<sup>19</sup> David Drew, 'Messiaen — a Provisional Study', [in three parts], *The Score* (Dec 1954), 33-49; (Sep 1955), 59-73; (Dec 1955), 41-61.

<sup>20</sup> David Drew, 'Messiaen — a Provisional Study', [part one], *The Score* (Dec 1954), 37.

<sup>21</sup> For details of this debate, see: David Drew, [Review of *Messiaen* by Robert Sherlaw Johnson], *Times Literary Supplement* (12 Sep 1975), 1030. Also: Robert Sherlaw Johnson, [Correspondence], *Times Literary Supplement* (17 Oct 1975), 1237. Wilfrid Mellers, [Correspondence], *Times Literary Supplement* (17 Oct 1975), 1237. David Drew, [Correspondence], *Times Literary Supplement* (5 Dec 1975), 1463. Messiaen's disapproval of Satie is expressed in his interviews. See: Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1999), 189. Drew's comparison is made more attractive by the knowledge that Satie's *Messe des pauvres* (a 'Rose Croix' work) was in Messiaen's concert repertory in the 1930s: he performed it at a concert on 14 Mar 1939. ['S.R.', 'La Sérénade (Eglise de la Trinité)', *La Revue musicale* 189 (Mar 1939), 131.]

<sup>22</sup> Leo Treitler, 'The Historiography of Music: Issues of Past and Present', *Rethinking Music*, eds. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (London, 1999), 356.

<sup>23</sup> Madeleine Hsu, *Olivier Messiaen: The Musical Mediator* (Cranbury, 1996).

exclusively on Bartók. The writing is confused in its arguments, especially when dealing with context, makes several doubtful historical placings and takes a cavalier attitude to sources.<sup>24</sup>

### **Messiaen in Context? *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time***

Paul Griffiths's book on the composer, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, makes the most serious attempt to contextualise Messiaen's development. Griffiths gives an account of the composer's early interests and formative musical experiences and, though the wide scope of the book (Messiaen's life and work to 1985 in 243 pages) precludes a detailed examination of Messiaen's early career, many of his observations raise fascinating questions that are worth examining in detail.

Griffiths's discussion of Messiaen's *Préludes* provides a good illustration. Griffiths notes that Messiaen dedicated them to Henriette Roget, a fellow student at the conservatoire, and indicates that she gave their first performance in 1931 at a concert of the Société Nationale.<sup>25</sup> In Griffiths's text, this vignette serves simply to introduce a discussion of the *Préludes*, but it is worth unpicking the wider questions it suggests. In the light of Michel Duchesneau's work on the Société Nationale (SN) and the Société Musicale Indépendante (SMI), for example, and knowledge of the partisan nature of Parisian music societies, we

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<sup>24</sup> Many of Hsu's references are not accurate (for example, 17 of her 39 references to *Technique de mon langage musical* are incorrect), and she applies the disconcerting technique of quoting long passages (sometimes inaccurately) without using quotation marks. In discussing the methods of the mystic she writes:

While the mystic would invoke the Tristan and Isolde myth by means of a narrative, the surrealist employs fantastic realms: through dreams and nightmares the surrealist's imagery places into surprising opposition various elements from the physical world that would not normally be associated with one another. [Madeleine Hsu, *Olivier Messiaen, The Musical Mediator*, 29-30.]

This is credited, by way of footnote, to Robert Sherlaw Johnson; a look at his original reveals her error:

Whereas mythology does this by means of a narrative, surrealism strives to do it more directly by invoking a world of dreams or nightmares in which objects which are not normally associated with each other in the physical world may be brought into stark opposition. [Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen*, 77.]

The comparison has been critically changed by the substitution of 'mystic' for 'mythology'; worse still, the paragraph as it appears in her book is footnoted to Robert Sherlaw Johnson, implying that the comparison is his. Finally, there are several unattributed and unacknowledged translations from the work of Michèle Reverdy, an example of which can be found in Hsu's confusing description of *Cloches d'angoisses et larmes d'adieu*: 'After the long ornamental digressions the piece concludes on the tritone proceeding to the last chord of resonance.' [Madeleine Hsu, *Olivier Messiaen: The Musical Mediator*, 57.] This is a clumsy and unattributed translation of Reverdy's analysis: 'Après ces longues digressions ornementales, ne demeure évidemment plus que la quarte augmentée, sur laquelle se termine la pièce (l'adieu) succédant à un dernier accord de résonance.' [Michèle Reverdy, *L'Œuvre pour piano d'Olivier Messiaen*, 20.]

<sup>25</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 226. In fact, Griffiths is incorrect in this assertion. The *Préludes* were first performed by Roget at a meeting of the Société Nationale on 1 March 1930. The performance was reviewed in *Le Ménestrel* by Joseph Baruzi. See: Joseph Baruzi, 'Société Nationale de Musique (1<sup>er</sup> mars)', *Le Ménestrel* (7 March 1930).

might seek more information on Messiaen's participation in a concert of the SN. Was he a member of the Société, and would that provide an indication of the music and people with whom he was in contact? Did membership of that society bring with it any other allegiances (institutional, partisan or political) that are relevant? As the first performer of Messiaen's first published works, was Roget an important figure, and how important were Messiaen's other conservatoire contemporaries – either as interpreters, collaborators or simply supporters – in this earliest phase of his career? A throwaway detail from Griffiths reveals on closer consideration a fascinating chain of interlinked issues that bear further investigation.

To give an impression of the Paris in which Messiaen studied, Griffiths mentions 'a living tradition of religious music that was bound to affect the young Catholic composer' and mentions Vierne, Widor and Tournemire:

Tournemire, composer of symphonies with such titles as *Les danses de la vie* [sic] (1918-22) and *La symphonie du triomphe de la mort* [sic] (1920-4) as well as of a vast cycle of meditations on plainsong contained in his *L'orgue mystique* [sic] (1927-32), must stand high among Messiaen's musical godparents.<sup>26</sup>

The image of a 'musical godparent' is a striking one: a senior musician linked but at some remove from young composer, not a 'parent' but a close elder contemporary. What kind of musical 'godparent' was Tournemire, and what other 'godparents' might one identify? Was their influence aesthetic (Messiaen and Tournemire, for example, shared a quasi-mystical approach to Catholicism), or did it extend to matters of musical language? With whom among the senior musicians of the day was Messiaen in contact? Did he acknowledge any musical 'godparents', either explicitly or implicitly?

Griffiths mentions other possible influences like those of the Russian *émigrés*, Obouhow and Vyschnegradsky, and the Solesmes plainchant scholar Dom André Mocquereau. Of Obouhow and Vyschnegradsky, Griffiths writes:

[They] brought with them a line of harmonic and mystical venturing that emanated from Skryabin. Both had performances in Paris, and their music was discussed in the *Revue Musicale* [sic]. Of the two, Obukhov would seem particularly close to Messiaen in his Christian testimony and also his scoring – such works as *Le pasteur tout-puissant règne* [sic] for female voice with ondes martenot and piano (1930) promise to be irresistibly Messiaenic – but the influence is hard to gauge, partly because it might have been that he was learning from Messiaen, and partly because Messiaen may have been drawing directly on similar harmonic and philosophical indications in Skryabin.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 24.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, 25. Note that the *New Grove* transliterations are inconsistent with Griffiths.



We might wonder if Messiaen had any personal contact with these men, if he was aware of their work at this time and whether they might also be candidates for the role of musical ‘godparents’ or perhaps affiliates of some kind?<sup>28</sup> In the case of the plainchant scholar, Griffiths writes that ‘Messiaen learned much from Mocquereau’s work’, but the precise nature of the relationship is left undiscussed.<sup>29</sup> What, if any, was the influence on Messiaen of Mocquereau’s work on plainchant? Are there, for example, any features of Messiaen’s musical language that could find roots in Mocquereau’s scholarship?

Griffiths also mentions in passing the composer’s first wife, Louise Justine Delbos, known as Claire Delbos. She is often referred to as ‘a violinist’ in the Messiaen literature, since it is known that Messiaen’s *Thème et variations* was written for her to play, but Griffiths points out that she was also a ‘fellow composer’ and mentions her setting for soprano and piano of poems from Cécile Sauvage’s *L’Ame en bourgeon*.<sup>30</sup> What can Messiaen and Delbos’s partnership tell us about the wider context for Messiaen’s development, and does her compositional style reveal any evidence of cross-fertilisation? (It might be unfair to criticise Messiaen scholars for neglecting the compositions of Claire Delbos since after her extended decline and tragic death, she was a subject too painful for Messiaen to discuss. On the other hand, there are a number of her works available in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.)

The Jeune France episode is another aspect of Messiaen’s early career where Griffiths gives a good, albeit brief, account that compels us to pose further questions.<sup>31</sup>

Like many French artists of the time [Messiaen] felt the need to associate himself with a group, and from among composers of his generation there emerged in 1936 La Jeune France.<sup>32</sup>

Griffiths’s language suggests that the formation of La Jeune France was rather haphazard and unplanned. Is this borne out by historical evidence? Was this Messiaen’s only involvement in a group of this kind, his only attempt to collaborate with other composers? Griffiths clearly believes that La Jeune France presents no serious challenge to the received view of the composer:

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<sup>28</sup> Obouhow published a version of one of Messiaen’s *Préludes* in a ‘simplified notation’ in 1947. See: Nicolas Obouhow, *Pièces pour piano, transcrites en nouvelle notation simplifiée* (Paris, 1947).

<sup>29</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 25.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, 77; *ibid.*, 73.

<sup>31</sup> Nigel Simeone’s work on La Jeune France and La Spirale has recently provided a much fuller account of this important episode. See: Nigel Simeone, ‘Group Identities: La Spirale and La Jeune France’, *Musical Times* (Autumn 2002), 10-36.

As far as Messiaen is concerned, the episode is of interest only in as much as it helps one understand the background against which music so extraordinary appeared. Undoubtedly there was a general wish to compose works unfiltered by the irony and polish of someone like Poulenc.<sup>33</sup>

However, this comment seems to omit an important aspect of La Jeune France – its clearly stated aims, laid out in a published quasi-political ‘manifesto’ (which was almost immediately translated into English for a concert of Messiaen’s *Les Offrandes oubliées*, given by the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Koussevitzky):

As the conditions of life become more and more hard, mechanical and impersonal, music must bring ceaselessly to those who love it its spiritual violence and its courageous reactions. La Jeune France, reaffirming the title once created by Berlioz, pursues the road upon which the master once took his obdurate course. This is a friendly group of four young French composers: Olivier Messiaen, Daniel-Lesur, Yves Baudrier and André Jolivet. La Jeune France proposes the dissemination of works [that are] youthful, free, as far removed from revolutionary formulas as from academic formulas.

The tendencies of this group will be diverse: their only unqualified agreement is in the common desire to be satisfied with nothing less than sincerity, generosity and artistic good faith. Their aim is to create and to promote a living music.

At each concert, La Jeune France, assembling an unbiased jury, will cause to be performed, in the measure of its means, one or several works characteristic of some interesting trend within the bounds of their aspirations.

They also hope to encourage the performance of the young French scores which have been allowed to languish through the indifference or the penury of official powers, and to continue in this century the music of the great composers of the past who have made French music one of the pure jewels of civilisation.<sup>34</sup>

Griffiths does not discuss what part, if any, Messiaen took in the development and projection of these aims. Preconceptions might lead us to conclude that his contribution to the crusade was rather peripheral, but this was a small group of only four members. Is Griffiths’s verdict on La Jeune France as a ‘tangent to Messiaen’s career’ justified?<sup>35</sup>

Griffiths draws attention to the composer’s well-known 1939 article on Stravinsky’s use of rhythm for *La Revue musicale* making the following assessment:

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<sup>32</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 71.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, 73.

<sup>34</sup> Boston Symphony Orchestra, 56<sup>th</sup> Season (1936-37), Second Programme (16 and 17 Oct 1936), programme book, 74-75. Quoted in: Nigel Simeone, ‘La Spirale and La Jeune France: Group Identities’, *Musical Times* (Autumn 2002), 15.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 76.

Drawing a parallel with his favoured Indian formulae, [Messiaen] applauds Stravinsky's conscious manipulation of rhythmic figures, changing one element whilst another remains constant. He writes of this, however, as something belonging to Stravinsky's past, a technique emerging in *Petrushka*, reaching its climax in 'his two masterpieces, *The Rite* and *The Wedding*', diminishing in *Histoire du Soldat* [*sic*] and becoming 'completely extinguished by the return to Bach of the *Symphony of Psalms*.' The harsh judgement on neoclassical aesthetics could have come from any of the members of *La Jeune France* [*sic italics*]. For Messiaen, however, this was not only his first but also his last engagement in polemics. His half-hearted career as a public musician – writing essays, backing manifestos, accepting commissions, composing for the conventional concert world – was at an end.<sup>36</sup>

The notion of the 'public musician' seems somewhat at odds with the 'musician apart' narrative, and for Griffiths the solution is to play down the importance of Messiaen's 'public' activities. Surely, however, these activities played a role in the trajectory of Messiaen's career and are worthy of more detailed exegesis? (Griffiths's claim that Messiaen's career as a 'public musician was at an end', combined with phrases such as 'conventional concert world', are further examples of how the image of the 'musician apart' can be more subtly – and perhaps inadvertently – propagated.)

Until recently, with the work of Nigel Simeone, little research had been done on Messiaen's professional life in the 1930s, though certain episodes have always (as we shall see) been biographical touchstones. Griffiths uses the lack of biographical detail as evidence of Messiaen's devotion to his church:

Unremarkable music for ondes martenot, two piano works and a vocalise, a couple of essays, some teaching and membership in a group: it is not much to represent Messiaen's non-religious activity in the 1930s, but in its meagreness it is typical.<sup>37</sup>

Once again, this assessment reinforces the familiar narrative: Messiaen the religious artist, unconcerned with worldly trials. In effect, though, Griffiths has drawn up a brief list of Messiaen's secular activities, and drawn his conclusion on this period of Messiaen's career from the observation that his own list is limited. The validity of Griffiths's conclusion must surely be questioned in this case since it is predicated on a *lack* of evidence.

Having considered in detail some of Griffiths's points, it is now time to examine how other writers have approached Messiaen's early life and career.

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, 76.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, 75.

## Messiaen's Grip on his own Biography

Nearly all general books and articles on the composer give a similar account of Messiaen's early life.<sup>38</sup> His mother, Cécile Sauvage, is mentioned first, along with her collection of maternal poems, *L'Ame en bourgeon*; Messiaen's 'true homeland' – Grenoble and the mountains of the Dauphiné – is noted, as is his earliest composition, *La Dame de Shalott*, written by Messiaen, untutored, at the age of 9. His year of entry to the Conservatoire is then given as 1919 and his principal teachers and the prizes he won are listed. Then, it is explained that he was appointed to the post of organist at La Trinité in Paris in 1931, becoming the youngest titular organist in France, and his public *début* on 19 February 1931 (the première of *Les Offrandes oubliées*) is mentioned. What is remarkable about these sketches of Messiaen's early life is that they are almost identical to the biographical note that Messiaen himself wrote for the first performance of *Le Tombeau resplendissant* in 1933.<sup>39</sup> One conclusion to be drawn from the similarity between Messiaen's own biographical note and those of writers on Messiaen must surely be that most of these writers on Messiaen have taken his statements as a basis for their own biographies, and have not undertaken source work.

Research for this thesis has uncovered several instances where the standard version of the biography seems incorrect. These range from inconsequential irregularities to major omissions. As an introductory example of the former, we may consider Messiaen's date of entry to the Conservatoire. Every published source on Messiaen – including Claude Samuel's book of conversations with the composer in its most recent French edition (1999) and *The Messiaen Companion* (1995) – gives Messiaen's date of entry as the beginning of academic year 1919.<sup>40</sup> This does not, however, tally with the records kept by the Conservatoire, which record his date of entry as October 1920.<sup>41</sup> Messiaen's name does not appear in the register of classes for the academic year 1919-20: he was not enrolled as a student in this academic year.<sup>42</sup> This is probably not an important detail – perhaps Messiaen audited Conservatoire

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example: *ibid.*, 19-23; Brigitte Massin, *Olivier Messiaen: Une Poétique du merveilleux*, 19-37; Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen*, 9-10.

<sup>39</sup> F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, Rés. Vmb ms 0094. [Autobiographical sketch by Messiaen written for the première of *Le Tombeau resplendissant*.]

<sup>40</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen*, 433; ed. Peter Hill, *The Messiaen Companion* (London and Boston, 1995), 530.

<sup>41</sup> F-Pan, Fonds AJ<sup>37</sup> 144 *Tableau annuel des classes. Première Serie 1920-21*.

<sup>42</sup> F-Pan, Fonds AJ<sup>37</sup> 143 *Tableau annuel des classes. Première Serie 1919-20*.

classes during this year (a common practice whereby students were permitted to sit in on classes without being enrolled) – but it highlights the fact that Messiaen scholars have largely ignored the archives.

The problem for Messiaen scholarship is precisely that which Hans Lenneberg encapsulates in the title of his collection of essays on musical biography, *Witnesses and Scholars*.<sup>43</sup> For Lenneberg, the ‘witness’ stands diametrically opposite the ‘scholar’. A witness provides critically unfiltered evidence contingent on his or her own perspective, whilst the scholar is charged with making critical decisions based on that evidence. Thus far, Messiaen’s life has tended to be understood through the mediation of witnesses whose evidence is based on their memory of events and actions. In particular, it has been illuminated by the first-hand evidence of one expert witness: Olivier Messiaen himself.

The extent of Messiaen’s commentary on himself is quite phenomenal: the famous extended interviews with Claude Samuel are just two of many substantial interviews, and there are extended self-analyses in *Technique de mon langage musical* of 1944, and in the posthumously published *Traité de rythme, de couleur et d'ornithologie*, which was still in publication at the time of writing but had already reached seven volumes – one of which is so fulsome that it is bound in two parts. Whilst Messiaen’s statements can be of great value to the study of his music, it is essential that they are always acknowledged as witness accounts and subjected to the necessary critical scrutiny.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, unless we explicitly recognise their particular status, there is a risk that the composer’s comments can obscure more than they elucidate.

Indeed, in surveying the panoply of statements Messiaen made about himself, we also find the ‘composer apart’ narrative that I have traced through Messiaen scholarship. When talking about the religious orientation and title of his first orchestral work, the unpublished *Banquet eucharistique* with Brigitte Massin, Messiaen comments: ‘J’admets volontiers que j’allais à contre-courant de mon époque’<sup>45</sup> (‘I will freely admit that I went against the tide of my era’). This is a theme that Messiaen had developed further in an interview with Almut Rößler in 1979:

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<sup>43</sup> Hans Lenneberg, *Witnesses and Scholars: Studies in Musical Biography* (London, 1988).

<sup>44</sup> French studies of the composer in particular have tended to be poor in this respect, often comprising linked interviews with the composer: examples are the studies by Antoine Goléa and Brigitte Massin. Such sources can of course provide fascinating raw material, provided it is acknowledged as such.

<sup>45</sup> Brigitte Massin, *Olivier Messiaen: Une Poétique du merveilleux*, 46. As I shall discuss in chapter 2, Messiaen was not particularly out of sympathy with the mood of the 1920s, which was marked by a resurgence in Catholicism.

In my youth Debussy made a deep impression on me with his sense of colour and his love of Nature, and so did Stravinsky with his rhythms. A man like Boulez who came 30 years later, was more impressed by Schoenberg on account of the contrapuntal and serial aspects. Strangely enough, I've also composed serial music, but it wasn't my way. In this sense I was swimming against the tide: the whole world was composing serial music, but I wasn't; and at the time that Stravinsky was working in neoclassicism, I didn't do that either.<sup>46</sup>

According to Messiaen, his uniqueness stretched back to his student days: he was, he said to Claude Samuel: 'le seul élève du Conservatoire qui s'était procuré le *Pierrot lunaire* de Schoenberg et le *Sacre du printemps* de Stravinsky'<sup>47</sup> ('the only student at the Conservatory who had acquired Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* and Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*').<sup>48</sup>

As well as emphasising experiences that make him stand out from his contemporaries, Messiaen also makes clear how his faith leaves him unperturbed by the rejection by the wider musical world. In an interview with Bernard Gavoty, translated for *Tempo* and published there in 1961, Messiaen is asked for whom he composes. This is his response:

OM: Only for myself. I am as indifferent to applause as to boos. But if someone cries in the hall, then I too am moved to tears. Otherwise I experience neither pleasure nor lasting sadness in face of such and such a public reaction. One thing alone is important to me; to rejoin the eternal durations and the resonances of the above and beyond, to apprehend that inaudible which is above actual music... Naturally, I shall never achieve this... [original ellipses]

In the quotations above, Messiaen himself seems to underline the same principle of 'apartness'. Doubtless, Messiaen is justified in expressing a sense of disjunction with the rest of the world, but over the course of these mature self-commentaries, this theme becomes greater than a simple expression of personal detachment. With the extensive interviews of Messiaen's later years, the theme of the 'composer apart' becomes more and more reinforced in the composer's self-commentary, seeming, in the end, to be the main route whereby Messiaen expects us to understand him and his music.

It could be said, then, that Messiaen commentators have been justified to a degree in using the notion of 'difference' as the unifying theme in their discussion of the composer

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<sup>46</sup> Almut Rößler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 74.

<sup>47</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen*, 188.

<sup>48</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Olivier Messiaen: Musique et couleur* (Paris, 1986); Eng. edn. *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, tr. E Thomas Glasow (Portland OR, 1994), 112.

since that idea stems to some extent from the composer himself. It must be remembered, however, that these comments come from the interviews that Messiaen gave from the 1960s onwards – when he was firmly established as a senior member of the musical world. The theme of ‘difference’ was less prevalent – perhaps absent – in early self-commentaries (many of which have only come to light in the course of research for this thesis), and I therefore argue that an understanding of that period must avoid relying, as some have done, on a theme that emerged later in Messiaen’s life.

Those who do history often do so by constructing – either deliberately or unconsciously – narratives that make sense of the subject of the study. These might take the form of the traditional ‘narrative history’, but can also comprise a nexus of more loosely-related ideas and tropes that seem to shed light on the subject at hand.

In Messiaen’s case, the narrative of ‘difference’ has provided a framework by which we can, at a certain level, understand both the man and his work. When a certain episode puts strain on this narrative the historian is forced either to reconsider the narrative, or to fit (or even ‘shoehorn’, as Stephen Jay Gould has evocatively expressed it) the episode into the narrative.<sup>49</sup> This, I would argue, is what Paul Griffiths has done in the case of Messiaen’s role in La Jeune France.

When compelling new data make the traditional narrative untenable, it is tempting to discard it, to search for and set up in its place a new story: such is the tradition of revisionist history. My title, through the use of the ‘re-’ prefix, does suggest a revision of the kind that Leo Treitler has so perfectly critiqued:

The prefix ‘re-’, like the word ‘new’ as in ‘new Left’, ‘New Historicism’, ‘New Philosophy of History’, ‘New Musicology’ stands for a narrative, now so widely recited as to constitute a modern mythology, of oppression followed by liberation [...] and attended by an ethos of exhilaration in new-found freedoms. But, paradoxically, the liberation argot that is switched in at the sign of the word ‘new’, as though by the striking of a computer function key, is itself the sign not only of an imposed radical discontinuity, but also of an encroaching new orthodoxy that threatens to constrain freedom.<sup>50</sup>

In attempting to unseat the image of the ‘musician apart’, and despite my title, I do not however want to propose a new narrative. Although critical of the prevailing Messiaen story, I

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<sup>49</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (London, 1989), 24ff.

<sup>50</sup> Leo Treitler, ‘The Historiography of Music: Issues of Past and Present’, *Rethinking Music*, eds. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (London, 1999), 356.

do not believe that any greater insight is gained by attempting to construct a new over-arching account, and I avoid doing so in the thesis. Instead, I examine some of the diverse areas in which the image of the ‘musician apart’ breaks down, and in the process reveal some new aspects of this fascinating subject.

This narrative of the ‘musician apart’ is not entirely coherent: various (at times almost contradictory) elements of ‘difference’ have been emphasised by those who have written on Messiaen.<sup>51</sup> So, when I refer to the ‘musician apart’, I am referring to a notion that is really more fragmented than the short phrase suggests. Likewise, I use the idea of ‘engagement’ – be it personal, theoretical, conceptual or quasi-political – as a shorthand for the breakdown of the ‘musician apart’. This is not meant to suggest a new ‘corrected’ story (‘the musician engaged’), but is merely a way of binding together the different ways in which the traditional image of the composer is difficult to defend: I share the anxieties of those critics whom Maynard Solomon characterises as ‘concerned about tendencies that would impose on the life a fairly restrictive array of mythic, narrative or other extramusical structures.’<sup>52</sup> My use of an ersatz (and fragmented) theme of ‘engagement’ is perhaps a methodological sleight-of-hand, but I do not believe that it undermines the argument.

## The Thesis

There are two important reasons why further biographical and contextual enquiry is worthwhile in Messiaen’s case. The first and most straightforward justification for scholarly work on Messiaen’s biography is the astonishing contrast between the received ‘biography’ and the evidence provided by documentary sources. The investigation of such details is the only way in which the conclusions of previous studies of the composer can legitimately be evaluated. In order to show that Messiaen was not alone in his preoccupations and experiments, for example, it is necessary to examine his professional life and that of the colleagues with whom he worked. When we do this, certain preconceptions are revealed to be unconvincing. A second reason to investigate biographical details is to allow us to understand

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<sup>51</sup> So, for example, music historians attempting a unified history of twentieth-century music have tended to see Messiaen as ‘apart’ because of the difficulty of assimilating him into their broad narratives (this is an issue to which I return in the Conclusion), whilst to a layperson, Messiaen is made ‘apart’ by two issues (his fascination with birdsong and his supposed suffering from synaesthesia) that I would argue are actually quite amenable to incorporation in an historical narrative.

<sup>52</sup> Maynard Solomon, ‘Biography’, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London, 2/2001), Vol. 3, 600.



the development of the idiosyncratic musical techniques and stylistic traits of the composer in context.

When considering matters of biography and context, we will inevitably come upon the notion of ‘influence’ and it is essential to consider the many dimensions of this concept and their range of application in each individual case. Treitler’s critique of the ‘shallow notion of musical influence’ has already been discussed, but there are further relevant issues surrounding the notion of ‘influence’.

In the case of Messiaen’s use of a feature from exotic or ancient music, it is important to recognise the precise nature of the influence. In discussing Messiaen’s use of Hindu rhythm, for example, Robert Sherlaw Johnson writes:

His knowledge of Sharngadeva’s rhythms... was initially derived from the table given in Lavignac’s *Encyclopédie de la Musique et Dictionnaire de la Conservatoire* [sic] and does not arise from a critical study of Indian music at its primary source. Much less does it mean that his music has been influenced by the essential ethos of Indian music.<sup>53</sup>

To say that Messiaen was ‘influenced’ by Hindu rhythm is to conceal a more complex process at work; rather, he was inspired by French scholarly work on Hindu rhythm to adopt the raw material of that work and the implications he saw contained in it, for his own musical ends.

To these considerations must be added an awareness of other facets of influence, particularly the power of Harold Bloom’s ‘anxiety of influence’ – the influence generated by a precedent that an artist wishes (consciously or subconsciously) to negate, and which therefore acts, in a sense, ‘inversely’.<sup>54</sup> Bloom’s anxiety can be detected in Messiaen’s attitude to Widor, and in his reaction to Cocteau’s *Le Coq et l’arlequin*.

The most important aspects of influence that appear in this thesis are those of methodological (or theoretical), historical and aesthetic outlook. When, for example, in *Technique de mon langage musical* Messiaen takes the greatest care to present his musical tools in as rational a tone as possible, he is revealing the influence of several centuries of French theoretical writing on music. Such influences receive detailed consideration here.

So-called ‘musical influences’ of the type identified by David Drew receive only a little attention in this thesis. Many ‘marked similarities’ between Messiaen’s early music and the work of predecessors have been noted by previous commentators but a systematic

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<sup>53</sup> Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen*, 7.

<sup>54</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York and Oxford, 2/1997).

investigation of such similarities (in the manner of Robin Holloway's study of Wagner and Debussy<sup>55</sup>) has been avoided here because of the problem of placing such similarities in a wider context. Messiaen's quotation of a 'source' does not necessarily imply a full aesthetic engagement with that source. (The level of engagement depends on the source and, in certain cases, changed through Messiaen's lifetime). This is the root of Sherlaw Johnson's comment on Hindu music (and the reason that he finds Drew's claim about a Satie influence unconvincing). It also underlies the strangeness of Messiaen's musical 'derivations' in *Technique de mon langage musical*: just because Messiaen has been inspired by the shape of a melodic contour or an irregular rhythm does not mean he has drawn in a wider sense from that source.

At the same time, Messiaen insisted on the existence of his 'musical language', an entity that, for Messiaen, takes on 'work'-like characteristics, but which is nonetheless separate from his compositions. Messiaen drew upon this 'language' when composing, but drew a clear distinction between matters of language and 'sentiment', between 'technique' and the 'work' created.<sup>56</sup> For example, the so-called 'added value' is a musical technique developed by Messiaen that has, at the composer's insistence, an existence independent of its appearance in any of his works. Messiaen is famous for the great diversity of sources upon which he drew in forming his musical language, and it is this aspect that is illuminated by more detailed knowledge of context.

Research has been shaped radically by the discovery that there are many sources outside the composer's later 'authorised' accounts of his music and career that can provide an insight into his development. Crucially, my discovery of journalism by Messiaen dating from the 1930s has provided a glimpse of the composer before fame had induced the caution and discretion that characterises the later interviews. Although I will introduce the journalism more formally in Chapter 3, it is worth mentioning some features of it here, since it is one of the key sources that has allowed me to recontextualise the early career.

Between 1936 and 1939, Messiaen worked as a reviewer of concerts and publications and also wrote essays on various subjects for a number of journals. At around 24,000 words, the quantity of writing is significant as a new resource, but also reflects the fact that this was a relatively limited activity for the composer. Messiaen's articles cover a wide range of music and topics, but also they reflect many of his familiar preoccupations and, though the

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<sup>55</sup> Robin Holloway, *Debussy and Wagner* (London, 1979).

<sup>56</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical* (Paris, 1999), 5.

supposition cannot be confirmed, there is a sense that Messiaen had the freedom to write about the topics that interested him most – the feeling that he was ‘on assignment’ is entirely absent from the journalism. Although the territory that Messiaen explores in his writing embraces many of the themes familiar from later writings and interviews, there is an abundance of detail and much new material – often expressed in forthright language.

This thesis does not aim to provide a detailed study of the journalism itself. Instead, Messiaen’s early writings are mined as a rich and valuable seam of new material on the composer. Other sources, like the autograph letters in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, and reviews of early Messiaen concerts, have also been consulted, revealing much that has previously passed unnoticed.

The thesis will seek to recontextualise Messiaen’s career in the 1930s, including reference to his first treatise, *Technique de mon langage musical*, of 1944. This period has been chosen for several reasons. It was in this first part of his career that Messiaen’s aesthetic position and public persona were formed and developed. Secondly, despite the radical change in his music that took place around 1949, an understanding of Messiaen’s early development has implications that extend beyond the period in question. Although Messiaen consistently adopted and created new means to composition, he rarely rejected that which had gone before. Consequently, an understanding of the context in which his early music was composed has implications for the comprehension of the later works. Finally, the existence of *Technique* offers a summation of Messiaen’s musical development to that time.

Alan Bowness has identified ‘four successive circles of recognition through which the exceptional artist passes on his path to fame’, with the fourth following inevitably from the first three. These ‘circles’ are peer recognition, critical recognition, patronage and public acclaim, and the period under discussion in this thesis marks Messiaen’s progress through the first three of these.<sup>57</sup> The fourth circle, public acclaim – according to Bowness the inevitable result of the first three – flowered at the end of the period under discussion in this thesis, but continued until the composer’s death in 1992.

My aim in this thesis is essentially twofold. Firstly, I give evidence that counters the narrative of the ‘musician apart’ and shows how the composer interacted and engaged in his early career with other musicians and the diverse musical and aesthetic trends of the time. Secondly, I widen the discussion to consider the broader context, examining Messiaen’s

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<sup>57</sup> Alan Bowness, *The Conditions of Success (Walter Neurath Memorial Lecture 1989)*, (London, 1989), 11.

involvement in the political-aesthetic debates that marked the 1930s, and his relation to French theoretical and historiographic trends.

This thesis, then, reassesses Messiaen's early career by considering in turn several contextual areas. Firstly, I consider how Messiaen positioned himself biographically and musically, by focussing on recurring themes in the composer's writings (established or newly discovered) as my main source. Then I examine Messiaen's relationship with his immediate contemporaries and, in particular, the group of musicians with whom he forged his early career. Subsequently, I go on to explore Messiaen's relation to the French traditions of musical technique and history. Finally, I consider some French aesthetic disputes of the 1930s and examine Messiaen's role in these debates.

## 2 The Wider Context – Institutions and Cultural Life

### Education

Messiaen's musical education did not begin with his enrolment at the Conservatoire. Paul Griffiths mentions a piano tutor – a Madame Chardon – in Grenoble, where Messiaen lived until the end of the Great War, but most accounts state that it was with the return of his father at the end of the war that Messiaen's guided study of music began. On his demobilisation, Pierre Messiaen was offered a post in Nantes. The move to Nantes brought the 9-year-old Olivier the chance to study the piano more formally with a series of teachers, and to study with Jehan de Gibon (also known variously as Jean or Joseph). The family's stay in Nantes was short – just six months – but Messiaen later drew great attention to his lessons with de Gibon, recounting how he gave him a vocal score of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*.<sup>1</sup> I will return to de Gibon when considering the way Messiaen told his autobiography. Lessons were, however, brief: a few months after de Gibon's gift, the Messiaen family was on the move again, Pierre having been offered a position at the Lycée Charlemagne in Paris. 'Je suis alors entré au Conservatoire'<sup>2</sup> reported Messiaen to Brigitte Massin.

The matter-of-fact quality of Messiaen's comment – 'so I entered the Conservatoire' – slightly obscures the fact that Messiaen, his parents, or someone else, decided that the Conservatoire, as opposed to one of the other musical institutions in Paris (or, indeed, a conventional school), was the one he would attend.<sup>3</sup> The Conservatoire was, of course, one of several places where one could study music – others, of various status and emphasis, included the Schola Cantorum, and lesser-known institutions such as the Ecole Niedermeyer.<sup>4</sup> Whilst the Ecole Niedermeyer, founded as a school for choristers and organists by the Protestant musician Louis Niedermeyer in 1853 and redesignated as a secular conservatoire in 1884, was less famous than the others, it is by no means clear that for a young musician inclined towards composition – as Messiaen later claimed to be by reference to his 1917 piece for piano *La Dame de Shalott* – the Conservatoire would be the obvious choice. The Schola Cantorum in

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<sup>1</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1999), 186.

<sup>2</sup> Brigitte Massin, *Olivier Messiaen: Une Poétique du merveilleux* (Aix-en-Provence, 1989), 39.

<sup>3</sup> In his interview with Bruyr, Messiaen says, somewhat cryptically, 'A Nantes, Lucy Vuillemin et Robert Lortat s'intéressèrent à ce que je griffonnais par intuition pure. Grâce à eux, je vins étudier à Paris' ('At Nantes, Lucy Vuillemin and Robert Lortat took an interest in what I was attempting to do by pure intuition. Thanks to them I came to study in Paris.') [José Bruyr, *L'Ecran des musiciens, seconde série* (Paris, 1933), 125.]

<sup>4</sup> The Ecole normale was not, however, an option as it did not open until the academic year 1921-22.

particular, and especially its director Vincent d'Indy, attracted a wide range of *compositeurs-aspirants*. It was a relatively recent foundation, having been opened just over twenty years previously by d'Indy, but his teachings on composition – crystallised in the publication of the famous *Cours de composition musicale* from 1902 – had helped to make the place famous, and later, in the 1930s, Messiaen gained possibly his first teaching post at the Schola. Nonetheless, the Conservatoire, directed by Gabriel Fauré, probably had the edge in sheer prestige, whether merited or not, and admitted a young Messiaen.

At the Conservatoire, students were taught in small classes, typically of about a dozen students but often incorporating 'auditeurs' who attended classes without taking the exam in that subject. Students were assessed by their own teachers and, if they showed sufficient skill, were entered for the Conservatoire-wide exams to compete for a prize. Certain core subjects were taught by several teachers, so the exam competitions would often include students studying under various teachers. Students were usually expected to remain in the class until they won a prize, a process that often took several years, but many joint prizes were awarded which undoubtedly made the system more workable. Nonetheless, this had the result that while certain preliminary classes, such the preparatory piano class, were composed of a cohort of close contemporaries, some of the more advanced classes included a wide range of ages: in Caussade's Counterpoint and Fugue class in the academic year 1925-26, for example, Messiaen was the youngest but one (after Elsa Barraine) at 16 years and 9 months, whilst the eldest, Jean Rivier was 29 years old.

Judging by the Conservatoire registers, the subjects Messiaen studied seem to have been entirely consistent with a typical Conservatoire education. His account of his studies to Claude Samuel is worth recalling:

Je peux citer dans l'ordre tous les professeurs que j'ai eu au Conservatoire de Paris. J'ai d'abord travaillé le piano chez Georges Falkenberg, ensuite j'ai étudié l'harmonie avec Jean Gallon, puis j'ai fait du contrepoint et pratiquement toutes les matières musicales en leçons particulières avec Noël Gallon pendant une dizaine d'années. J'ai obtenu mon prix de fugue chez Georges Caussade, mon prix d'accompagnement au piano chez César Abel Estyle, et mon prix d'orgue chez Marcel Dupré, qui m'a initié au plain-chant, à la registration, à l'improvisation et m'a transmis la technique de l'orgue. Enfin, j'ai travaillé les timbales et la percussion avec Baggers (le seul professeur de percussion de l'époque), l'histoire de la musique et la métrique grecque avec Maurice Emmanuel, la composition et l'orchestration avec Paul Dukas, qui fut mon professeur principal.<sup>5</sup>

I can cite in order all the teachers I had at the Paris Conservatoire. I began by working on the piano with Georges Falkenberg, then I studied harmony with Jean Gallon, then I did counterpoint and almost all music theory in private lessons with Noël Gallon for around ten years. I won my first prize in fugue with Georges Caussade, my piano accompaniment prize with César Abel Estyle and my organ prize with Marcel Dupré, who initiated me in plainchant, registration, improvisation and passed on to me the technique of playing the organ. Finally, I studied timpani and percussion with Baggers (the only percussion teacher at that time), history of music and Greek metrics with Maurice Emmanuel, and composition and orchestration with Paul Dukas, who was my main professor.

There are various inconsistencies in the chronologies that have been given in the standard Messiaen commentaries. Some of these involve the precise dating of events, and most almost certainly result from the imprecise use of academic years. Other inconsistencies require further elucidation. The chronology provided in *The Messiaen Companion*, for example, states that Messiaen won a *1<sup>er</sup> Prix* in the history of music in 1928, which is omitted from the composer's account given above, and from Paul Griffiths's version.<sup>6</sup> The account given in the second edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* is different again.<sup>7</sup> Records for the classes in music history are not contained in the archives, but in his preface to the 1981 reprint of Emmanuel's *Histoire de la langue musicale*, Messiaen claimed that he took Emmanuel's class in the academic year 1928-29, making a *1<sup>er</sup> Prix* in 1928 seem unlikely.<sup>8</sup>

It is possible, however, to reconstruct a certain amount of Messiaen's time at the Conservatoire using the records that are kept in the Archives Nationales, and although they do not contain information on all the classes Messiaen took, they do offer the chance to confirm certain details of his academic career. As mentioned in the introduction, there are discrepancies between the official records of Messiaen's time at the Conservatoire and the composer's version: the first of these is his date of entry. Messiaen claimed that he began his studies in 1919, a date that has been reproduced in all studies on Messiaen. The records of the Conservatoire, however, state that he enrolled on 26 September 1920 and, because of the design of the records that were kept at the time, this date is mentioned on the record sheets of every class Messiaen took until the beginning of the academic year 1926-7, when the format

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<sup>5</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Oliver Messiaen*, 187.

<sup>6</sup> ed. Peter Hill, *The Messiaen Companion* (London and Boston, 1995), 530-531.

<sup>7</sup> See: Paul Griffiths, 'Messiaen', *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London, 2/2001), Vol. 16, 491.

<sup>8</sup> Olivier Messiaen, preface to: Maurice Emmanuel, *Histoire de la langue musicale* (Paris, 1981), iii. [This is a reprint of the publication of 1911 using the same plates, with additional prefaces.]

of the records changed.<sup>9</sup> He is not mentioned anywhere in the register of classes for the academic year 1919-20.<sup>10</sup> This inconsistency is probably of little consequence, since it is perfectly possible that he audited classes in the academic year 1919-20 and so might legitimately have considered himself to be studying at the Conservatoire whilst not appearing in the official records. Indeed, when discussing his studies at the Conservatoire, Messiaen mentioned private lessons with Noël Gallon spanning approximately ten years: perhaps these began in 1919.<sup>11</sup> However, the inconsistency does emphasise that archives may yet have new insights to offer. Table 1 [page 31] provides a version that is based on the historical records of the Conservatoire and includes classes and first prizes won (a fuller version with additional notes from the archives forms appendix IV).

Until the academic year 1926-27, the Conservatoire records merely fill out detail within the framework that Messiaen outlined to Samuel in the quotation above. Some of that detail bears comment – for example, Messiaen’s long study of harmony with Jean Gallon compared with his brief one-year sojourn in Caussade’s counterpoint class – but it is not until 1926-27 that there is a startling inconsistency with the composer’s account: Messiaen’s only recorded class for this year was a class in composition with Charles-Marie Widor.<sup>12</sup> In the interviews from the peak of his career, Messiaen never mentioned that he was a pupil of Widor, but his name appears unambiguously in both the record for that class and the index of the register. The details of his time in Widor’s class are obscured a little by an inconsistency in the Conservatoire records<sup>13</sup> but this inconsistency does not challenge the claim that Messiaen’s first composition teacher was not, it seems, Paul Dukas, but Charles-Marie Widor. Confirmation of this comes from his father Pierre Messiaen, in the latter’s memoirs:

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<sup>9</sup> F-Pan, Fonds AJ<sup>37</sup> 144 *Tableau annuel des classes. Première Serie 1920-21*.

<sup>10</sup> F-Pan, Fonds AJ<sup>37</sup> 143 *Tableau annuel des classes. Première Serie 1919-20*. Intriguingly, Messiaen told Antoine Goléa that he was eleven when he entered the Conservatoire which effectively contradicts his own statement that he enrolled in 1919, since he only turned eleven on 10 December 1919 [Antoine Goléa, *Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1960), 27.] Both of Messiaen’s statements cannot be true unless he was enrolled between 10 December 1919 and 1 January 1920, which seems very unlikely.

<sup>11</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d’Olivier Messiaen*, 187.

<sup>12</sup> F-Pan, Fonds AJ<sup>37</sup> 490 *Tableau annuel des classes. Première Serie 1926-27*.

<sup>13</sup> The record for Widor’s class in the academic year 1926-27 states that Messiaen joined it on 26 Jan 1926, that is, half way through the previous academic year. In Oct 1927, Widor retired from teaching at the Conservatoire, and Paul Dukas took over, with the student records being carried on from Widor’s classes. The record for Messiaen’s first year with Dukas, however, states that he joined the composition class on 26 Jan 1927, a year later than previously recorded.



|                                              |                                                                     |                                                      |                                                               |                                                                    |                                                |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| 1919-1920                                    |                                                                     |                                                      |                                                               |                                                                    |                                                |
| [Messiaen not enrolled at the Conservatoire] |                                                                     |                                                      |                                                               |                                                                    |                                                |
| 1920-1921                                    | Preparatory Piano<br>(Falkenberg)                                   |                                                      |                                                               |                                                                    |                                                |
| 1921-1922                                    | Preparatory Piano<br>(Falkenberg)                                   | Harmony<br>(J. Gallon)                               |                                                               |                                                                    |                                                |
| 1922-1923                                    | Preparatory Piano<br>(Falkenberg)<br><i>1<sup>er</sup> Médaille</i> | Harmony<br>(J. Gallon)                               |                                                               |                                                                    |                                                |
| 1923-1924                                    |                                                                     | Harmony<br>(J. Gallon)                               | Piano Accompaniment<br>(Estyle)                               |                                                                    |                                                |
| 1924-1925                                    |                                                                     | Harmony<br>(J. Gallon)                               | Piano Accompaniment<br>(Estyle)<br><i>1<sup>er</sup> Prix</i> |                                                                    |                                                |
| 1925-1926                                    |                                                                     | Harmony<br>(J. Gallon)<br><i>1<sup>er</sup> Prix</i> |                                                               | Counterpoint and Fugue<br>(Caussade)<br><i>1<sup>er</sup> Prix</i> |                                                |
| 1926-1927                                    |                                                                     |                                                      |                                                               | Composition<br>(Widor)                                             |                                                |
| 1927-1928                                    |                                                                     |                                                      |                                                               | Composition<br>(Dukas)                                             | Organ<br>(Dupre)                               |
| 1928-1929                                    |                                                                     |                                                      |                                                               | Composition<br>(Dukas)                                             | Organ<br>(Dupre)<br><i>1<sup>er</sup> Prix</i> |
| 1929-1930                                    |                                                                     |                                                      |                                                               | Composition<br>(Dukas)<br><i>1<sup>er</sup> Prix</i>               |                                                |
| 1930-1931                                    |                                                                     |                                                      |                                                               |                                                                    |                                                |
| [Messiaen not enrolled at the Conservatoire] |                                                                     |                                                      |                                                               |                                                                    |                                                |

Table 1: Messiaen’s classes as confirmed in the *Tableau annuel des classes*.

Le pianiste Gontran Arcouet, l'organiste Joseph de Gibon le prirent en amitié et lui enseignèrent les éléments techniques qu'il poussa ensuite plus avant, au Conservatoire de Paris, avec des maîtres tels que Jean et Noël Gallon, Marcel Dupré, C.-M. Widor, Paul Dukas.<sup>14</sup>

The pianist Gontran Arcouet and the organist Joseph de Gibon befriended him and taught him technical elements that he then later developed at the Paris Conservatoire, with such professors as Jean and Noel Gallon, Marcel Dupre, C.-M. Widor, Paul Dukas.

I will return later to Messiaen's relationship with Widor. In October 1929, Messiaen enrolled for his final year at the Conservatoire, studying with Dukas and successfully winning the *1<sup>er</sup> Prix* in composition that had eluded him the previous year. He entered the *Prix de Rome* in the spring of 1930 with a choral setting of 'La Sainte-Bohème' from *Odes funambulesques* by Théodore de Banville.<sup>15</sup> Inscribing meaning into small details, Pierrette Mari highlights its second line: 'Nous sommes frères des oiseaux';<sup>16</sup> despite this apparent omen, Messiaen was not admitted to the second round.

Messiaen's name does not appear in the Conservatoire's register of classes for the following year, but he seems to have maintained close contact with his teachers and fellow students, and in the competition of spring 1931 attempted the *Prix de Rome* for a second time.<sup>17</sup> The text set was *La Jeunesse des Vieux*, and this time Messiaen progressed successfully to the second round, for which he composed the cantata *L'Ensorceleuse*. Unfortunately, he again failed to satisfy the judges and did not win any prize. With this failure, Messiaen's formal association with the Conservatoire was over, though he maintained close contact with friends and teachers. A letter to Claude Arrieu of 4 November 1931, some eighteen months after he had officially completed his studies, speaks of the difficulties of getting to Dukas's class with any regularity because of his busy schedule.<sup>18</sup> Messiaen also kept in close contact with Dupré, but his time as a student of the Conservatoire had ended.

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<sup>14</sup> Pierre Messiaen, *Etudes* (Paris, 1943), 221. Further confirmation comes from recently published letters associated with Messiaen's appointment at La Trinité. See: Nigel Simeone, "'Chez Messiaen, tout est prière': Messiaen's appointment at the Trinité", *Musical Times* (Winter 2004), 38.

<sup>15</sup> F-Pc, Médiathèque du Conservatoire, Cons. D8038. [Archives of the *Prix de Rome*].

<sup>16</sup> Pierrette Mari, *Messiaen* (Paris, 1965), 16.

<sup>17</sup> F-Pc, Médiathèque du Conservatoire, Cons. D8038. [Archives of the *Prix de Rome*].

<sup>18</sup> F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, N.L.a. 27 (021-1). [Letter sent 4 Nov 1931.]

## Messiaen's Daily Life

Messiaen's home from the time of his arrival in Paris until shortly after his marriage to Claire Delbos in 1932 was at 65 Rue Rambuteau, in the fourth *arrondissement*, about 15 minutes brisk walk from where his father Pierre taught, at the Lycée Charlemagne in Rue Charlemagne. Rue Rambuteau runs east-west through the market district of the Marais, and today skirts the north end of the Place Georges Pompidou with its clutch of iconic arts institutions. Despite massive redevelopment in the area, Messiaen's house still stands. The Marais had, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, been a fashionable district – and has become so again – but in the 1920s and 1930s it was decidedly less up-market. Photographs of the time show Rue Rambuteau as a bustling commercial street busy with shopkeepers and assistants, stallholders, craftsmen and workmen, in addition to shoppers and passersby. As well as being the location of the important Parisian markets of Les Halles, Le Carreau du Temple and Les Enfants Rouges, the *arrondissement* was home to a wide range of trading craftsmen such as printers, engravers and furniture makers (including the charmingly titled *Au Lit d'or*, just a few steps from the young Messiaen's front door, at 60 Rue Rambuteau).

This was a distinctive and cosmopolitan district of Paris, and Pierre Messiaen's description of the vibrant diversity of the Lycée Charlemagne gives an indication of the district in which Messiaen lived as a teenager and young adult. The school was home to the children of many immigrant families:

Arrivés de Pologne, de Russie, de Hongrie, de Roumanie. parlant à peine le français, fabricants de casquettes ou de chapeaux, tailleurs, merciers. Leurs camarades chrétiens les traitaient en camarades, sans aucune arrière-pensée.<sup>19</sup>

Arrivals from Poland, Russia, Hungary, Romania, hardly speaking French, cap and hat makers, tailors and haberdashers. Their Christian comrades treated them as comrades without a second thought.

For a picture of Messiaen's home at Rue Rambuteau, we may also turn to a contemporary source. Such was Messiaen's promise, he was included in the second volume of a series of 'portraits' of musicians by Jose Bruyr published in 1933, but from an interview given in October 1931, possibly Messiaen's first such interview. Bruyr met Messiaen in his home, and introduces his subject with a detailed description of the flat:

Une suspension au centre d'une table ronde a ralongs. Un buffet ou l'on doit serrer des bouquins et des paroissiens dans les tiroirs; un piano droit avec un long banc d'orgue ; au mur, quelques pieuses images. Me tromperais-je de beaucoup sur les details de cet interieur? L'atmosphere y est. En plein Marai – la rue coule en brouhaha, dans une odeur de legume et de naphto-benzol.<sup>20</sup>

Something is hanging over the centre of a round, extending table; there is a cabinet in which books and missals are lined up on the shelves; and an upright piano with a long organ bench; on the wall, some devotional images. Am I mistaken about some of the details of this interior? Well, the atmosphere is right. The house is in the heart of the Marais – the road bustles with activity, with the smell of vegetables and of petrol fumes.<sup>21</sup>

A photograph from about the same time shows Messiaen in the room described by Bruyr, seated at a pedalier, which, bedecked with candelabra, photographs and ornaments, seems entirely of a piece with what we can see of the rest of the room: a low, heavy fireplace with a mirror above, richly-toned decoration and a dining chair in muted *art nouveau*. It is the sort of room that we might now associate with the *fin-de-siècle* rather the decade of sleek *art deco*. However, it might be misleading to conclude that Messiaen was in some way living in uncharacteristically old-fashioned style. In his study of the 1930s, Eugen Weber argues that France (and even Paris, despite the gulf between metropolitan and provincial France) was in many ways – especially physically and socially – a nineteenth-century society. The beacons with which musicologists, art historians or those with a special interest in cultural life are tempted to plot the course of artistic life in the 1920s and 1930s – Cubism, Jazz-hot, Les Six, Le Corbusier – were relatively insignificant in the daily life of the people.<sup>22</sup> Even wider material progress in areas such as technological innovation, improved communications and transport had, Weber argues by reference to a range of data, little impact on the daily life of the French. The photograph of Messiaen at the piano in the Rue Rambuteau flat might be seen as a reflection of the dislocation that existed between daily life and the high aesthetic aspirations of France's artists.

If Messiaen attended the nearest church, St. Eustache (where the first performance of Berlioz's *Te Deum* took place in 1855), he would have been able to hear noted improvisor

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<sup>19</sup> Pierre Messiaen, *Etudes*, 224.

<sup>20</sup> José Bruyr, *L'Ecran des musiciens, seconde série*, 124.

<sup>21</sup> Nigel Simeone, 'Offrandes oubliées 2: Messiaen, Boulanger, and José Bruyr', *Musical Times* (Spring 2001), 20.

<sup>22</sup> Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (London and New York, 1994), 7; *ibid.*, 55-85.

Charles Bonnet, but he was no great distance from the great Parisian churches: St. Sulpice, where he could hear Widor, and Notre-Dame, where he could hear Vierne, were an easy walk from the Rue Rambuteau, though Ste. Clotilde, where Tournemire was titular, was a little further. Whilst Messiaen said he was born a Catholic, neither of his parents were believers. If this apparent paradox now seems curious, we can in fact see it as reflecting a wider change in French life between the wars, which saw a resurgence in churchgoing, the training of priests and a general interest in the spiritual that Weber has called 'the Indian Summer of French Christendom'.<sup>23</sup>

After his marriage to Claire Delbos in 1932, Messiaen and Delbos moved to an apartment at 77 Rue des Plantes in the 14<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, near the Porte d'Orleans in the south of the city (now close to the Boulevard périphérique) This was a very long walk or a substantial metro journey from the city's concert venues and from La Trinité, and, though the building no longer stands to offer confirmation, it was probably a rather small apartment since the birth of their son Pascal, on the *fête nationale* in July 1937, precipitated a move in 1938 north across the city to the 19<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, to 13 Villa du Danube, where they lived until Claire's death in 1959.

## Wider Life

My brief comment above about the dislocation between daily life and aesthetic aspirations requires elaboration. Paul Griffiths sets the artistic context for the 1920s thus:

There is a feeling of immediate familiarity to the decade of Messiaen's studies at the Conservatoire: this was Paris in the twenties, the age of Stravinsky and clean-cut neoclassicism, of jazz and cabaret, of Cocteau and Les Six, and of the chic second phase of the Ballets Russes.<sup>24</sup>

Griffiths goes on to explain that these 'familiar' aspects of the musical life of 1920s Paris tell only a part of the story and then leads his reader through a parallel Paris, focussed on certain religious and educational institutions and a particular cast of musical thinking that, he says, seems a more relevant context for Messiaen's development,

Griffiths's point about the apparent 'familiarity' of 1920s Paris is well made: the

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, 186.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (London and Boston, 1985), 24.

1930s also seem well-trodden ground; the musical life of interwar Paris can appear relatively coherent and purposeful as it is presented in histories of 20<sup>th</sup> century music history. In general histories, however, this sense of coherence is entirely absent: everyday life seems much more fragmented, less purposeful, and strongly governed by transitory political movements and frequent economic and social crises.

The social unrest that bubbled violently to the surface only too frequently in the 1930s would doubtless have had a considerable impact on daily life in Paris. Weber conveys vividly the reality of such unrest:

In January 1934 the first issue of the popular magazine *Détective* featured a cover showing the terrified face of a blonde: '1934 opens anxious, panicked eyes on a future heavy with hatred, tragedies and catastrophes.' Jitters spread fast. [...] A taxi strike and the threat of more rioting caused the postponement of the year's major social charity event, the Bal des Petits Lits Blancs, which had been scheduled for February 6. Then, in the late afternoon of that Tuesday, while Daladier sought and received majority approval for his cabinet, all the forces of discontent marched on the Chamber of Deputies. Leagues, veterans heavy with decorations beneath a sea of banners, down-at-heel taxpayers converged on the place de la Concorde from which a bridge that had just been broadened crossed the Seine to the Palais Bourbon. On that bridge, at least during the first crucial hours, stood a thin screen of guards, fewer than two hundred, with no weapon heavier than the regulation pistol, to bar the way to thousands of demonstrators determined to break into the Assembly. [...] That Tuesday evening and long into the night, as one rioting wave after another broke on the Concorde bridge, as kiosks and overturned buses flared on the square and near it, as the 'Internationale' of participating Communists mingled with the 'Marseillaise,' [*sic*] fifteen people died and fifteen hundred were wounded.<sup>25</sup>

We might imagine that such disturbances would have considerable impact on the musical life of the city, which depended to a considerable extent on the transit and gathering together of groups of people, large or small, whether to attend conservatoire classes, rehearsals, concerts, or even committee meetings of concert organisations. The effect of such disturbances on concert going and giving is, however, difficult to gauge; issues of the weekly *Guide du concert* for February 1934, for example, give no indication whatsoever that the events described by Weber had a knock-on effect on the musical life of the city.<sup>26</sup> However, it is

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<sup>25</sup> Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s*, 134-136.

<sup>26</sup> See: *Guide de concert* Vol. xx No.18 (2 Feb 1934); *Guide de concert* Vol. xx No.19 (9 Feb 1934); *Guide de concert* Vol. xx No.20 (16 Feb 1934); *Guide de concert* Vol. xx No. 21 (23 Feb 1934). On the other hand, the number of Messiaen concerts (either performed by him or including his music) is less in the season 1933-34 than in surrounding years: where I have traced 8 such concerts for the 1932-33 season (running approximately November to June) and 8 for the season 1934-35, I can find only 2 for the 1933-34 season. There is no evidence of cancelled concerts, however, and so the hypothesis that musical life was not disturbed by political events must

against this turbulent political backdrop that the familiar-seeming musical life of Paris was played out.

## The Cultural Landscape

The period between the two world wars, with its profusion of composers' groups, societies, institutional factions and opposing aesthetic currents, suggests a factionalised musical society. There is a good deal of evidence to support this first impression, from the manifestos and polemics of various composers and aestheticians, to the opposing currents in musical criticism and the performing tendencies and preferences of the different orchestras. It is worth laying out some of these elements here to show the background against which the discussions that are given later in the thesis occurred.

The educational institutions have already been mentioned, but they may be briefly revisited because they seem to have espoused slightly different ideological positions. Traditionally, the state-sponsored conservatoire has been seen as primarily concerned with turning out performers and composers, perhaps at the expense of a broader musical education. Certainly, contextual studies for the performer or composer, such as, for example, the study of the history of music, came to conservatoire only late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Against this backdrop, the Schola Cantorum, founded by Vincent d'Indy, took pride in inculcating in its students a sense of the majestic sweep of a unified, contiguous and elegantly unfolding music history, resplendent with musical masterpieces reflecting summits of achievement. In 1900, in a lecture inaugurating the Schola's new building, Vincent d'Indy clearly painted his institution as standing opposite the callow conservatoire.<sup>27</sup> Some commentators, such as Jane Fulcher, have seen the contrasts between the two institutions in broader ideological terms, claiming that the Schola 'helped to associate specific musical values, genres, and works with an anti-Republican stance', whilst the Conservatoire represented the 'state'.<sup>28</sup>

On the more verifiable grounds of musical pedagogy at least, the differences between the two institutions seem to be rapidly melting away between the wars. Evidence for this diminution in the divide between the two institutions comes in shape of the large number of

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stand.

<sup>27</sup> Vincent d'Indy, 'Une Ecole d'art répondant aux besoins modernes', *La Tribune de Saint-Gervais* (Nov 1900), 303-314.

<sup>28</sup> Jane Fulcher, 'Musical Style, Meaning, and Politics in France on the Eve of the Second World War', *The Journal of Musicology* Vol. 13 No. 4 (Fall 1995), 438.

shared staff (Messiaen's music history teacher Maurice Emmanuel being an example) and the number of musicians (like Messiaen himself, and Daniel-Lesur<sup>29</sup>), who had a foot in both camps. Conclusive evidence of a *rapprochement* between the two institutions came in 1935, with the formation of the Ecole César Franck by a group of more conservative members of the Schola staff, partly in response to what they saw as the radicalism of the newer, younger, members of staff (including Messiaen), many of whom had been conservatoire trained. Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that the ideological divide between the two main training institutions was diminishing through the 1920s and 30s.

The professional musical landscape of the time was dominated by the orchestras, the opera and the theatres. Roger Nichols gives a useful survey of the Parisian orchestral scene in the interwar period, underlines its importance in the musical life of the capital and suggests that this indicated a conservative streak in the concert-going public:

The main Paris orchestras after the [first world] war were four in number – three of whom had been operating in 1914, while one was a revival from thirty years before that. The fact that they continued to hold the premier positions in the city's musical life until 1939 speaks perhaps for their musical standards but more certainly for the loyalty of a large number of the concert-going public to institutions and conductors they knew and trusted.<sup>30</sup>

Proceeding from the eldest to the youngest, the four orchestras that Nichols goes on to discuss are the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire (the oldest and perhaps most conservative of the four, preferring, as a contemporary review that Nichols quotes puts it, 'to lend itself to hallowed works'<sup>31</sup>); the Concerts Colonne (which, under conductor Gabriel Pierné, was rather more adventurous even before unappreciative audiences); the Concerts Lamoureux (which, by the 1920s, was programming mainly French music by composers such as d'Indy, Caplet and Ropartz); and finally the itinerant Concerts Padeloup (a revival from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that was not considered to offer the best performances).<sup>32</sup> Although there is scant evidence of Messiaen's concert-going habits in his student days, there is little doubt that Messiaen would have attended concerts by most if not all of these orchestras. Indeed, he later recalled in conversation with Claude Samuel a particularly memorable concert of the Concerts Colonne

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<sup>29</sup> 'Daniel-Lesur' is used throughout in preference to 'Daniel Lesur' (a frequently used form), since the composer's full name was Jean Yves Daniel-Lesur and he used the hyphenated form throughout the period under consideration in this thesis.

<sup>30</sup> Roger Nichols, *The Harlequin Years: Music in Paris, 1917-1929* (London, 2002), 41.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, 42.



(so memorable, in fact, that Nichols also mentions and dates this concert, which took place on 24 October 1920<sup>33</sup>):

Je me souviens d'avoir assisté, aux Concerts Colonne, à la création de *Protée* (j'avais douze ans): le public a tellement sifflé qu'on ne pouvait pas entendre une note. À la fin, Gabriel Pierné, qui dirigeait l'œuvre, s'est retourné et a dit: 'L'œuvre était inscrite au programme; elle a été exécutée. Et elle va l'être une seconde fois.' Les huées ont repris.<sup>34</sup>

I remember attending the *première* of *Protée* at the Concerts Colonne (I was twelve): the audience booed so loudly, you couldn't hear a single note. At the end, Gabriel Pierné, who had conducted the work, turned around and said: 'The piece was listed on the program; it was performed. And it shall be a second time.' The booing started up again.<sup>35</sup>

These well-established orchestras were clearly an important part of the musical landscape in which Messiaen studied and began his career, but they represent an almost self-contained world into which it would have been far from easy for a young composer to break. Almost on cue, however, two further orchestras appeared during Messiaen's time at the Conservatoire, and it was these orchestras that were to have a decisive impact on Messiaen's early output.

The first of these was the orchestra founded in 1923 by Walter Straram, which cherry-picked some of the finest players from the other Parisian orchestras and, with support from a rich American patron, was able to programme adventurously. Straram directed the *première* of Messiaen's *Les Offrandes oubliées* in 1931 (which might be considered Messiaen's *début*) and his *Le Tombeau resplendissant* in 1933, shortly before his own death later in that year. Straram's orchestra was held in the highest regard, being chosen by Toscanini for his Parisian concerts from 1932, and also selected by Stravinsky for the first recording of *Le Sacre du printemps*.<sup>36</sup>

The wider performing and programming tendencies of the Parisian orchestras has been surveyed by Eric Benoist, who has compared the programmes of the *grands concerts* for the seasons 1930-1931 and 1937-1938.<sup>37</sup> His work reveals the context for Messiaen's early

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, 41-44.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, 43. See also: Darius Milhaud, *Notes sans musique* (Paris, 1949), 119-120.

<sup>34</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Oliver Messiaen*, 189.

<sup>35</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Olivier Messiaen: Musique et couleur* (Paris, 1986); Eng. edn. *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, tr. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland OR, 1994), 113. Translation amended.

<sup>36</sup> Roger Nichols, *The Harlequin Years: Music in Paris, 1917-1929*, 52. Jean-Charles Hoffelé, sleeve notes for recording: *L'Orchestre des Concerts Walther Straram* (Paris, 1999), 7. [Lys 531-532]

<sup>37</sup> Eric Benoist, 'Les Grands Concerts parisiens', *Musiques et musiciens à Paris dans les années trente*, ed.

orchestral performances. In the season 1930-1931, there were 224 *grands concerts* containing a total of 1145 works, which included 59 (5%) first performances, 27 (46%) of which were by French composers (and one of which was the performance of Messiaen's *Les Offrandes oubliées* mentioned above). Messiaen's performance takes its place among 123 performances of music by Wagner, 96 of music by Beethoven, 57 of music by Debussy, 54 of music by Mozart; and 43 of music by Ravel, to cite only the five most-played composers that year.<sup>38</sup> According to Benoist's work, the season 1937-1938 seems to suggest a certain decline in the activity of the *grands concerts* through the 1930s, but with a increase in the relative importance of new music by French composers: there were 194 concerts in total (14% less than in 1930-1931), performing 1036 works, of which 52 (5%, as in 1930-1931) were first performances, with 37 of these (71%) by French composers.<sup>39</sup> Despite the apparent increase in performances of new music by French composers, the programmes remained comparable with the 1930-1931 season – among the five most-performed composers in 1937-1938, Wagner remained the most performed, with 105 performances. Beethoven, Mozart and Ravel remain in the top 5, whilst Debussy cedes his place to Liszt.<sup>40</sup>

A survey of any music journal of the time shows, however, that orchestras, despite their importance as cultural touchstones, were only a part of the musical scene. Despite the relatively large number of orchestras, opportunities for composers to have new music performed by them were relatively rare. More important in the new music scene were the numerous chamber music concerts and societies.

Such societies were much more explicit in their aesthetic preferences than the orchestras – doubtless partly because they did not need to rely on mass appeal to fill large concert halls and could play to a more distinct taste – and may be split up here for convenience into those that were ostensibly unassociated with a particular group of composers, such as the Société Nationale (SN) and the Société Musicale Indépendante (SMI), and those that more or less united behind a smaller group of composers.

The SN was formed in 1871 for the promotion of French chamber music, but by the early years of the twentieth century, it was seen by some as partisan and conservative, prompting the creation in 1909 of the SMI in opposition. Michel Duchesneau has undertaken

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Danièle Pistone (Paris, 2000), 259-270.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, 265-267.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, 268-270.

<sup>40</sup> There were 105 performances of Wagner, 97 of Beethoven, 73 of Ravel, 50 of Mozart, 36 of Liszt and 34 of Debussy. The number of Ravel performances is probably not typical of concerts at the end of the 1930s, since

thorough work on the two Societies and has explained in detail their associations with the Schola (SN) and Conservatoire (SMI):

Il est incontestable que les compositeurs issus de la Schola occupent une place importante dans la programmation de la SN. Le nombre des œuvres de Bréville, Labey, Le Flem, Orban, Roussel et Samazeuilh et la quasi-exclusivité de leur présence dans les programmes de la SN confirment le lien étroit entre l'institution et la société. La relation entre le Conservatoire et la SMI est intimement liée à la présidence de la société assurée par Fauré, qui est aussi directeur du Conservatoire; elle tient aussi au rôle de plusieurs de ses élèves dans les activités de la société. Mais, si le lien Schola-SN est très apparent dans les programmes, le lien Conservatoire-SMI est plus tenu, car il s'accompagne de multiples orientations d'écoles étrangères.<sup>41</sup>

It is incontestable that composers from the Schola occupy an important place in the programmes of the SN. The number of works by Bréville, Labey, Le Flem, Orban, Roussel and Samazeuilh, and the near-exclusivity of their presence in the SN programmes confirms the explicit link between the institution and the society. The relationship between the Conservatoire and the SMI is closely connected with the presidency of the society, a role taken by Fauré who was also director of the Conservatoire; it is also seen in the roles that many of his students took in the activities of the society. But, if the Schola-SN connection is evident from the programming, the link between with Conservatoire and the SMI is less clear, for it is accompanied by the diverse approaches of foreign styles.

The SN and the SMI were then, for many years, politically and musically opposed, with the SN aligned with the more conservative aesthetic espoused by Vincent d'Indy at the Schola Cantorum, and the SMI run by those who considered themselves 'independent', but who were often associated with the Conservatoire. In practice, however, many composers had music played in both societies, and by the early 1930s (which saw the SMI fall into what would prove a terminal decline), the aesthetic differences had essentially evaporated. Messiaen had music performed in both the concerts of the SN and SMI, but he was most closely involved in the SN. Nonetheless, Michel Duchesneau claims that Messiaen's involvement with the SN bore witness to his association with the Schola through the mediation of his Conservatoire teacher Maurice Emmanuel, who also taught at the Schola.<sup>42</sup> Messiaen's own appointment at that institution came some years after his involvement with the SN began, but his regard for the aesthetic ideas of Vincent d'Indy, to which we will return, might also have precipitated an early drift towards the Schola's sphere of influence. The first performance of Messiaen's

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Ravel died during this season and a large number of tribute performances were undertaken. See: *ibid.*, 265-270.

<sup>41</sup> Michel Duchesneau, *L'Avant-garde musicale à Paris de 1871 à 1939* (Liège, 1997), 187-188.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, 195.

music under the aegis of the SN took place in March 1930, when his *Préludes* were premiered by Henriette Roget, and items from Messiaen's rather limited chamber music catalogue were a fairly regular feature of SN concerts from that time on.<sup>43</sup> Messiaen was a member of the committee of the SN from 1933 onwards, and continued to participate in the society administratively and musically throughout the 1930s. In a neat piece of circumstantial symmetry, the final concert given by the society (shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War) also incorporated a performance of his *Préludes*.<sup>44</sup>

Messiaen's involvement with the SMI was much more limited, comprising only two concerts in the final years of the society. Both of these were premières: *La Mort du nombre* was performed in 1931, and the *Fantaisie burlesque* was performed in February 1933 by Robert Casadesus. On these occasions, the performances were co-ordinated by Nadia Boulanger (a stalwart of the SMI) with whom he corresponded over the details of the performances.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, 291.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, 304.

<sup>45</sup> This was before the misunderstanding that led to their troubled relationship. For details, see: Nigel Simeone, 'Offrandes oubliées 2: Messiaen, Boulanger, and José Bruyr', 17-22. Jérôme Spycket's account of this episode in his monograph on Nadia Boulanger misrepresents Messiaen. Spycket writes the *La Mort du nombre* was to be performed 'with the composer himself at the piano: "No one ever at the piano but me', he had stipulated." In fact, 'stipulated' is rather misleading, since this statement is included in a letter to Boulanger written because the other performers had to be changed several times. Messiaen was simply assuring her that he would definitely be playing the piano part. See: Jérôme Spycket, *Nadia Boulanger* (Stuyvesant NY, 1992), 74.

### 3 Messiaen and the Press

#### The Musical Press

A thorough investigation of the French musical press of the 1930s, or a detailed analysis of Messiaen's critical reception, are not central aims of this thesis. Nevertheless, in order to understand Messiaen's journalism and the progress of his burgeoning career, it is necessary to consider at least briefly the main features in the landscape of French music writing.

Most Parisian daily newspapers contained an element of music criticism, though often more space was devoted to advertising forthcoming concerts than reviewing those past. As an illustration of this tendency it may be noted that in early 1933, *Le Figaro* printed no fewer than 5 adverts for various concerts featuring Messiaen's music (including the première of *Hymne au Saint-Sacrement* and a repeat performance, erroneously advertised as a *première audition*, of *Les Offrandes oubliées*) without producing a single review of his music.

The specialist musical press was substantial. Roger Nichols suggests that as many as 29 music journals were in publication in 1917 and whilst some (such as the *Tribune de Saint-Gervais*) had folded by the 1930s, there was still a strong field of such journals, supplemented by the appearance of new papers such as *La Page musicale* and *L'Art musical*, both in 1936. Quantity of copy and advertising are by no means sure indicators of widespread readership, but if they are used as an informal means of comparing the relative importance of journals, then four publications seem to bear particular mention.

*Le Ménestrel* and *Le Courrier musical* were both devoted to music and theatre reviews and *nouvelles* with some more discursive essays. *Le Ménestrel*, published weekly, was owned by the music publisher Heugel and was edited by Jacques Heugel. *Le Courrier musical*, published twice-monthly until it closed in August 1935, was independent and, according to Nigel Simeone 'notable for the thoroughness of its coverage and the high quality of its critics (including Tournemire and Vierne, among others)'.<sup>1</sup>

*La Revue musicale* was a monthly serial, directed and edited by Henry Prunières. It was initially associated with the SMI, and contained some reviews, but had a format that allowed room to a greater number of essays dealing with the musical questions of the day in such fields as contemporary aesthetics, historical revival, new technological developments, as well as special numbers on individual composers. In the 1920s and 30s, the *Revue* also came

with a separate section containing concert notices, adverts and, intriguingly, a 'review of reviews' that aimed to keep subscribers up to date with the musings of other journals by offering condensed accounts of their articles. This section was evidently considered to be ephemeral: it was printed on newsprint rather than the higher quality laid paper of the main journal and was either physically separate from the main journal or only loosely bound with it (many of the bound runs of *La Revue musicale* now held in libraries do not include this section).

Finally, *Le Monde musical* was a fortnightly journal, publishing a range of articles that fell somewhere between the extremes of the weekly and monthly journals: *Le Monde musical* included a large number of concert reviews together with discursive essays and what appears to be a proportionately greater number of publication reviews than the weeklies. It also published an occasional *Album musical*, generally containing extracts of unpublished works by contemporary composers.

### **Messiaen and the Press: Reception**

Messiaen's reception in the musical press began before he had left the Conservatoire. The earliest published reviews that I have been able to trace date from 1930: a review in *Le Ménestrel* of the first performance of Messiaen's *Préludes* by Henriette Roget on 1 March,<sup>2</sup> and a discussion of an orchestral version of *Le Banquet céleste* performed at the Conservatoire on 22 January:

Puis on entendit avec une sympathie justifiée un poème symphonique de M. Messiaen élève de la classe de composition de M. Paul Dukas, *Le Banquet céleste*, qui trahit évidemment encore – ainsi qu'il est bien naturel – l'influence de maîtres au moins toujours bien choisis. Mais il affirme aussi un désir d'ampleur, un sens de l'orchestre, et une fermeté de dessin, qui sont, surtout à l'heure actuelle, des qualités auxquelles on ne saurait attacher trop de prix. M. Messiaen a, heureusement, la vie devant lui pour développer son sentiment personnel et consacrer à l'expression de sa sensibilité un métier qui semble déjà assuré.

Then we heard with a justified sympathy a symphonic poem by M. Messiaen, student in M. Paul Dukas's composition class : *Le Banquet céleste*. If it still reveals – as is entirely natural – the influence of predecessors, these are at least well-chosen. But it also demonstrated a desire for grand scale, a feeling for the orchestra and a structural sureness that are, especially at the current time, qualities to which we cannot attach too

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<sup>1</sup> Nigel Simeone, *Olivier Messiaen: A Bibliographical Catalogue of Messiaen's Works* (Tutzing, 1998), 203.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Baruzi, 'Société Nationale de Musique (1<sup>er</sup> mars)', *Le Ménestrel* (7 Mar 1930), 110.

great an importance. Fortunately M. Messiaen has his life before him to develop his personal sentiment and devote to the expression of his sensibility a craftsmanship that already seems assured.<sup>3</sup>

Gustave Samazeuilh was something of a champion of Messiaen in this earliest phase of his career, and it is particularly interesting to note his reference to Messiaen's skills being prized 'at the present time', suggesting a certain dissatisfaction with current trends. Samazeuilh took up Messiaen's case more explicitly when it came to the way he fared with his *Prix de Rome* entries. Writing in *Le Courrier musical*, Samazeuilh made no secret of his dismay at Messiaen's failure to win the *prix*. In an article entitled 'Le Concours de Rome 1930: Ce qu'il pourrait être – Ce qu'il est', he praised Messiaen's work and potential.<sup>4</sup> The following year, Samazeuilh once more expressed his anger at the judgment in a further report for *Le Courrier musical*:

Il m'est impossible de souscrire à la sévérité singulière du jugement de l'Institut, refusant toute récompense à M. Olivier Messiaen, élève de M. Paul Dukas, la nature la plus musicale du concours, le seul qui, à mon sens, ait donné à sa composition une construction poétique, qui y ait prouvée – en particulier dans son duo aux exquises inflections qui eussent enchanté Emmanuel Chabrier – un don inventif de qualité rare.<sup>5</sup>

It is impossible for me to subscribe to the singularly severe judgment of the Institute, refusing any acknowledgement to M. Olivier Messiaen, student of M. Paul Dukas, the most musical of the competitors, and the only one who, in my opinion, gave his composition a poetic construction, something that revealed – especially in the duet, with its exquisite inflections which would have delighted Emmanuel Chabrier – a gift of invention of rare quality.

The cantata was performed on 4 July 1931 in the Académie des Beaux-Arts, and prompted a review in *Le Ménestrel* that questioned its construction but singled out Messiaen as 'one to watch':

M. Messiaen, qu'anime une vie intérieure intense, n'est plus à l'aise dès qu'entre en jeu le conflit des faits et le choc des sentiments humains, et c'est pourquoi sa cantate donne une impression de déséquilibre un peu chaotique, non exempt d'ailleurs de monotone. Néanmoins, retentons son nom. Il est douteux qu'il illustre la musique

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<sup>3</sup> Gustave Samzeuilh, 'Exercice des élèves du conservatoire', *La Revue musicale* 102 (1930), 271.

<sup>4</sup> Gustave Samazeuilh, 'Le Concours de Rome 1930: Ce qu'il pourrait être – Ce qu'il est', *Le Courrier musical* (15 Jul 1930), 475-7. Also quoted in: Nigel Simeone, *Olivier Messiaen: A Bibliographical Catalogue of Messiaen's Works*, 190.

<sup>5</sup> Gustave Samazeuilh, 'Le Prix de Rome', *Le Courrier musical* (15 Jul 1931), 461. Also quoted in: Nigel Simeone, *Olivier Messiaen: a bibliographical catalogue of Messiaen's works*, 190.

dramatique, mais je serai surpris qu'il ne se plaçât pas en haut rang dans la musique pure.<sup>6</sup>

M. Messiaen, who leads an intense inner life, is no longer at ease when he brings into play the conflicts of fate and the gamut of human emotions, and that is why his cantata gives a rather chaotic impression of imbalance, not, indeed, without monotony. Nonetheless, remember his name. It is unlikely that he will win fame through dramatic music, but I would be very surprised if he does not make a great success in pure music.

Messiaen may be considered a part of that quasi-tradition of promising and established composers who are rejected by the Institute and fail to win the *Prix de Rome*. He was, however, emphatically not rejected by the press, and throughout the 1930s, the most notable aspect of Messiaen's reception in the press is the consistency and quantity of positive reviews.

The first performance of *Les Offrandes oubliées*, which is often regarded as Messiaen's *début*, gives a useful case study. As well as reviews in the specialist press (such as those in *Le Courrier musical* and *Le Ménestrel*<sup>7</sup>), the event received extensive and approving coverage in the general press: reviews appeared in *Comœdia* (from Le Flem), *Excelsior* (Vuillermoz), *Le Figaro* (Robert Brussel), *Le Journal* (L. Aubert), *Journal des débats* (M. Imbert), *Œuvre* (R. Brunnel) and *Le Petit-journal* (P. Dambly).<sup>8</sup> In *Le Courrier musical*, Febvre-Longeray commented:

Il faudrait n'avoir aucun sens de la musique pour ne pas reconnaître un musicien, un artiste, une nature 'en profondeur' et ce qui me plaît par-dessus tout, un mystique.<sup>9</sup>

One would have to have no sense of music at all to fail to recognise a musician, an artist, a character 'with depth' and, what pleased me above all, a mystic.

In *Excelsior*, Vuillermoz urged his readers to look out for more from Messiaen: 'Il faudra suivre avec attention la carrière de ce débutant si bien doué' ('We will have to follow closely the career of this *débutant* who is so very gifted').<sup>10</sup> The impact that Messiaen and his *début*

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Bertrand, 'Concours de Rome', *Le Ménestrel* (10 Jul 1931), 304.

<sup>7</sup> A. Febvre-Longeray, 'Concerts Straram', *Le Courrier musical* (1 Mar 1931), 154; Joseph Baruzi, 'Concerts Straram', *Le Ménestrel* (27 Feb 1931), 95.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Le Flem, [review of *Les Offrandes oubliées*], *Comœdia* (23 Feb 1931); Emile Vuillermoz, [review of *Les Offrandes oubliées*], *Excelsior* (23 Feb 1931); Robert Brussel, [review of *Les Offrandes oubliées*], *Le Figaro* (24 Feb 1931); L. Aubert, [review of *Les Offrandes oubliées*], *Le Journal* (26 Feb 1931); M. Imbert, [review of *Les Offrandes oubliées*], *Journal des débats* (23 Feb 1931); R. Brunnel, [review of *Les Offrandes oubliées*], *Œuvre* (25 Feb 1931); P. Dambly, [review of *Les Offrandes oubliées*], *Le Petit-Journal* (27 Feb 1931).

<sup>9</sup> A. Febvre-Longeray, 'Concerts Straram', *Le Courrier musical* (1 Mar 1931), 154.

<sup>10</sup> Emile Vuillermoz, [review of *Les Offrandes oubliées*], *Excelsior* (23 Feb 1931).



made is revealed by the curious review in *Le Temps*, which comes a week after the concert. *Le Temps* had not covered the concert in the days immediately following it, but the composer Florent Schmitt, a regular reviewer in *Le Temps* at this time provides a short discussion of the music and its composer – and expressing his regret at having failed to attend the concert.<sup>11</sup>

## Messiaen's Writings

Messiaen was not only the subject of press coverage – he also contributed as a writer of musical journalism. Bibliographies of Messiaen's writings usually mention the composer's early articles for *La Revue musicale*. Included in these, typically, are 'Ariane et Barbe-Bleue de Paul Dukas', an eight-page commentary on Dukas's opera published in 1936;<sup>12</sup> 'Le Rythme chez Igor Strawinsky', a short article published in 1939;<sup>13</sup> and an article on Maurice Emmanuel's *Trente Chansons bourguignonnes* that was published in 1947, but probably written at the time of Emmanuel's death in 1938.<sup>14</sup>

These articles are the only early writings that appear in most bibliographies of the composer; they in fact form only a tiny proportion of Messiaen's journalistic output.<sup>15</sup> In total, Messiaen wrote just under forty articles between 1935 and 1939. In addition to those mentioned above and several 'one-off' articles for other journals, he was a regular contributor to *Le Monde musical* and *La Sirène* (later called *La Syrinx*), and had several articles published in *La Page musicale*.

The articles that Messiaen wrote for *La Revue musicale* in the 1930s are comparatively

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<sup>11</sup> Florent Schmitt, [review of *Les Offrandes oubliées*], *Le Temps* (29 Feb 1931).

<sup>12</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Ariane et Barbe-Bleue de Paul Dukas', *La Revue musicale* 166 (Jun 1936), 79-86. See: Appendix I: I/1.

<sup>13</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Le Rythme chez Igor Strawinsky', *La Revue musicale* 191 (May 1939), 91-92. See: Appendix I: I/3.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Griffiths explains:

'When [Maurice Emmanuel] was the subject of a special issue of the *Revue musicale* in 1947, Messiaen contributed a short appreciation of his *Trente chansons bourguignonnes*, [sic] op. 15, of 1913, recalling how after a performance of these folk-song arrangements he 'was amazed – and at once converted to modal music'. It would of course be interesting to know exactly when this took place. Messiaen says he was 'still a young student at the Conservatoire' but remarks that this was fifteen years ago, which would give a date of 1932, after he had left the academy and written a good few modal works of his own. However, if the article was written at the time of Emmanuel's death, the date [of Messiaen's 'conversion'] would be 1923, a much better fit. [Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (London and Boston, 1985), 27.]

<sup>15</sup> Even the most recent published bibliographies omit some of the journalism. Nigel Simeone's catalogue (which is reproduced in the *New Grove* second edition) includes some of Messiaen's early writing. See: Nigel Simeone, *Olivier Messiaen: a Bibliographic Catalogue of Messiaen's Works*. The bibliography with Nigel Simeone and Peter Hill's documentary biography is fuller. See: Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (Cambridge, 2005), 403-405.

well-known, but their significance can be understood only in the context of Messiaen's other writing. Despite the ever-increasing celebration of Messiaen as a composer, the majority of his journalism has lain undiscovered and unstudied for more than sixty years. The reasons for this are various. Compared with the very prolific journalists, like his friend and colleague Paul Le Flem, for example, Messiaen did not write a large amount and so he did not grow famous in his role as a critic. Likewise, his fame as a composer was not yet great enough in the 1930s for special attention to be drawn to his writing. The nature of the journals to which Messiaen contributed has also played a part in concealing the journalism. Some articles have been passed over because the journals in which they appeared were short-lived or obscure: this is the case for the articles written for the Belgian publication *La Sirène* and those for *La Page musicale*, a Parisian fortnightly paper. *La Sirène* was never lodged at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris while *La Page musicale* was published for just four years, between 1936 and 1939. A further reason that the journalism has remained unstudied may be the lack hitherto of detailed reception work on Messiaen. A 'Messiaen-focussed' study of the journals of the 1930s would have brought to the attention of Messiaen scholars the articles in *Le Monde musical*, which is readily available in the Bibliothèque Nationale. A final reason that the journalism has not come to light must also be admitted: Messiaen's tight control over his own story. If Messiaen had wished to draw attention to his early writing, he would surely have done so.

Between March 1937 and May 1938, Messiaen wrote twelve articles for *La Sirène*. Their content varies: eight of the articles are concert reviews, covering several concerts or concentrating on one composer or event [Figure 1, page 55]. Two articles are devoted to more general musical topics, whilst the remaining two are concerned with particular works: Jolivet's *Mana* and Tournemire's *L'Orgue mystique*. The aims of the journal are explicitly given in an editorial that accompanied the issue for December 1937 – the last issue before the journal adopted the new name of *La Sylinx*:

*Syrinx* tiendra ses lecteurs au courant des manifestations artistiques étrangères, mais entend surtout se placer sur le plan national, faire connaître en Belgique et à l'Etranger, nos artistes, nos interprètes, nos écoles.<sup>16</sup>

*Syrinx* will keep its readers up to date with artistic events in other countries, but always try to orient itself nationally, make known in Belgium and abroad, our artists, our interpreters, our schools.

The fact that the Bibliothèque Nationale did not receive the publication suggests that it achieved only limited success in this aim: it was clearly not a journal of consequence in the French capital (although it advertised at least once in *La Revue musicale*).<sup>17</sup> Its attraction to Messiaen is certainly difficult to understand in some respects, but perhaps, in 'keeping [...] readers up to date with artistic events' in Paris, Messiaen thought he would gain a professional foothold in Belgium. With the exception of the article on Tournemire (which was reprinted in the sleeve notes to Georges Delvallée's recordings of the Christmas and Easter cycles from Tournemire's *L'Orgue mystique*<sup>18</sup>) there are no references to *La Sirène* or *Syrinx* anywhere in the Messiaen literature.<sup>19</sup>

Messiaen's contributions to *Le Monde musical* were short concert and publication reviews. He wrote mainly about the organ, and between June 1936 and January 1939 published articles on a regular basis.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, he was twice given the chance to explain his own music: an article from April 1936 describes *La Nativité*, while in April 1939, Messiaen defended his *Chants de terre et de ciel* against the criticisms of one of *Le Monde musical*'s principal critics, Pierre Capdevielle. His connection with *Le Monde musical* was quite close, since he made regular contributions and had several personal friends Daniel-Lesur

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<sup>16</sup> [unsigned editorial], *La Sirène* (Dec 1937), 2.

<sup>17</sup> [advert], *La Revue musicale* 186 (1938), xxii.

<sup>18</sup> See: Nigel Simeone, *Olivier Messiaen: A Bibliographical Catalogue of Messiaen's Works*, 199.

<sup>19</sup> Messiaen was also briefly involved in a second Belgian journal: in July 1938, the first issue of the *Revue internationale de musique* appeared in Brussels giving, in a music supplement, an extract from Messiaen's *Fête des belles eaux*. Though Messiaen's name does not appear in the list of sponsors in the first issue and he did not make any written contributions, a notice in *La Revue musicale* notes that the new journal was published 'avec les signatures de [...] Olivier Messiaen' [[advert], *La Revue musicale* 185 (1938), x.]. It described itself a 'revue indépendante', but from what it was independent is not clear. Among the list of names of 'collaborators' given in the same issue, two names stand out alongside Messiaen's: Jose Bruyr (who had interviewed Messiaen in October 1931 for the second volume of his book *L'Ecran des musiciens*) and the future director of the Conservatoire, Claude Delvincourt.)

<sup>20</sup> Reviews by an 'OM' also appear in the issue of June 1933, but the evidence that these were by Messiaen is not conclusive. Stylistically, they are similar to the articles that he later wrote for *La Sirène*. However, there are reviews published in June 1934 by an Odette Malézieux, whose style is comparable, and she may also be the author of the 1933 reviews.

and Jean Langlais on the staff. His short reviews for the organ column were comparatively insubstantial, but the fact that the editors granted him the opportunity to explain and defend his own work suggests they were willing to celebrate the growing celebrity of their columnist. There only reference to Messiaen's reviews for *Le Monde musical* in any published writing is in an article by Nigel Simeone.<sup>21</sup>

## Journalistic Voices

One of the most remarkable features of Messiaen's journalism is the way he adopted a slightly different voice for each of the journals to which he contributed. The articles for *La Page musicale*, such as 'Contre la paresse', and 'Eclairages des compositeurs' are forthrightly polemical – with grandiose rhetoric to match, such as this example from a short article on religious music, published in February 1937:

Jeunes compositeurs, si vous avez la foi, marchez de l'avant; et donnez-nous des œuvres religieuses vivantes et agissantes dont l'on puisse dire ce que L'Ecriture dit des étoiles: 'Elles brillent joyeusement pour celui qui les a créées!'<sup>22</sup>

Young composers: if you believe, step out in front and write us religious works that live and inspire, and which will bring us to say of them what the Scripture says of the stars: 'With cheerfulness they shewed light unto him that made them'.<sup>23</sup>

All the *Page musicale* articles appeared on the front page of the paper, with a prominent byline: in short, they seem to play on their author's burgeoning celebrity. Although these are the articles that are most surprising in the context of our received impression of Messiaen, they are also the most personal and committed of Messiaen's early writings.

Messiaen's writings for *La Sirene* (and *Syrinx*) are more matter-of-fact. In some respects, these are the most diverse of Messiaen's articles to be gathered in one journal, but the more straightforward style that Messiaen adopts here moves easily from talking about individual concerts to the wider themes that interest him. This example comes from a review of *opéras-bouffes*

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<sup>21</sup> Nigel Simeone, 'Offrandes oubliées: Messiaen in the 1930s', *Musical Times* (Winter 2000), 33-41.

<sup>22</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Musique religieuse', *La Page musicale* (5 Feb 1937), 1. Messiaen quotes from the apocrypha: Baruch (3, xxxv). See: Appendix I: IV/4.

<sup>23</sup> Baruch (3, xxxv). See, e.g.: [...], *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* ed. and with an introduction and notes by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford, 1997), 166.

Avec *La Poule noire* de Manuel Rosenthal nous tombons en plein music-hall. Le décor de Mme. Roland-Manuel est exquis. Mlle. Nadia Daut, dans le rôle de la jeune veuve, est étourdissante de vie, d'entrain. Elle pleure avec une voix ravissante et danse le fandango le plus drôlement du monde!

Le spectacle est terminé. Je me suis bien diverti, j'ai ri quand il fallait rire, comme les autres. Et cependant je suis mécontent. Pour ne pas formuler trop haut mon mécontentement je vais poser – dans le vague – une petite question indiscreète: à mes lecteurs d'y répondre! Nous avons eu Debussy, puis Stravinsky, puis Schönberg. On attend autre chose, certes, de plus audacieux, et non un retour à Scarlatti ou à Massenet. Les opéras-bouffes de Chabrier, tout en restant tels, contenaient d'indéniables nouveautés. Pourquoi ce pas en arrière, non seulement de la musique légère, mais de beaucoup de musique tout court? Pourquoi?<sup>24</sup>

With *La Poule noire* by Manuel Rosenthal, we come to the domain of pure music-hall. The scenery, by Mme. Roland-Manuel, is exquisite. In the role of young widow, Mlle. Nadia Dauty is stunningly lively and energetic. She cries with a beautiful voice and dances the funniest fandango in the world!

However, the show ended. I was well entertained and like everyone else I laughed in all the right places. Nevertheless I am not happy. To avoid detailing my discontent out loud, I am going to pose – in very general terms – a little indiscreet question for my readers to answer! We have had Debussy, then Stravinsky, then Schoenberg. We now await new, more audacious things, of course, than a return to Scarlatti or to Massenet. Chabrier's *opéras-bouffes*, while remaining *opéras-bouffes*, contain things that were undeniably innovative. Why this time-lag, not just in light music but, simply, in lots of music. Why?

Here Messiaen touches on a theme – the question of progress in music especially with respect to neoclassicism – that he deals with elsewhere in a much more heavy-handed way (see, for example, the polemic 'Contre la paresse'). This article was written only six months after the *Page musical* piece quoted above, yet the 'tub-thumping' style is entirely absent. This less confrontational voice is still characterful, but it is more circumspect than the tone adopted for *La Page musical*. Where Messiaen ended his *Page musical* essay with a rallying call referring to scripture, this article ends with a 'little indiscreet question'.

The articles that Messiaen wrote for *Le Monde musical* reveal yet another style: professional, confraternal, even confiding at times, it is a voice that seems almost to say 'I am a musician like you'. In this extract, he discusses an organ recital by Guy Lambert:

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<sup>24</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Billet Parisien: Quatre Opéra-bouffes', *La Sirène* (Sep 1937), 11. See: Appendix I: II/6.

Programme très intéressant. Un Bach, un Franck – comme il sied – et beaucoup de moderne. A remarquer l'intelligente présentation du papillotant Scherzo de la 6<sup>e</sup> Symphonie de Vienne, des chatoyantes et mystiques harmonies de la 1<sup>er</sup> *Fiorella* [sic] de Tournemire et d'une pièce en fa dièse de Mignan, tout à fait charmante, qui nous fut offerte en bis.<sup>25</sup>

A very interesting programme. Music by Bach and Franck – as is expected – and lots of modern music. I noted his intelligent performance of the fleeting Scherzo from Vienne's sixth Symphony, the sparkling, mystical harmonies of the first *Fiorella* by Tournemire and a piece in F sharp by Mignan, altogether charming, which was offered as an encore.

This seems like Messiaen the professional musician, knowledgeable about the repertoire, showing that he understands its formulas and can recognise when they are imaginatively broken. Messiaen the teacher also makes an appearance in the reviews for *Le Monde musical*, as this example, a review of a piano sightreading textbook, shows:

Ouvrage bien fait. La musique est claire, bien harmonisé. Les difficultés se présentent peu à peu dans une gradation savamment ordonnée. Partis d'un morceau d'une facilité enfantine, nous arrivons, sans heurt, au no. 19 (charmante petite valse), et au no. 20, nanti d'arpèges, appoggiatures et broderies, d'assez sérieuse difficulté. Ce recueil rendra les plus grands services aux débutants et professeurs de lecture.<sup>26</sup>

A well-written book. The music is clear and well harmonised. Difficulties are introduced little by little in a carefully ordered gradation. Beginning with a piece of childish simplicity, we end up painlessly at nos. 19 (charming little waltz) and 20 (rich in arpeggios, appoggiaturas and embellishments and of quite serious difficulty). This collection will greatly help beginners and teachers of sight-reading.

Much of Messiaen's writing for *Le Monde musical* is related to the organ, and some articles, like this review of a didactic publication by Charles Tournemire, *Précis d'exécution de registration et d'improvisation à l'orgue*, bring together the Messiaen the professional, the teacher and the confraternal colleague. I quote this short article in full because it comprehensively demonstrates Messiaen's style in *Le Monde musical* – as well as the infectious enthusiasm that permeates much of his writing:

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<sup>25</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Récital Guy Lambert', *Le Monde musical* (30 Apr 1936), 124. See: Appendix I: III/5.

<sup>26</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Maurice Le Boucher: *Enseignement du piano. Vingt morceaux manuscrits destinés à l'étude progressive de la lecture du piano*', *Le Monde musical* (29 Feb 1936), 60. See: Appendix I: III/3.

Ecrit dans une langue à la fois poétique et mordante, savoureuse et enflammée (on pense à Léon Bloy, à Berlioz), ce traité à l'emporte-pièce est très agréable à lire. Une courte histoire de l'orgue à travers les siècles, quelques plans d'orgues, une nomenclature des jeux et familles de jeux et de leurs caractéristiques, une 'technique de l'exécution' suivie de quelques conseils sur l'interprétation des œuvres de maîtres anciens et modernes: voilà le plan des deux premiers chapitres, le 3<sup>e</sup> traite de la registration. Il existe peu d'ouvrages sur cette question si importante: ce chapitre fera donc le bonheur des organistes! Ils y trouveront de nombreux exemples de colorations diverses et nouvelles: dialogues de *bourdons*, *flûtes* ou *cornets*, *solo de gambe* et mixtures, *solo de bourdon 16* accompagné par la *voix humaine*, effets d'octaves graves et aiguës, etc. Le 4<sup>e</sup> chapitre s'intitule 'L'Art de l'improvisation'. Les cinq exemples de versets qui y figurent – et qui sont délicieux de musique! – suffisent à montrer le sens de l'effet, l'imagination débordante et l'originalité de Charles Tournemire. Ils sont suivis d'une *Fantaisie improvisée* dont les volutes et la structure sont disséquées avec soin pour la plus grande joie du lecteur. Cette *Fantaisie* est une harmonieuse combinaison des formes préexistantes (fugues, sonate, lied, chorale), fondues dans une sorte d'immense variation amplificatrice d'un même thème. Ceci est, à mon sens, le sommet de l'ouvrage.<sup>27</sup>

Written in a language that is at once poetic and forthright, spicy and fiery (one thinks of Léon Bloy and Berlioz), this punchy treatise makes very good reading. A short history of the organ through the centuries, some organ designs, a glossary of stops and families of stops and their characteristics, a 'technique of execution' followed by advice on the interpretation of some of the organ masterpieces, ancient and modern: this is the outline of the first two chapters. The third deals with registration. There exist very few works on this important subject: this chapter will be a source of joy for many organists! They will find numerous examples here of varied and innovative timbres: dialogues between *bourdons*, *flûtes* or *cornets*, *solo de gambe* and mixtures, *solo de bourdon* accompanied by the *voix humaine*, effects of low and high registers, etc. The fourth chapter is entitled 'The Art of Improvisation'. The five verset examples that comprise this chapter – and what delicious music they are! – are sufficient to demonstrate the exuberant imagination and originality of Charles Tournemire. He follows them with a *Fantaisie improvisée* whose twists and turns and structure are then elegantly dissected for the reader's pleasure. This *Fantaisie* is a harmonious combination of pre-existing forms (fugue, sonata, lied, chorale), melted together in a huge set of variations on the same theme. For me, this is the culmination of the treatise.

The wider implications of Messiaen's range of journalistic voices will only be seen in the light of other aspects of this study: I will return to it in 8.2. However, it is worth noting here that the stylistic variations in the journalism reflect several things. Firstly, Messiaen had a well-developed skill in manipulating the written word (reminding us that *Technique de mon langage musical* was not an 'early' written work, but came after a good deal of experience

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<sup>27</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Charles Tournemire: *Précis d'exécution de registration et d'improvisation à l'orgue*', *Le Monde musical* (30 June 1936), 186. See: Appendix I: III/7.

representing his ideas in published prose). He was also aware of the notion of ‘audiences’ beyond the concert hall or church, and of how to communicate with them. Finally, he understood how to project himself publicly – how to create an image of himself to accompany his work as a musician.



# CHRONIQUE DE PARIS

par Olivier MESSIAEN

Musique morne, grise, beaucoup de faux-classique et de Scarlatti dissonnancé, pauvreté rythmique générale, perte totale de l'émotion mélodique : voilà ce qui caractérise la plupart des œuvres entendues dans les derniers concerts parisiens. Le système déplorable de la première audition à outrance nous a valu aussi des concertos bâclés, des quatuors inutiles. Quelques rayons de soleil éclairent cependant ce triste paysage. Il faut signaler aux Concerts Poulet-Siohan l'exécution des « Choéphores » de Milhaud, toujours aussi grandes et sanguinaires, admirablement déclamées par Madeleine Whita. Au même concert, première audition des « Adages » de Milhaud, pour quatuor vocal et orchestre : œuvre charmante et fine, délicieusement écrite pour les voix et dont le style pimpant — très « Abandon d'Ariane » — convient parfaitement à la sagesse toute orientale du poème. Les chanteurs : Mmes Mahé et Schenneberg, MM. Guénod et Froumenty furent dignes de tous éloges. « Raimi » de Mme Béclard d'Harcourt, malgré un abus de pédales rythmiques, m'a séduit par l'exotisme de ses mélodies.

Aux Concerts Padeloup, on a réentendu avec plaisir le « Kâa » d'André Bloch, remarquable peinture de la fascination du serpent-python de Kipling. Il faut constater avec tristesse le succès du « Panorama Américain » d'Amphitèatrof, qui n'est qu'une molle improvisation de jazz.

Signalons encore, aux Concerts de la Spirale, la première audition des « Hymnes » pour orgue de Daniel Lesur (pièces courtes, délicieusement polytonales et d'une suave qualité de timbre) et celle du Quatuor à cordes d'André Jolivet (dans lequel des dissonnances raffinées ou cruelles s'allient à une grande maîtrise d'écriture et de forme). Ce dernier ouvrage fut présenté par le « Nouveau Quatuor Hongrois », une des plus beaux du monde.

J'ai réservé pour la bonne bouche, le festival de musique à quarts de tons, consacré à l'audition exclusive des œuvres de Ivan Wyschnegradsky, qui me paraît être l'événement le plus important du mois. Après une spirituelle présentation-causerie de José Bruyr, l'auteur nous a fait entendre successivement un « Fragment Symphonique », différentes pièces et préludes et une « Symphonie » inspirée par « Ainsi parla Zarathoustra » de Nietzsche : toutes œuvres écrites pour deux ou quatre pianos, un piano ou un groupe de deux pianos étant accordé au diapason normal, l'autre piano ou l'autre groupe, un quart de ton plus haut. Il y a donc ici, non seulement des contours mélodiques connus et appréciés des seuls Indous

Figure 1 Part of Messiaen's first 'Chronique de Paris' for *La Sirène*. [Olivier Messiaen, 'Chronique de Paris', *La Sirène* (March 1937), 14.]

## 4 Self-construction

### 4.1 Building a Biography

One of the underpinning themes of this thesis is the idea that Messiaen's life and creative output has been understood through a collection of associated biographical ideas. In the introduction, it was shown that writers on Messiaen have relied to a considerable extent on Messiaen's own self-commentary, and the extent to which Messiaen himself has influenced the commonly-held images of him was introduced. In this chapter, I examine the different ways in which Messiaen has constructed his image. Initially, I deal with the mythology that grew up around him in the later part of his life, since this is a key element in the notion of the 'musician apart' that I hope to unseat. Then, I go on to examine how Messiaen constructed his position in the early phase of his career through his writings, revealing considerable contrasts between these two phases of self-construction.

#### **Biography, Autobiography, Mythology**

Those born at midnight are marked from birth. According to Scottish legend, they will be different from others, either for good or ill, but typically marked by a brilliance of intellect, an air of being 'not of this world', and a predisposition to supernatural powers. This legend – like the magical abilities of the protagonists of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* – is only a particular manifestation of a much wider mythology of the magic of the midnight child.<sup>1</sup> In the Christian tradition, Christ was born at midnight (this being the origin of the midnight mass on Christmas Day); likewise was Krishna born at midnight in the Hindu tradition.

According to an interview with Harriet Watts, Olivier Messiaen, too, was born at midnight. It seems that this was the night of the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> December 1908, but it is impossible to confirm the precise time of Messiaen's birth since his birth certificate has not been traced (a baptismal certificate in the possession of Nigel Simeone even gives a different day for his birth).<sup>2</sup> Yet Messiaen carefully notes this small biographical detail, thereby lending it a degree of apparent significance.

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<sup>1</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London, 1981).

[*Des Canyons aux étoiles...*] will be performed again on precisely the tenth of December [1978], that's my birthday, and since I was born at midnight, it will finish at the moment of my birth. It will be a major performance, conducted by Pierre Boulez.<sup>3</sup>

This vignette comes from one of the numerous interviews that Messiaen gave in the later part of his life when, as a fêted senior member of the musical world, each new work was accompanied by interviews and articles in the musical press. Through such interviews, the milestones of Messiaen's life (together with his love of colour and birdsong, among other passions) became well known and well rehearsed: he recounted what he considered to be his key experiences and these anecdotes coalesced into a 'biography'. Despite numerous studies of the composer and his music, the composer's life has also usually been understood through what he chose to say about it.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Messiaen, in the relatively unfiltered sense of Lenneberg's 'witness', has formed his own image: the relative lack of critical examination to which the composer's comments have been subjected by some Messiaen commentators has led to certain discrepancies and omissions that will be considered elsewhere in the thesis. At the same time, however, Messiaen's judicious 'authorisation' of certain biographical details has generated a mythology around the composer that deserves detailed dissection in itself.

In her article on the biography in art history, Griselda Pollock gives a strong critique of the process of biographical writing whose subject is the artist (in her case, the visual artist):

The art historian produces a monograph which, while, in effect, not more than an illustrated biography, traces the life of a special kind of person, the artist, from birth to death, within the narrow limits of *only that which serves to render all that is narrated as signifier of artistness*.<sup>5</sup>

Pollock critiques the notion that biographical details become important only inasmuch as they point up in some way a feature of the subject that underlines their status as artist. She is offering an assessment of biographies written by a third party, but her comment takes on a striking new resonance when it is applied to the sorts of biographical comments that the artist makes about himself. Autobiographical comments made by the artist are not so much details about the artist as a person, but, rather, about the person as artist. Such comments may thus be seen as a self-construction or reinforcement of artistic status made by the artist himself.

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<sup>2</sup> Private communication between the author and Nigel Simeone (Jun 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Harriet Watts, 'Canyons, Colours and Birds: An Interview with Olivier Messiaen', *Tempo* 128 (1979), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone's documentary biography is the first of its kind. Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (Cambridge, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Griselda Pollock, 'Artists' Mythologies and Media genius, Madness and Art History', *Screen* 21 No. 3 (1980).

Messiaen's reference to his own birth is an excellent example of this notion of self-construction: his moment of birth becomes important only because it may be employed as a signifier of what Pollock terms his 'artistness'. This small biographical detail exists in a curious reciprocal relationship with Messiaen's position as an artist: it at once supports his status as artist and itself becomes elevated to significance because of this status.

The almost solipsistic relationship between such biographical details and the artist himself does not lessen the value of investigating the additional resonances that such details carry with them. Rudolf and Margot Wittkower have offered a strong thematic study of the changing elements of the artistic biography through history,<sup>6</sup> but here I wish to examine the ways in which Messiaen's biography (as he told it) resonates within a tradition of biography. Where elements of detail are shared among different biographical subjects, the notion of a biographical trope – such as the idea of the 'special birth' – emerges. Thus, I am interested in the extent to which the stories Messiaen told about himself are characteristic of the stories told about or by artists. As I have shown, Messiaen's birth 'at midnight' is an example of a biographical detail that lies within a wider tradition of significance, but this is only one instance among many: indeed, many of Messiaen's biographical touchstones may be contextualised in a similar way.

In the musical world, one individual would surely head up a league table of the most mythologised: Ludwig van Beethoven. In his article on the history of the Beethoven myth for the second edition of the *New Grove*, Scott Burnham describes how aspects of Beethoven's personality and outlook, together with elements of musical style combined to make him the emblematic romantic hero:

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63. My italics.

<sup>6</sup> Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn: The Character and Conduct of Artists: A Documentary History from Antiquity to the French Revolution* (New York and London, 1969).

Here was a creative artist who felt cut off from the simple communal joys of society, who yearned for an idealized love, and who was able to react to these privations with an outpouring of music conceived on an unprecedented scale. A more potent model for the Romantic view of the artist could hardly be imagined.<sup>7</sup>

Each of the three elements that Burnham cites as contributory to the mythologisation of Beethoven have their counterpart in Messiaen's biography. It is notable that Burnham cites firstly the notion of isolation (the main theme of Messiaen's 'biography') as a basic premise of the romantic artist; but no less important are the themes of 'idealised love' (which could find its reflection in Messiaen's faith, his love of birdsong, or, as we shall see, in his approach to his mother) and the idea of an overwhelming outpouring of music – unfettered and uninhibited. Messiaen's biography might therefore be seen as reflecting themes in the biography of the archetypal romantic artist, Beethoven.

Burnham has argued in his study *Beethoven Hero* that the romantic archetype represented by the Beethoven myth is so ubiquitous as to be an overriding theme in music history writing. It is reassuring but perhaps platitudinous to note that Messiaen falls within this tradition: to illuminate a close study of Messiaen's biographical stories and place the detail they contain in context, I will turn to a study from the height of post-freudian literary criticism.

### **Myths of Time: Deconstructing the Messiaen Story**

A more detailed reflection on Messiaen's biography is afforded by the work of Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz. In *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist*, they examine the legends of 'great artists' from ancient times through to Giotto, and attempt to isolate the incidents and themes that reappear in the mythologies of great artists. Their work thus allows a means of placing themes from Messiaen's biography in a much wider context, at the same time suggesting that, since Messiaen himself is the origin of these anecdotes, he has wittingly or unwittingly propagated a mythology that places him within a tradition of 'great artists'.

Three biographical tropes in particular emerge from Kris and Kurz's study. Firstly, the great artist appears fully-formed as an artist almost from birth, and is initially self-taught rather than having his genius inculcated by some external agent. Secondly, the decision to

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<sup>7</sup> Scott Burnham, 'Beethoven 19 (i)', *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London, 2/2001), Vol.

embark upon a career as an artist will be governed by a chance occurrence of some kind, and not by careful design; that career may also be beset by obstacles. Thirdly, the artist will become great through an ability to ‘draw from Nature’, and not an ‘old master’.<sup>8</sup>

These three themes are clearly traceable through the stories Messiaen told about himself – indeed he repeatedly underlines them. It is worth examining in detail the different ways in which Messiaen referred (whether knowingly or unknowingly) to the recurring themes of artists’ biographies, because they reveal the extent to which his story lies within a much wider tradition of writing about artists.

As a starting point, we might consider Messiaen’s account of his first steps in music, as recounted to Brigitte Massin towards the end of his life:

La musique, comme la religion, est venue toute seule! J’étais à Grenoble, Je n’avais aucun professeur. Il y avait dans la maison de mes grands-parents un vieux piano désaccordé, c’est là-dessus que j’ai appris tout seul à jouer du piano, et que, toujours tout seul, je me suis mis à composer. C’est ainsi que j’ai écrit, à neuf ans, une toute petite pièce, pour piano justement, parce que j’aurais été bien incapable d’écrire pour un autre instrument et encore moins pour orchestre. Il s’agit de *La Dame de Shalott* sur un poème de Lord Alfred Tennyson, *The Lady of Shalott*. Si le poème était beau, ma pièce à moi était vraiment balbutiante! A la même époque, j’ai découvert dans la maison, au fond d’une armoire, le *Don Juan* de Mozart, une partition pour chant et piano bien entendu. Ce fut une véritable révélation, non seulement par la présence de la musique, mais aussi du texte, c’était donc cela un opéra, quelle découverte! J’ai donc vécu tout seul mes premières émotions musicales.<sup>9</sup>

Like religion, I discovered music alone! I was in Grenoble and I had no teacher. In my grandparents’ house there was an old out-of-tune piano, and it was on this instrument, all alone, that I learned to play the piano and began to compose. So it was that when I was nine I composed a little piece, for solo piano only, because I was not capable of writing for another instrument, less still for orchestra. It was called *La Dame de Shalott* and was based on a poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Lady of Shalott*. Whilst the poem was beautiful, my piece was just a stammering! At the same time, I discovered Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* – a vocal score of course – at the bottom of a wardrobe. This was a real discovery, not just because of the music, but also because of the text. So this was an opera, then, what a discovery! That was how I had my first musical emotions.

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3, 111.

<sup>8</sup> Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment* [‘Based on *Die Legende vom Künstler*, published in 1934 (Vienna: Krystall Verlag). The English translation was prepared by Alastair Laing and revised by Lottie M. Newman. Additions to the original text were made by Otto Kurz’] (New Haven MA and London, 1979), 15.

<sup>9</sup> Brigitte Massin, *Olivier Messiaen: Une Poétique du merveilleux* (Aix-en-Provence, 1989), 33.

This account is shot through with the themes that Kris and Kurz identify (and is inconsistent with other accounts, which have the Mozart score coming to Messiaen as a Christmas present).<sup>10</sup> At the very outset, Messiaen explains that he discovered music alone, and further underlines that he had no teacher: he not only taught himself to play the piano, but also composed his first piece before receiving any formal tuition. The chance discovery plays an important part, not only in the unearthing of the operatic vocal score, but also in the presence of the old piano. We might, of course, question how, as an uninitiated child, he was able to make sense of the musical notation contained in the vocal scores he found without any outside guidance, but this inconvenient problem is neither raised nor explained. The whole passage glows with mythical imagery: the out-of-tune piano, the scores found ‘at the bottom of a wardrobe’. Even the music discovered – the opera by history’s greatest child prodigy – underlines the mythic quality of the composer’s first steps in music.

Messiaen’s early biography, as he told it, is replete with further examples of the themes that, according to Kris and Kurz, appear in legends as diverse as those of Giotto and Lyssipus. The decisive ‘chance discovery’, in particular, recurs throughout Messiaen’s accounts of his early years. More famous than the discovery of *Don Giovanni* is Jehan de Gibon’s gift of Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

C’était une véritable bombe qu’un professeur de province mettait entre les mains d’un tout petit garçon. Cette partition fut, pour moi, une révélation, un coup de foudre; je l’ai chantée, jouée et rechantée indéfiniment. Voilà probablement l’influence la plus décisive que j’ai reçue.<sup>11</sup>

This provincial professor had placed a real bomb in the hands of a small boy. This score was, for me, a revelation, a lightning-bolt; I sung it, played it and sung it again, over and over. It was probably the most decisive influence I received.

De Gibon’s role in the Messiaen story is worth considering in some detail. Messiaen frequently emphasised the importance and audacity of his teacher’s gift, but he also took care to show how de Gibon’s teaching also covered the important fundamentals – he apparently made Messiaen work from Reber’s *Traité d’harmonie* in Dubois’s revised edition of 1889 – ‘comme il se devait’<sup>12</sup> (‘as he should have’) said Messiaen:

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example: Claude Samuel, *Permanences d’Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1999), 185. Pierrette Mari, *Messiaen* (Paris, 1965), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d’Olivier Messiaen*, 186.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 186.

C'est lui qui m'a appris à distinguer un accord parfait d'un accord de sixte, c'était un enseignement très élémentaire mais je lui dois ce premier enseignement.<sup>13</sup>

He was the one who taught me to distinguish a root-position chord from a first inversion. It was a very elementary lesson, but I owe him for this basic knowledge.

Thus, Jehan de Gibon fulfils an important double role in Messiaen's story; he is simultaneously portrayed as a revolutionary and a traditionalist, a theorist and a magician. By combining a basic theoretical grounding with the planting of 'bombs', and by being an unpretentious provincial teacher who nonetheless provided 'the most decisive influence' Messiaen ever received, de Gibon becomes one of many symbols of 'difference' for Messiaen. Revealingly, de Gibon is not mentioned in Messiaen's early accounts of himself such as the biography he wrote for *Le Tombeau resplendissant* in 1933 nor in the long list of 'influences' in the preface to *Technique de mon langage musical*; his role was only emphasised by Messiaen later in life, perhaps to reinforce the image of isolation that he had chosen to project – remember, too, that Messiaen emphasises de Gibon's position as a 'provincial professor', far removed from the traditions of the Conservatoire.<sup>14</sup>

There are other important 'chance occurrences' in Messiaen's story. Messiaen's description of his discovery of the Hindu *décî-tâlas* provides a further example. He explained to Claude Samuel, 'C'est un coup de chance. J'ai eu par hasard dans les main le traité de Çârngadeva et la fameuse liste des cent vingt *décî-tâlas*' ('It was a stroke of luck. Çârngadeva's treatise and the famous list of one hundred and twenty *décî-tâlas* came into my hands by chance').<sup>15</sup> Messiaen's love for Claude le Jeune's *Printemps* was apparently the result of a similar experience:

I got to know Claude le Jeune while I was still in Paul Dukas' composition class. By chance, [...] in a shop window in the Rue de Madrid, opposite the Conservatoire, I spotted a volume of the Collection Expert with Claude le Jeune's *Spring* in it; I bought it – and was enchanted!<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Brigitte Massin, *Olivier Messiaen: Une Poétique du merveilleux*, 38.

<sup>14</sup> F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, Rés. Vmb ms 0094. [Autobiographical sketch by Messiaen written for the première of *Le Tombeau resplendissant*.] Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical* (Paris, 1999), 5.

<sup>15</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen*, 115.

<sup>16</sup> Almut Rößler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen* (Duisberg, 1986), 83. We might ask what had drawn Messiaen's attention to this volume in particular. Since Messiaen claimed to have known d'Indy's *Cours de composition musicale* since childhood, it is likely that he would have known of Le Jeune's *Printemps* (and of the *Collection Expert* in particular) from the detailed explanation of that work, and references to the *Expert* edition, that appear in d'Indy's treatise. See: Vincent d'Indy, *Cours de composition musicale* (Paris, 1902-1950), Vol. 1, 190.



Messiaen's use of birdsong in his compositions looks at first sight like a candidate for Kris and Kurz's third ingredient in the legend of the artist: that the artist rises to greatness by imitating 'Nature' rather than some eminent predecessor. However, Messiaen's use of birdsong in his music dates from very much later in his life, when he was well established as a composer: the earliest example of music in the *style oiseau* is *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (1941), with perhaps a foreshadow of the technique in the second movement of *L'Ascension* (1933). These are much too late in the composer's career to support the idea that – like the great artists whose biographies Kris and Kurz study – his rise to greatness was predicated on an ability to 'draw from nature'.

In his biographical anecdotes, however, Messiaen is careful to place a love of nature in general and of birdsong in particular, as early in his childhood as possible. In 1960, Messiaen described his relationship with birds to Antoine Goléa by emphasising their primacy:

Les oiseaux ont été mes premiers et mes plus grands maîtres. Je n'ai pas fini de me mettre à leur école.<sup>17</sup>

Birds were my first and greatest teachers. I have never stopped learning from their school.

By describing Nature as a 'teacher', Messiaen alludes to Kris and Kurz's third trope; by describing Nature as 'his first and greatest teacher' he is unambiguously applying it to himself (and referring indirectly to Aristophanes).<sup>18</sup> Messiaen recounts to Brigitte Massin an anecdote that his parents would often tell:

Mes parents avaient plaisir à raconter qu'un jour où j'étais à la campagne avec mon père, c'était dans le Puy-de-Dôme, il y eut soudain des chants d'alouettes. J'ai brusquement posé mon morceau de pain et j'ai fait signe qu'il fallait écouter. J'avais, paraît-il, trois ans!<sup>19</sup>

My parents liked to tell the story of a day when I was in the country with my father. We were in the Puy-de-Dôme, and suddenly there was a chorus of larks. I brusquely threw down my piece of bread and indicated that we should listen. I was, it seems, three years old!

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<sup>17</sup> Antoine Goléa, *Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1960), 218.

<sup>18</sup> In Aristophanes's *Birds*, Peisetairos comments at lines 481-2 that the birds were masters of the human world, before the coming of the gods. See, e.g.: Aristophanes, *Birds and Other Plays*, tr. with introduction and notes by Stephen Halliwell (Oxford and New York, 1998), 33.

<sup>19</sup> Brigitte Massin, *Olivier Messiaen: Une Poétique du merveilleux*, 24.

Yvonne Loriod repeated this story in conversation with Peter Hill, though the details are different: he was walking with his mother, threw down his bottle rather than a piece of bread, and was only eighteen months old.<sup>20</sup> This story seems calculated to underline that Messiaen was 'learning from nature' from the earliest age – certainly, Loriod's placing of the incident even earlier in Messiaen's childhood reinforces this proposition.

Elsewhere, Messiaen describes his first attempts to notate birdsong:

[Mes tantes] possédaient une ferme assez originale, avec des sculptures d'un de mes oncles, un parterre de fleurs, un verger, des vaches et des poules. Tout cela était très varié et, pour me 'refaire' la santé, mes braves tantes m'envoyaient garder un tout petit troupeau de vaches; c'était vraiment un tout petit troupeau: il n'y avait que trois vaches que je gardais d'ailleurs très mal et, un jour, elles ont trouvé le moyen de s'enfuir et de faire des dégâts terribles dans un champ de betteraves qu'elles ont dévorées en quelques heures, ce qui m'a valu les reproches de tous les gens du village. Les paysages de l'Aube sont très beaux et très simples: la plaine, de grands prés entourés d'arbres, de magnifiques lever et coucher de soleil et une quantité d'oiseaux. C'est là que j'ai commencé mes premières notations de chants d'oiseaux.<sup>21</sup>

[My aunts] owned a rather quaint farm, with sculptures by one of my uncles, a flower garden, an orchard, and cows and hens. All this was quite novel, and, to 'improve' my health, my good aunts sent me to tend a tiny herd of cows. It really was tiny: only three cows; even so, I tended them very badly, and one day they found a way to escape and wreak terrible havoc in a field of beets, which they devoured in a few hours, earning me the scorn of all the village people. The Aube countryside is very beautiful and very simple: the plain, the big meadows surrounded by trees, magnificent sunrises and sunsets, and a great number of birds. It was there that I first began jotting down bird songs.<sup>22</sup>

With the repeated story of the infant Messiaen's fascination with birdsong, this picturesque anecdote seems to underline Messiaen's fulfilment of the third of Kris and Kurz's main themes in the biography of the 'great artist': the ability to 'draw from nature'. The task of cow herding is itself a highly specific recurring motif noted by Kris and Kurz. This chore is typically seen as 'particularly apt to stimulate latent artistic talent', apparently because it offered the untutored young genius the chance to reflect on and respond artistically to nature.<sup>23</sup> Messiaen's picturesque anecdote is, according to Kris and Kurz, entirely of a piece with

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Hill, 'An interview with Yvonne Loriod', *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (London and Boston, 1995), 297.

<sup>21</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Oliver Messiaen*, 41.

<sup>22</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Olivier Messiaen: Musique et couleur* (Paris, 1986); Eng. edn., *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, tr. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland OR, 1994), 33.

<sup>23</sup> Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*, 9.

artists' biographies throughout history. They cite examples from the biographies of artists such as Giotto and others:

Raffellino da Reggio deserts the geese entrusted to him by his father, while Mantegna in the fifteenth century, and Franz Xaver Messerschmidt in the eighteenth, are both supposed to have begun life as shepherd boys. [...] Even in modern times we see occasional attempts to return to the old theme of the shepherd boy, as in the biography of Segantini by Servaes or that of Mestrovic by Planiscig.<sup>24</sup>

Once again, we may see a story that Messiaen told about himself as entirely typical of the 'legend of the great artist'.

### **Cecile Sauvage: *mère du Maître***

A sentence at the beginning of Berlioz's famous *Mémoires* might perhaps have drawn Messiaen's attention:

During the months that preceded my birth my mother never dreamt, as Virgil's did, that she was to bring forth a laurel branch.<sup>25</sup>

Like Virgil, and in contrast to Berlioz, Messiaen came to believe that his mother *had* foreseen his development as an artist. The role of parents, and the artist's relationship to them, is another area in which Kris and Kurz have identified recurring themes in myth of great artists:

In the motifs of mythology the relation of the hero to his parental home, the origin of the hero, is depicted in a very special way. This theme is dominated by the tendency to deny the real father of the man who is elevated to a hero, and to substitute a more exalted, royal parent; indeed, as far as possible, all mortal taint is removed from the hero's origin. This store of themes, which is found in a wide range of myths, is known to students of comparative mythology as the sagas of royal children who as infants were abandoned in the wilderness and later became the founders of new empires.<sup>26</sup>

Messiaen accords relatively little importance to his father, Pierre Messiaen, an English teacher and scholar of some renown who published many translations. Most Messiaen biographies mention Pierre Messiaen's Shakespeare translation, but his output was, in fact, as diverse as it was extensive. In addition to the Shakespeare edition, Pierre Messiaen published

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, 33.

<sup>25</sup> Hector Berlioz, *The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz*, tr. and ed. David Cairns (London, 1977), 31.

<sup>26</sup> Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*, 35.

translations of Milton as well as critical studies of Villon and other French poets, and a memoir entitled *Images*.<sup>27</sup> Yet whilst Messiaen liked to discuss his childhood love of Shakespeare, he was also careful to explain that this love blossomed long before and independent of his father's translation, further downplaying his father's role. When Antoine Goléa suggested that Messiaen was fixated on his mother, the composer rejected the proposition by stating that his mother's role in his upbringing was greater owing to the long-term absence of his father during the Great War of 1914-18.<sup>28</sup> Messiaen simplified and sidestepped the issue, and yet it is clear from other discussions that the role of his father had been distinctly underplayed.

Cécile Sauvage, on the other hand, held a central place in Messiaen's telling of his own story: he celebrated her at every opportunity. In the interviews he gave later in life, Messiaen portrayed his mother as a delicate, Mélisande-like figure:

Elle était discrète et portait en elle-même une sorte de désespoir caché. Peut-être parce qu'elle devait mourir jeune.<sup>29</sup>

*Le Vallon*, il est plus mélancolique, il évoque les oiseaux, les fleurs, mais on n'y trouve plus le soleil de cette Provence que ma mère aimait tant et qu'elle ne s'est jamais consolée d'avoir quittée.<sup>30</sup>

She was a very private person [modest] and carried a sort of hidden despair within her – perhaps because she was to die young.<sup>31</sup>

*Le Vallon* 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.<sup>32</sup>

At times, Messiaen's language imparts an almost saintly quality to his mother. In the sleeve notes to his 1977 recording of improvisations inspired by his mother's poetry, he cited these poems as 'his purest pride'.<sup>33</sup> The notions of purity and saintliness are revisited in Messiaen's conversation with Almut Rößler, which contains an intriguing description of the role of the angel in *Saint François d'Assise*:

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<sup>27</sup> For example: William Shakespeare, *Les Comédies. Nouvelle traduction française avec remarques et notes de Pierre Messiaen*, tr. and ed. Pierre Messiaen (Desclée, 1939); François Villon, *Œuvres complètes*, tr. and ed. Pierre Messiaen (Lyon, 1948); John Milton, *Paradis perdu. Introduction, traduction et notes de Pierre Messiaen*, tr. and ed. Pierre Messiaen (Paris, 1951); Pierre Messiaen, *Images* (Paris, 1943).

<sup>28</sup> Antoine Goléa, *Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen*, 26.

<sup>29</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen*, 17.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, 16. Translation amended.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> Olivier Messiaen, sleeve notes for recording: *L'Ame en bourgeon: poèmes de Cécile Sauvage* (Paris, 1977). [Erato STU 71104]. Quoted in: Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (London and Boston, 1985), 19.

The only female role is that of an angel: womankind is seen here more from the aspect of tenderness and motherliness than from that of femininity: as an angel, in fact, kind and motherly.<sup>34</sup>

Messiaen's conversations with Brigitte Massin suggest that for Messiaen the concepts of angel and mother were closely related:

[Olivier Messiaen:] L'image de la Vierge [est] très présente dans *La Nativité*. C'est une image qui m'est chère. Je continue à penser que tout ce à quoi ma mère a pensé en m'attendant a influencé ma destinée artistique.

[Brigitte Massin:] De la Vierge à la mère, à votre mère.

[OM:] C'est quelque chose de sacré, auquel on n'ose pas toucher. Je vous ai dit, je crois, que j'avais jamais osé mettre en musique *L'Ame en bourgeon*.<sup>35</sup>

[OM:] The image of the Virgin is very much present in *La Nativité*. It is an image which is very dear to me. I continue to believe that all that my mother thought when expecting me has influenced my artistic destiny.

[BM:] From the Virgin to the mother, your mother.

[OM:] It's something sacred, which one dare not touch. I believe I said to you that I have never dared set *L'Ame en bourgeon*.

Messiaen's interrelation of the angelic and the motherly suggests that he may have seen his own mother as an angel-figure. By constructing his mother in this way and emphasising her otherworldly qualities, Messiaen implies obvious conclusions about himself: that he is not wholly of this world, that he is, like Siegfried or Hercules, the mortal offspring of an immortal. By juxtaposing his birth with the Nativity, he makes an even more audacious linkage. Messiaen strongly appears to be claiming Kris and Kurz's great artists' parentage: 'exalted, royal' and free from 'mortal taint'.

Messiaen repeatedly asserted that Cécile Sauvage's cycles of poetry had been the greatest influence on his life, and that in her poetry, his mother had foreseen his future artistic development, just as Virgil's mother had foreseen the 'laurel branch' growing within her:

Ainsi a-t-elle dit, sans pouvoir imaginer que je deviendrais un musicien: 'Je souffre d'un lointain musical que j'ignore.' Ou encore: 'Voici tout l'Orient qui chante dans mon être – avec ses oiseaux bleus, avec ses papillons.' Comment pouvait-elle deviner que je serais ornithologue et que le Japon me fascinerait? Enfin, eu un temps où il était impossible de prévoir, avant la naissance, le sexe d'un enfant, elle s'est toujours adressé au garçon que je serais. C'est tout de même un cas troublant de prescience.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Almut Rößler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 122.

<sup>35</sup> Brigitte Massin, *Olivier Messiaen: Une Poétique du merveilleux*, 172.

<sup>36</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Oliver Messiaen*, 16.

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 a troubling example of premonition.<sup>37</sup>

There is, however, an irony in Messiaen's artistic relationship with his mother, and we can trace a subtle shift in Messiaen's references to his mother over the span of his career. Whilst in the first part of Messiaen's career, the period under consideration in this thesis, Sauvage was well known, her position in later years has been maintained mainly through her son's frequent references to her. As a young man, Messiaen's mother was a 'claim to fame', but it is mainly through his later celebrity that her poetry has lived on. Consequently, the significance of Messiaen's references to her changed through time. In the early 1930s, Sauvage was still reasonably well-known in French literary circles (the handsome *Mercure de France* edition of her works in 1929 being only one indication of this), and so her name on Messiaen's *curriculum vitae* would have provided some artistic gravitas and indicated the young composer's pedigree. Increasingly, however, Sauvage and *L'Ame en bourgeon* became an emblem of Messiaen's particular kind of spirituality, becoming in Messiaen's late interviews an icon of his removal from the mundane and worldly. Put briefly, Cécile Sauvage's role in Messiaen's biography drifted slowly over time from a mark of distinction to a symbol of difference.

It may, however, be unwise to conclude that Messiaen deliberately constructed his biographical relationship with his mother in order that a parallel with predecessors like Virgil would be drawn, since other evidence points to a complex relationship with his parents that may have coloured all the composer's statements about his family.

In 1929, two years after Sauvage's death and whilst Messiaen was still a student, *Le Mercure de France* published an edition of her works along with extracts from letters that offer the opportunity to examine the mother-son relationship without Messiaen's mediation. In an undated essay, we can glimpse the relationship from her perspective:

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<sup>37</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, 15 [Translation amended]. It must be admitted that the odds of guessing a child's sex before birth are very good.

Olivier, c'est mon 'chevalier rose'! Il s'est donné ce nom lui-même, c'est moi la dame de ses pensées. Il a dessiné son écu, qu'il pose comme un sceau de tendresse au pied des petites lettres qu'il m'écrit. Cela représente sur un fond de lune ronde un chevalier qui tient une lance, sur un cheval coiffé d'églantine. [...]

Nous causons comme des hommes, il a chipé tous mes livres, il a retenu tant de choses. Mais c'est un enfant, il dort comme un ange, il est diable comme un diable et fait mille sottises. Heureusement j'ai sur lui le pouvoir de cet appel magique: 'Mon beau chevalier rose'. Aussitôt un doux: 'J'obéis à ma dame', tout rentre dans l'ordre. [...]

J'ai feuilleté avec lui *L'Ame en bourgeon*. – C'est pour toi. lui dis-je, ces abeilles, ces sauterelles. – 'Maman, dit-il, tu es aussi poète que Shakespeare. Tu as comme lui des soleils, des planètes, des fourmis, des squelettes qui font peur. Je préfère tout ce qui fait peur.'<sup>38</sup>

Olivier is my 'Rose Knight'! He gave himself this name, and I am his muse [dame de ses pensées]. He has designed a coat of arms that he places at the bottom of the little letters he writes to me, like a seal of tenderness. It shows a knight carrying a lance on a horse dressed in eglantine against a full moon. [...]

We chat like men: he has pinched all my books and retains so much. But he is a child: he sleeps like an angel, he is a devil and does thousands of silly things. Fortunately, I have over him the power of this magical phrase: 'My handsome Rose Knight'. At once, a sweet 'I obey my lady', and everything is sorted out. [...]

We thumb the pages of *L'Ame en bourgeon* together. 'They are for you', I say, 'these bees, these grasshoppers'. 'Mother', he says, 'you are as good a poet as Shakespeare. Just like him, you have scary suns, planets, ants, skeletons. I like everything that makes me scared.'

These extracts confirm Messiaen's childhood devotion to his mother, and in terms that are ripe for Freudian analysis. Analysis of Messiaen's complex relationship with his mother is not the aim of this discussion, but this passage is quoted because it shows the composer's innocent idealisation of his mother, long before considerations of biography. The image of his mother that Messiaen projected doubtless contributed to his own mythology, but it seems to be based on a genuine infatuation with her.

### Source Stories: The Conflict between Heir and Autodidact

It is instructive to consider the underlying reasons for the confused accounts of Messiaen's discovery of his various 'sources', such as Greek and Hindu rhythm, within the context of the mythology of the artist. Kris and Kurz identify a deeply-rooted problem in the great artist's biography: education. On the one hand, much importance is placed on the concept of 'self-

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<sup>38</sup> Cécile Sauvage, *Œuvres* (Paris, 1929), 316-7. Also included in: Cécile Sauvage, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris, 2002).

teaching' in the legend of the great artist. On the other, the concepts of 'school' and artistic lineage are also crucial:

If we keep in mind that considerable attention is paid to this problem in the scant remains of Duris's writings, we become aware of a polarity that played an important role in Greek culture as a whole. Originating in mythology, it permeated the writing of history. The autodidact represents one side of this polarity, reflected in the elevation of the creative individual to the status of culture hero. The other side reflects the urge to anchor the individual's achievements firmly in the dynastic succession, a process we might refer to as 'genealogization'.<sup>39</sup>

In the course of transmitting his own biography, Messiaen is left to grapple with this ancient dichotomy: the conflict between the notion of student and artist, between craftsman and inspired genius, that has its roots as far back as Socrates' dialogue with Ion. Messiaen's problem is that he is buffeted by the opposing currents of genealogy (and the urge to acknowledge those who helped him), and the seductive mythology of the autodidact. Here, in the process of myth building, we may find the underlying reason for the obscure irregularities and picturesque anecdotes that pepper Messiaen's account of his musical honey-gathering.

The two important sources that Messiaen drew upon in order to enlarge his rhythmic vocabulary are well known: Greek metrics and Hindu rhythm, particularly the 'regional rhythms' or *déçi-tâlas*. As noted in the introduction, Messiaen's interest in the *déçi-tâlas* was not scholarly: 'What he reads about these matters itself provides the artistic impetus for a major part of his music'.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, the musical content of the original source is of only secondary importance in the music that draws its inspiration from it. On the other hand, Messiaen's biographical accounts of his engagement with these sources may be usefully considered because they play a small but significant part in the composer's projected image.

In discussion with Martine Cadieu, Messiaen gave this account:

[Martine Cadieu:] Lorsque vous avez été nommé organiste à l'église de la Trinité, en 1932, aviez-vous déjà commencé ces recherches qui devaient ensuite s'étendre à la métrique grecque et aux rythmes hindous?

[Olivier Messiaen:] Je me suis aperçu, aux orgues de la Trinité, que je connaissais mal le plain-chant et j'ai commencé l'étude des neumes, de l'arsis et de la thésis (du grec, 'élan' et 'repos'). De là, j'en suis venu, naturellement, à l'étude de la métrique grecque et des *Déçi-tâlas* (rythmes des provinces de l'Inde).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*, 20.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen* (London, 2/1989), 7.

<sup>41</sup> Martine Cadieu, 'Duo avec Messiaen', *Nouvelles littéraires* (29 Dec 1960).



[MC:] When you were nominated organist at La Trinité in 1932, had you already begun your research that was to result in the use of Greek metre and Hindu rhythms?  
 [OM:] I realised at the organ of La Trinité that I did not understand plainchant very well and I began to study the neumes, the *arsis* and *thesis* (from the Greek for ‘rises’ and ‘falls’). From there, I naturally came to the study of Greek metre and the *décî-tâlas* (Indian provincial rhythms).

Messiaen discussed the same issue with Claude Samuel some six years later:

J’ai découvert la métrique grecque grâce à deux de mes maîtres: Marcel Dupré, mon professeur d’orgue, qui m’a fait improviser sur des rythmes grecs et qui a parlé des rythmes grecs dans son *Traité d’improvisation*, et Maurice Emmanuel, mon professeur d’histoire de la musique, qui a fait pendant une année un cours centré sur la métrique grecque auquel j’ai eu la chance d’assister. Bien sûr, je n’ai obtenu que des renseignements fragmentaires, parce que les cours de l’un et de l’autre étaient limités dans le temps, ce qui m’a conduit à étudier seul la métrique grecque. J’ai rencontré beaucoup de difficultés, d’abord parce que je ne parle ni ne lis le grec ancien, ensuite parce qu’il existe très peu de traités de métrique grecque. J’ai dû fouiner dans les bibliothèques, glaner ici et là les éléments de cette métrique.<sup>42</sup>

I discovered Greek metrics thanks to two of my professors: Marcel Dupré, my organ teacher, who made me improvise on Greek rhythms and who spoke of them in his *Traité d’improvisation*, and Maurice Emmanuel, my music history teacher, who gave a year-long course centred on Greek metres which I had the good fortune to attend. Of course, I only got a fragmentary understanding because each of the courses was limited in time, but that drove me on to study Greek metres myself. I met with many difficulties, firstly because I don’t speak or read any ancient Greek and secondly because there are very few treatises on Greek metres in existence. I was forced to poke about in libraries, gleaning here and there the elements of this system.

In the second quotation, it is interesting to note the deft balance that Messiaen strikes between crediting his teachers and underlining his own research. The picturesque image of Messiaen ‘poking about in libraries’ introduces of a sense of struggle in his search for knowledge (another of the motifs that Kris and Kurz identify) and simultaneously reinforces his own role whilst downplaying his teachers’. The first quotation evades the professorial influence altogether.

Accounts of Messiaen’s introduction to Hindu rhythm are simultaneously less consistent and more revealing of the composer’s urge to manipulate the details of his own biography. The so-called *décî-tâlas* are a collection of 120 ‘regional rhythms’ that were originally collated by the thirteenth century theorist Çârngadeva. John Satterfield, in his 1955 translation of *Technique de mon langage musical*, notes in a footnote that the list of *décî-tâlas*

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<sup>42</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d’Oliver Messiaen*, 109.

can be found in Lavignac's *Encyclopédie de la musique et dictionnaire du Conservatoire* and so implies that this is where Messiaen himself discovered them. The Lavignac encyclopedia is also the source reported by Robert Sherlaw Johnson and Paul Griffiths, but it is unclear whether these authors had learned independently from Messiaen that Lavignac was his source, or had simply concluded that this was the case from Satterfield's note or otherwise.<sup>43</sup>

According to Sherlaw Johnson, Messiaen discovered the *décî-tâlas* at around the same time as he first began to learn about Greek metre (that is, around 1928), whilst Griffiths claims he had been 'instructed in Indian rhythmic formulae as catalogued in the Lavignac encyclopaedia'.<sup>44</sup>

In contrast, Anthony Pople states that Messiaen first came into contact with Indian rhythmic theory in 1935 'when he came across the thirteenth-century treatise on rhythm by Çârngadeva'.<sup>45</sup>

Pople's version is closest to the 'authorised' account, as reported to Claude Samuel, (though Messiaen gives no date here):

[Olivier Messiaen:] C'est un coup de chance. J'ai eu par hasard dans les mains le traité de Çârngadeva et la fameuse liste des cent vingt *décî-tâlas*; cette liste fut une révélation, j'ai senti immédiatement que c'était une mine extraordinaire, je l'ai regardée et copiée, contemplée et retournée dans tous les sens pendant des années afin de parvenir à en saisir le sens caché

[Claude Samuel:] Ces textes étaient publiés en français?

[OM:] Non, et à l'époque je ne comprenais pas les mots sanskrits. Par une nouvelle chance, un ami hindou m'a donné la traduction de ces mots, ce qui m'a permis de découvrir, en plus des règles rythmiques, les symboles cosmiques et religieux qui sont soutenus dans chaque *décî-tâla*.<sup>46</sup>

[OM:] It was a stroke of luck. Çârngadeva's [*sic*] treatise and the famous list of one hundred and twenty *décî-tâlas* came into my hands by chance; this list was a revelation, and I realised immediately that it contained extraordinary potential. I read it and copied it, contemplated it and returned to it from all angles over many years in order to unlock its hidden meaning.

[CS:] Were these texts published in French?

[OM:] No, and at that time I did not understand the Sanskrit words. By another piece of good fortune, a Hindu friend translated them for me, allowing me to understand not only the rhythmic rules, but also the cosmic and religious symbols that are contained in each *décî-tâla*.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 49. Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen*, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen*, 10. Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 49.

<sup>45</sup> Anthony Pople, 'Messiaen's Musical Language: an Introduction', *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (London and Boston, 1995), 37.

<sup>46</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Oliver Messiaen*, 115.

<sup>47</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, 77.

This version (which offers us another example of the ‘decisive chance occurrence’) directly rebuts the accounts that state that Messiaen owed his knowledge of the *décî-tâlas* to Lavignac’s encyclopaedia, but it does not end the confusion. Paul Griffiths, for example, notes that there are certain errors in Lavignac’s list that Messiaen seems to have adopted:

It is arguable that the Lavignac list errs in notating as a dotted semiquaver what ought to be read as a semiquaver followed by a semiquaver rest, so that many of the irregularities Messiaen specially cherishes are spurious.<sup>48</sup>

Griffiths indicates an alternative reading, given in Fox Strangways’s *The Music of Hindustan*. Lavignac’s list of the *décî-tâlas* does indeed differ significantly in its interpretation of the Çârṅgadeva rhythms from that given by Fox Strangways and Messiaen’s interpretation is clearly seen to correspond with that of Lavignac.<sup>49</sup> In *Technique de mon langage musical*, for example, Messiaen quotes the rhythm *râgavardhana*, which is one of those which includes the questionable interpretation of the Hindu notation. Its quoted form is that given in Lavignac’s encyclopaedia, rather than that given by Fox Strangways, providing a further, philological, argument that Lavignac was Messiaen’s source.

The ‘official’ account given to Samuel throws up other problems. If one is to believe that Messiaen gained his first knowledge of Hindu rhythms directly from Çârṅgadeva’s treatise, one must be permitted to ask how he was able to interpret the Hindu rhythmic symbols, which bear no resemblance to Western notation. The Lavignac dictionary (and, indeed, Fox Strangways’s book) provides the symbols from Çârṅgadeva’s treatise alongside a version in modern Western notation. How could Messiaen have understood the original treatise without initiation in Hindu notation? One is, of course, forced to conclude that his source was indeed the Lavignac encyclopaedia, or some other modern edition. The ambiguity around Messiaen’s discovery of Hindu rhythm mirrors exactly the dichotomy outlined by Kris and Kurz. One version of the story – that Messiaen discovered the *décî-tâlas* in the Conservatoire dictionary – emphasises his lineage as a diligent musician-scholar. The other version – that they ‘came into his hands by chance’ and required much patient work – emphasises the image of the inspired autodidact. Such inconsistencies, which are of little musical consequence, are nevertheless crucial in the context of Messiaen’s projection of persona, and they reflect perfectly the problem that Kris and Kurz identify.

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<sup>48</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 60.

<sup>49</sup> Fox Strangways does not give the complete table, but quotes several examples. These show that he, crucially, interprets one of the symbols as a quaver followed by a rest where Lavignac (and Messiaen) interpret it as a

## Origins and Propagation of the Mythology

Messiaen's story, as he told it, shows a very strong correlation with the biographical themes and problems identified by Kris and Kurz. This is not to imply that his anecdotes were fictitious (though the inconsistencies that pepper the biography imply that stories were occasionally embellished or altered). Rather, it is his selection and cultivation of certain anecdotes, whether consciously or subconsciously, that positions his early life-story as a descendant of the biographies of Lysippus, Giotto and others. At this point, though, an important distinction must be drawn. Whilst the themes that Kris and Kurz identify and examine were propagated retrospectively by biographers (Duris of Samos in the case of Lysippus, and Vasari in the case of Giotto<sup>50</sup>), Messiaen himself remained the ultimate arbiter of his own biography. Where mythologies surrounding the great artists that Kris and Kurz examine could be seen as the work of romanticising biographers, Messiaen has himself crafted his own mythology.

Whether this myth-making was conscious or not, it is difficult to say, and it is likely that some intentional mythologising was balanced by a certain amount of almost subconscious refinement of the stories he told about himself, under the influence of the great biographies of the past. Some aspects of the myth were certainly deliberate constructions on Messiaen's part. Nicola Rischin has examined in detail the first performance of the *Quatour pour la fin du Temps* in her comprehensive study *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet*.<sup>51</sup> Aspects of this famous *première* in Stalag VIII A in 1941 are well known, but Rischin has through detailed interviews with witnesses and a thorough review of the literature offered a measured account. Her discussion of some of the mythic elements of the event is fascinating, especially when she quotes Etienne Pasquier (cellist in the camp *première*) on the question of his instrument.

The three-stringed cello story is sheer myth. Contrary to Messiaen, Pasquier repeatedly insisted that the instrument on which he played in Stalag VIII A at the rehearsals as well as at the *première* possessed all four strings. 'I told him that I played on *four* strings,' said Pasquier. 'I kept telling him: "I had four strings, and you know it." I had

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dotted quaver. A. H. Fox Strangways, *The Music of Hindustan* (London, 1914), 201.

<sup>50</sup> Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*, 15; *ibid.*, 25.

<sup>51</sup> Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet* (Ithaca NY, 2003).

gone to a dealer in Gortitz, where I bought a bow [*sic*] – with four strings, obviously. You can't play without strings! If Messiaen had played the cello, he would have known that you couldn't play that piece on three strings (he laughed).' But Messiaen would continue to tell journalists that Pasquier played on three strings, despite the cellist's protests.

[...] 'Whenever I saw him after the war, I would say "You know I had four strings." Because it was impossible to play that piece on three strings. And that would make him laugh. But he would continue to say that I played on three strings.' In a subsequent interview, Pasquier speculated that Messiaen's persistent repetition of this story stemmed from his desire to illustrate the hardships the musicians faced in performing the piece. The intentionally misreported details thus served to enhance the legend of the *Quartet*.<sup>52</sup>

Rischin explains numerous other elements of Messiaen's telling of the quartet story that are not backed up by evidence (the audience of 5000 prisoners being only one of the less judicious aspects of Messiaen's exaggeration).<sup>53</sup>

More generally, Messiaen's story about himself is likely to have been influenced by the biographies (both formal and informal) of his own heroes and other figures from history. This is not to say that Messiaen has consciously noted the recurring biographical themes of the 'great artists' in order to incorporate them into his own story – it is much more likely that he absorbed such themes involuntarily to propagate them inadvertently through the telling of satisfying stories about himself.

As an example of a possible source of influence in Messiaen's biography, we might consider the case of Hector Berlioz. Messiaen liked to draw allusions between himself and Berlioz, who appears in the manifesto of La Jeune France as a touchstone of French Romanticism. Berlioz was born in the Dauphiné near Grenoble, which Messiaen considered his own 'true home', and the composers' birthdays are just a day apart.<sup>54</sup> Thus, it is little surprise that in conversation with Antoine Goléa, Messiaen compared himself with his illustrious predecessor: 'Je ne suis pas un Français cartésien, mais un Français des montagnes, comme Berlioz'<sup>55</sup> ('I am not a Cartesian Frenchman, but a Frenchman of the mountains, like Berlioz'). It is inconceivable that Messiaen was unaware of Berlioz's famous *Mémoires* (perhaps one of the most thorough acts of self-construction and mythologizing in Western music) and, indeed, Berlioz's story as he recounts in the *Mémoires* also reflects the themes identified by Kris and Kurz. Berlioz's story is, for example, strewn with chance occurrences:

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<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, 65-66.

<sup>53</sup> See: *ibid.*, 62.

<sup>54</sup> Antoine Goléa, *Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen*, 19. Berlioz born 11 Dec 1803, Messiaen born 10 Dec 1908.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, 19.

his crucial discovery of a flageolet 'at the bottom of a drawer', for example, uses precisely the same trope as Messiaen's discovery of the score of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.<sup>56</sup> Since this biography also taps into the traditions of greatness delineated by Kris and Kurz, it may be one of the lenses through which Messiaen was able to view his own life.

Beethoven, as the archetypal romantic hero-artist, has already been alluded to. Scott Burnham argues in his study *Beethoven Hero* that the Beethoven myth underpins much of the popular understanding of music since Beethoven's time.<sup>57</sup> Among the various elements of the layperson's idea of the composer, the notion of personal testament (whether written or through music) is particularly relevant to Messiaen. Although he frequently spoke of the 'theological' basis for his works (and explained this basis in considerable detail), such ostensibly apersonal commentary is dwarfed by the numerous interviews that he gave. These amount to no less than a series of personal testaments, ironically reinforcing, in the manner of the romantic artist, his authorship over and presence in the music. Of course, Messiaen is by no means alone in this. Indeed, his urge to talk about himself may itself be seen as an activity that draws him into the mainstream of 20<sup>th</sup> century musical discourse, joining many colleagues who also choose to contribute substantial personal statements to stand alongside their music. Stravinsky, on account of his multi-volume conversations with Robert Craft stands out particularly in this regard, but so do Boulez (through his *Orientations*, correspondence and other published writing), Milhaud, Cage and others. Without giving a comprehensive analysis of nineteenth- and twentieth-century composers, it is nonetheless worth noting that the composers to whom Messiaen referred most frequently (Debussy, Stravinsky, Wagner and Berlioz) all developed extended extra-musical testaments and played a considerable part in creating the mythologies that enveloped them.

It is instructive to examine how the mythical elements of the Messiaen biography have been propagated. The note that Messiaen wrote for the programme of the first performance of *Le Tombeau resplendissant* in 1933 is one of the earliest extant biographies of the composer, and it offers the chance to see how elements of Messiaen's story have been passed on. It begins:

Olivier Messiaen est né à Avignon le 10 décembre 1908. Il est le fils de la poétesse Cécile Sauvage qui écrivait pour sa naissance le poème: *L'Ame en bourgeon*.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Hector Berlioz, *The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz*, 39. Berlioz also discovers Rameau's *Treatise* by chance [*ibid.*, 40].

<sup>57</sup> Scott Burnham, *Beethoven Hero* (Princeton NJ and Chichester, 1995).

<sup>58</sup> F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, Rés. Vmb ms 0094. [Autobiographical sketch by Messiaen written for the

Olivier Messiaen was born in Avignon on 10 December 1908. He is the son of the poetess Cécile Sauvage, who wrote the poem *L'Ame en bourgeon* for his birth.

Messiaen places his mother prominently at the very beginning of this and almost every other biographical sketch that he wrote: Sauvage and *L'Ame en bourgeon* are also raised by Messiaen at the very beginning of his interviews with Claude Samuel and Antoine Goléa.<sup>59</sup>

Attracted, no doubt, by the apparently prescient passages in *L'Ame en bourgeon* that seem to resonate with suggestions of his future, most commentators follow Messiaen's lead in placing Sauvage at the very head of his story, and, in keeping with the mythology that developed later in his life, make her emblematic of everything that makes Messiaen a 'musician apart'. Paul Griffiths begins his account of Messiaen's life thus:

Enigmas of time start before the beginning. For most individuals there is no knowing how genetic and environmental conditions have already begun to shape personality in the womb, but in Messiaen's case there is something to be said about his uterine existence, since his mother, the poet Cécile Sauvage (1883 - 1927), made her pregnancy the subject of a collection of twenty poems, *L'âme en bourgeon* [sic].<sup>60</sup>

Roger Nichols's first paragraph is very similar:

Olivier Messiaen was born on 10 December 1908 at Avignon. That is what the history books say and in a way they are correct. Yet, from the point of view of art, Olivier Messiaen was 'born' before the day of his birth, when his mother, the poetess Cécile Sauvage, wrote a series of poems for the son that she was carrying – that he was a son she had no doubt:

Enfant, pâle embryon, toi qui dors dans les eaux,  
Comme un petit dieu mort dans un cercueil de verre,  
Tu goûtes maintenant l'existence légère  
Du poisson qui somnole au-dessous des roseaux.

The musicality of this, the opening verse of one of the poems of *L'Ame en bourgeon*, suggests that the child of such a mother might well be no ordinary talent.<sup>61</sup>

For Griffiths and Nichols, Sauvage is a symbol of Messiaen's difference, and the ideal foundation for biographical approaches that emphasise Messiaen's mystical isolation from the twentieth century. Robert Sherlaw Johnson's assessment is rather more circumspect and subtly makes it clear that it is Messiaen himself who sees his mother as an important influence. He begins:

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première of *Le Tombeau resplendissant*.]

<sup>59</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Oliver Messiaen*, 14; Antoine Goléa, *Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen*, 19.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 19.

<sup>61</sup> Roger Nichols, *Messiaen* (London, 1975), 7.

Olivier Messiaen was born on 10 December 1908 at Avignon.[...] His mother, the poetess Cécile Sauvage, had a profound influence on her son's artistic development and character; during her pregnancy she wrote a book of poems called *L'Ame en bourgeon* (The Flowering Soul), which Messiaen claims has had a particular influence on his character and his whole destiny.<sup>62</sup>

All too often, those who have written about Messiaen have propagated his mythology by repeating or amplifying the composer's own statements without subjecting them to judicious critical examination. It is not only the composer's accounts of his childhood that have been retold: Messiaen's grip on his own biography seems strong throughout the first part of his career. His famous collaboration with André Jolivet, Daniel-Lesur and Yves Baudrier as La Jeune France provides a good example of how effectively commentators have been guided towards their conclusions by the composer. Paul Griffiths seems to suggest that the members of La Jeune France simply drifted together:

His reputation was gaining ground, but like many French artists of the time, he felt the need to associate himself with a group, and from among the composers of his generation there emerged in 1936 La Jeune France.<sup>63</sup>

This nonchalance mirrors precisely that shown by Messiaen in conversation with Almut Rößler:

The origins of the formation were as follows: Baudrier came to see me after hearing my 'Offrandes Oubliées' [*sic*] and said to me: 'Let's form an alliance.' I said to him: 'An alliance, that's like a parliament: there has to be a Right and a Left. The Right will be Lesur, who's very classical, the Left will be Jolivet', – who at that time was a real thunderbolt, a composer of the extreme avant-garde, much more terrible than later on. And that's how we came together: Baudrier was the founder, we had a Right and a Left and I was the Centre. (Messiaen laughs as he says this.) The whole thing lasted only two or three years. When the War broke out, we became separated from each other.<sup>64</sup>

The Jeune France episode is downplayed by Messiaen and made to seem like a brief and largely uncharacteristic engagement with wider issues. Writers on Messiaen have generally followed this cue: even Serge Gut's study of the group (written, it seems, in ignorance of Messiaen's other artistic collaborations, to which I turn in Chapter 5) fails to

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<sup>62</sup> Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen*, 9.

<sup>63</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 71.

<sup>64</sup> Almut Rößler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 105-106.



explain Messiaen's key role in La Jeune France.<sup>65</sup> Only in Nigel Simeone's article on La Jeune France is Messiaen's role subjected to greater independent analysis, showing the extent and intensity of his engagement in the activities of the group.<sup>66</sup> When I wrote above that Messiaen had 'crafted' his own mythology, I used the word advisedly: in the introduction to the 1994 English translation of the Claude Samuel interviews, Samuel writes that Messiaen's '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.'<sup>67</sup> In the subsequent French edition of the same interviews, Samuel reproduces a page from the original transcript, encrusted with Messiaen's extensive editing [Figure 2, page 81].<sup>68</sup> To be sure, such editorial work would be necessary to clarify imprecise moments in what were in their raw form unscripted interviews. But such attention to detail in creating this 'testament' is also a reflection of a wider desire to shape and control how he was perceived.

In this chapter, I have focussed on elements of Messiaen's early biography as he told them later in his life, but other aspects of Messiaen's mythology could usefully be examined in a similar way, particularly his famous sound-colour relationship, which he described to Claude Samuel as a 'a kind of synesthesia, more in my mind than in my body'.<sup>69</sup> The sound-colour relationship (at least in the precise sense that Messiaen eventually developed) belongs to a later period in his career and therefore lies outwith the scope of this thesis but one account of does bear mentioning here because it shows the extent to which the various strands of the Messiaen mythology have been blended: according to Pierrette Mari, Messiaen's wartime imprisonment caused him to develop full-blown physiological synesthesia:

Dès 1931, Messiaen établit, sous l'influence du peintre suisse Blanc Gatti, des correspondances de tonalité et de nuance entre le son et la couleur, mais il n'accorde à ces rapports qu'une importance relative; et ce n'est, effectivement, qu'au cours de son internement au Stalag, mordu par le froid, tenaillé par la faim, que le phénomène se développe naturellement et involontairement en lui jusqu'à l'amener à ce que la médecine désigne par le terme de 'synopsie'.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Serge Gut, *Le Groupe Jeune France* (Paris, 1977).

<sup>66</sup> Nigel Simeone, 'La Spirale and La Jeune France: Group Identities', *Musical Times* (Autumn 2002), 10-36.

<sup>67</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, 9.

<sup>68</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen*, 173.

<sup>69</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, 40.

<sup>70</sup> Pierrette Mari, *Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1965), 27. If Messiaen had developed synesthesia as a result of conditions in Stalag VIIIA, this would make him exceptional even amongst synesthetes:

An attempt to estimate the proportion of synesthetes in the general population suggests that synesthesia is experienced by at least 0.05% of the population [...] In these cases, synesthesia has been experienced as early as individuals can remember, although some forms, such as chromatic-graphemic synesthesia

From 1931, Messiaen built up relationships of tonality and nuance between sound and colour, under the influence of the Swiss painter Blanc Gatti, but he placed only a relative importance on these relationships and it was not, effectively, until his time of his imprisonment in the Stalag that, bitten by the cold and tormented by hunger, the condition known to doctors as ‘synesthesia’ naturally and involuntarily developed in him.

Messiaen’s account of his life benefits from critical reappraisal. Having considered his early life through the lens of his later statements, it is now time to consider what Messiaen said about himself during that early career.

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[i.e. the matching of colour to shapes], may only be formed upon acquisition of certain skills – in this case, reading. [Noam Sagiv, ‘Synesthesia in Perspective’, *Synesthesia: Perspectives from Cognitive Neuroscience* ed. Lynn C Robertson and Noam Sagiv (Oxford, 2005), 3-4. My italics.]



## 4.2 Early Writing

‘Parlez-nous de votre musique’, me dit-on [...]. Dois-je avouer que je suis bien embarrassé? C’est chose difficile que de juger les autres, mais quand il s’agit de soi... N’importe, je me jette à l’eau!<sup>71</sup>

‘Tell us about your music’, people say to me [...]. May I say that I find this rather embarrassing? It is difficult enough to criticise others, but when you have to criticise yourself... Nevertheless, I will plunge in!

Whilst the composer’s later comments underline his ‘apartness’, Messiaen’s writing in the early phase of his career shows another aspect of his self-construction. In the journalism of the 1930s, and in his treatise of 1944, *Technique de mon langage musical*, Messiaen tells a contrasting story that places him directly in the context of his contemporaries and predecessors.

### Messiaen on Messiaen

Self-contextualisation is explicit in Messiaen’s articles about himself; indeed, he enthusiastically discussed his own music whenever the opportunity arose. In an article for *Le Monde musical* in 1939, Messiaen vigorously defended his *Chants de terre et de ciel* and confidently justified his musical language by referring to his years of study:

Il n’est pas extravagant! J’ai fait d’assez longues études d’harmonie, fugue et composition, pour avoir la prétension de connaître mon métier. Et si dans cette œuvre, il y a plus de vigueur que dans les précédentes, mes chers ‘modes à transposition limitées’ sont toujours là, et aussi mes contrepoints d’accords, mes pédales d’accords, mes grappes d’accords.<sup>72</sup>

It is not extravagant! I have studied harmony, fugue and composition long enough to have the pretension to know my *métier*. And if, in this work, there is more vigour than in my previous works, my dear ‘modes of limited transposition’ are still there, as well as my chordal counterpoints, my chordal pedals and my chord clusters.

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<sup>71</sup> Olivier Messiaen, ‘Autour d’une Œuvre d’orgue’, *L’Art sacré* (Apr 1939), 123. See: Appendix I: V/2.

<sup>72</sup> Olivier Messiaen, ‘Autour d’une Parution’, *Le Monde musical* (30 Apr 1939), 126. See: Appendix I: III/14. Reproduced in translation in: Nigel Simeone, ‘Offrandes oubliées: Messiaen in the 1930s’, *Musical Times* (Winter 2000), 41.

He then goes on to defend his rhythmic techniques, and finally gives a panorama of those whose music he feels has influenced him:

Certaines pages de Schönberg, de Jolivet, certains airs populaires français ou russes, ne m'ont pas non plus laissé indifférent. Ajoutez à cela que j'aime Massenet, parce qu'il est tonale, bien harmonisé, et vous aurez quelque idée de mon style. Quant à ceux qui hurlent pour mes soi-disant dissonances, je leur déclare tout net que je ne suis pas dissonant: qu'ils se lavent les oreilles!...<sup>73</sup>

Certain pages of Schoenberg and Jolivet, and certain French and Russian folksongs, have also influenced me. Add to that that I like Massenet, because he is tonal and well harmonised, and you will have some idea of my style. As to those who bellow about my so-called dissonances, I tell them quite simply that I am not dissonant: let them wash out their ears!...

Such lists of 'influences' are not uncommon in Messiaen's writing about himself, but this one stands out because of the composers who are mentioned: Schoenberg and Massenet. In conversation with Claude Samuel, Messiaen acknowledged Schoenberg's importance in the evolution of music, whilst questioning his status as a great musician.<sup>74</sup> He also admitted that Schoenberg was not his favourite composer, a statement whose resonance is all the greater because Messiaen later eschewed almost all direct statements of personal preference.<sup>75</sup> The reference to Schoenberg in this article of 1939 suggests either that Messiaen's attitude to Schoenberg was different when he was younger or that his purpose in citing the leader of the Second Viennese School was more cunning: perhaps to underline his credentials as a thoroughly modern musician. Although Messiaen frequently claimed that he was the only student at the Conservatoire to acquire a score of *Pierrot Lunaire*, only in this defence of *Chants de terre et de ciel* does he actually state that he was influenced by its composer.<sup>76</sup> The reference to Massenet (even if it is only a note of 'liking' his music) seems calculated to present a striking contrast to Schoenberg, while the passage as a whole is intended to frame his music in a broader context. Messiaen's youthful self-confidence is also note-worthy and may be seen in other extracts in the journalism, such as this example from *L'Art sacré*:

L'Œuvre est écrite dans un langage très neuf qui, tout d'abord, fit scandale. Ce langage, soi-disant extravagant, repose en réalité sur des lois très précises et cherche bien plus à charmer qu'à surprendre. Malgré quelques affinités avec la rythmique

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<sup>73</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Autour d'une Parution', *Le Monde musical* (30 Apr 1939), 126. See: Appendix I: III/14.

<sup>74</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Oliver Messiaen*, 327.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, 327.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, 188.

indoue et la liberté plain-chantesque, malgré quelques accords debussystes ou stravinskystes, il se caractérise surtout par l'emploi harmonique des 'modes à transpositions limitées' d'une part, et par l'emploi rythmique de la 'demi-unité de valeur ajoutée' d'autre part. Voilà des termes qui ont surpris les techniciens! Je les ai expliqués ailleurs. Ils expriment bien les particularités de mon style. Joignez-y une écriture d'orgue inhabituelle, des registrations inattendues, vous comprendrez aisément pourquoi *La Nativité du Seigneur* a pu plaire aux uns déplaire aux autres.<sup>77</sup>

The work is written in a very new language that initially caused a scandal. This language, dubbed 'extravagant', rests in reality on very precise rules, and seeks more to charm than surprise. Despite some affinities with Hindu rhythm and the liberty of plainchant, despite some Debussyste or Stravinskian chords, it is characterised above all by the harmonic use of 'modes of limited transposition' on the one hand, and on the other by the rhythmic use of 'the added half-value'. Now there are some expressions that have surprised the technicians! I have explained then elsewhere. They explain the peculiarities of my style well. Add to these an unusual organ style and innovative registrations, and you will easily understand why *La Nativité du Seigneur* has pleased some and displeased others.

The same urge – to place his music in a wider setting – is also central to Messiaen's first treatise, *Technique de mon langage musical*. This desire is reflected in the very concept of this publication: at its simplest level, it is designed to explain for the benefit of a wider audience the musical processes he has developed in order that they be better understood. Throughout, Messiaen attempts to show, explicitly or implicitly, that his work does not stand apart from the rest of music, but is rather a result of the musical environment in which it developed.

*Technique de mon langage musical* is shot through with indications that Messiaen's central aim in writing is self contextualisation. The title itself recalls the treatise by Messiaen's history teacher, Maurice Emmanuel – the *Histoire de la langue musicale* (though Messiaen uses 'langage' in preference to 'langue', presumably to reflect the fact that he is talking about a personal style, rather than a supposedly universal medium).<sup>78</sup> Published in two volumes, Emmanuel's treatise takes the reader through the history of music in six successive stages, seeking to boil down the music of each era into basic principles:

En [chaque époque], les Echelles, l'Harmonie, – le mot étant pris dans les divers sens qu'il comporte, – la Notation, la Rythmique et les Formes seront étudiées sommairement, réduites à leur principes.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Autour d'une Œuvre d'orgue', *L'Art sacré* (Apr 1939), 123. See: Appendix I: V/2.

<sup>78</sup> Maurice Emmanuel, *Histoire de la langue musicale* (Paris, 1911).

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, 3.

In [each epoch], scales, harmony (the word being taken in its various meanings), notation, rhythm and forms will be studied concisely, reduced to their principles.

Messiaen's interpretation of the phrase 'musical language' coincides precisely with Emmanuel's; like his teacher, Messiaen is concerned with reducing music to a set of interrelated technical areas in which certain basic principles may be distilled. The expression 'musical language' implies an analogy between these principles and the syntax of language. Messiaen writes of 'believing music to be a language', implying that he sees music as a tool for communication that must be mastered before one can fully understand that which is communicated by it.<sup>80</sup> In Emmanuel's case, the 'musical languages' of times past are explained so that the music of the past might be better understood. Messiaen, in contrast, may be said to be teaching his own 'language', implying that, having done so, he will be better understood. The ethos of popularisation is underlined by an article by Messiaen, timed to coincide with the publication of the treatise, in *Musique et radio* ('Organe corporatif officiel de la musique': a magazine that bears comparison with Britain's *Radio Times*).<sup>81</sup>

The acknowledgements that form the second part of Messiaen's short introduction to the treatise may also be viewed as evidence of his desire to show his music in a broader context. They take the form of a series of relationships that combine to define the composer through his associations with others.

Je ne veux pas terminer cette Introduction sans remercier:

Mes maîtres: Jean et Noël Gallon qui ont aiguisé en moi le sens de l'harmonie 'vraie', Marcel Dupré qui m'a orienté vers le contrepoint et la forme, Paul Dukas qui m'a appris à développer, à orchestrer, à étudier l'histoire du langage musical dans un esprit d'humilité et d'impartialité.

I do not want to conclude this introduction without thanking:

My teachers: Jean and Noël Gallon, who honed within me a feeling for the 'true' harmony; Marcel Dupré, who oriented me towards counterpoint and form: Paul Dukas, who taught me skills in development and orchestration, and taught me to study the history of musical language in a spirit of humility and impartiality.

This statement of gratitude is also a kind of self-positioning by the composer. Mention of the Gallon brothers provides a strong pedigree of theoretical excellence, whilst Dupré forms a link with the French tradition of organ composition and virtuoso performance dating back to

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<sup>80</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical* (Paris, 1999), 6.

<sup>81</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Technique de mon langage musical', *Musique et radio: Organe corporatif officiel de la musique* 386 (Nov 1942), 253-4. I am grateful to Nigel Simeone for access to the item in his private collection

Franck. Finally, Dukas provides Messiaen with a route by which both Debussy and Wagner may be recalled, and the ethos of neoclassicism rejected. In a few sentences, Messiaen encapsulates his relationship to the musical past, and positions himself in the musical present.

He then goes on to cite a series of ‘influences’ that include his mother (but not his father), his first wife, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, plainchant and Hindu music. Finally, he turns to his ‘most devoted interpreters’: Roger Désormière, Marcelle Bunlet, Etienne Pasquier and Yvonne Loriod.

There is no doubt that Messiaen would have wanted to thank each of these performers, but their names would also have brought to mind the different aspects of Messiaen’s music, the various phases of his career so far, and the diverse arenas within which his music had been performed. Désormière, conductor of the Orchestre Symphonique de Paris in the 1930s, would have recalled the grand symphonic concerts of La Jeune France, whilst Marcelle Bunlet would have acted as a reminder of his vocal music (music that was somewhat neglected, according to Messiaen) and the concert he gave with her at La Spirale.<sup>82</sup> Etienne Pasquier played cello in the first, and much publicised, performance of *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, and so might have brought to mind that already-famous fruit of Messiaen’s time in Stalag VIIIA. Finally, Yvonne Loriod, who was the focus of Messiaen’s musical output at the time of the publication of *Technique de mon langage musical*, would have reminded the reader of his most recent works, such as *Visions de L’Amen*, which she had premiered with the composer. Thus, the simple act of thanking his performers also provides a means whereby the new publication, *Technique de mon langage musical*, is firmly placed within the context of his own career to date. Strikingly, Messiaen does not mention his Jeune France colleagues, the student friends who were, as we shall see, so vital in the early stage of his career, or any of his professional colleagues in the classroom or the organ loft.

One aspect of *Technique de mon langage musical* is Messiaen’s habit of quoting the music of his predecessors in order to ‘derive’ *post facto* his own music from them. Most famous in this regard is Messiaen’s quotation from *Boris Godunov*, which forms the basis of a contour used so frequently by the composer that it takes on the character of a musical ‘monogram’ in the manner of Shostakovich’s DSCH motif.<sup>83</sup> As well as quoting Mussorgsky,

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(note that this article lies outside the scope of Appendix I).

<sup>82</sup> Concert on 28 Apr 1937. See, e.g.: Roger Vinteuil, ‘La Spirale (28 avril)’, *Le Ménestrel* (7 May 1937), 147-148.

<sup>83</sup> Armand Machabey’s book *Portrait de trente musiciens françaises* contains short articles on 30 composers, each of which are preceded by a photograph, musical quotation and autograph of the composer. The quotations



Messiaen quotes passages from Grieg, Debussy and others. It is difficult to understand the impetus for these ‘derivations’ if one takes them at face value because, while we can see that Messiaen’s examples are inspired by the basic shape of the ‘source’, the resulting melodic phrases clearly owe much more to Messiaen’s techniques than they do to the ‘source’ material – indeed, the term ‘derivation’ seems inappropriate, since the connection between the two is tenuous. This curious feature of the treatise has drawn much comment and will be discussed further in 6.1.

References to the music of others appear elsewhere in the treatise. In Messiaen’s ‘List of melodic periods’, a selection of excerpts from Messiaen’s music (mainly from *Visions de L’Amen*) is dissected with respect to other composers: Ravel, Adam de la Halle, Mozart, de Falla, Bartók, Jolivet and Rameau are all cited. As with his melodic ‘derivations’, the music owes so much more to Messiaen’s own techniques than to any discernible influence that the connections look contrived. In ‘A look at other styles’ and ‘List of chord progressions’, Messiaen quotes further examples from his own music and discusses the antecedents that he sees as inherent in each example.<sup>84</sup> Though composers of many nationalities are mentioned, French composers feature very prominently among Messiaen’s stated antecedents, allowing him to position himself as a descendant of Adam de la Halle, Rameau, and Debussy – a pedigree of more than 500 years of French music.<sup>85</sup> In this procedure, Messiaen seems to be aiming definitively to place his music within a greater tradition. Within *Technique de mon langage musical*, he is in a very strong position to assert his authority in such matters: the reader is simply not in a position to dispute the composer’s musical genealogies.

There are other references in the text that seem designed to show Messiaen’s innovations in context. Notable amongst these are his references to his immediate predecessors in the field of rhythm, namely Stravinsky, Emmanuel and Mocquereau – indeed, the ‘Danse sacrée’ from *Le Sacre du printemps* is the first musical example in *Technique de mon langage musical*.<sup>86</sup> His references to the quarter-tone composers Haba and

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have been specially written by the composers in their own hand and the implication is that they represent musical monograms. Messiaen’s monogram is a version of the *Boris* motive, found in many places in his music including, for example, *La Nativité*, *Visions de l’Amen* and *Saint François d’Assise*. See: Armand Machabey, *Portrait de trente musiciens français* (Paris, 1949), 126.

<sup>84</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical*, 72-3.

<sup>85</sup> The part these ‘antecedents’ played in providing a justification for new techniques is discussed in 6.1.

<sup>86</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical*, 7.

Vyschnegradsky are also significant and show him marking himself out as a ‘modern man’ ready to embrace the latest innovations.<sup>87</sup>

We might question the validity of Messiaen’s many self-positioning references, feeling that the whole act of self-contextualisation is undermined when relationships between a phrase from his own work and its ‘antecedents’ seem rather artificial (as they frequently do). At first sight, the issue seems to be the sincerity of Messiaen’s discussion of his own music. In fact, I believe this makes little difference to the argument that *Technique de mon langage musical* is an act of self-contextualisation. If we accept that the composer genuinely perceives the relationships that he explains in *Technique de mon langage musical*, then the question of whether they are reasonable becomes irrelevant, because we must then concede that Messiaen saw his music couched in historical and contemporary contexts and felt that these contexts were significant enough to be explained alongside the mechanics of his language. If, on the other hand, we believe that the composer’s allusions to other composers are simply constructed to give a superficial semblance of continuity, we are still forced to conclude that the concepts of continuity and context were important to Messiaen, and that he felt it necessary to provide them for his own music, minimising his own ‘difference’. Either conclusion underlines the importance of context for Messiaen at the time of writing *Technique de mon langage musical*, and suggests that the dominant theme of Messiaen writing is inappropriate with respect to the composer’s early career.

### **An Implied Contextual Framework**

Messiaen’s music criticism gives an indication of the music that he heard in concert, and so gives an idea of his musical frames of reference. We would expect that Messiaen would write about only a small proportion of the music that he heard; yet even in the relatively few reviews that he wrote, a great range of styles and genres is considered, indicating the breadth of his listening. Debussy, Ravel, Tournemire, Milhaud, Honegger, Roussel, (André) Bloch and Schmitt are all mentioned but so are others who are now less well known: Martelli, Barraud, Delannoy and Vellones, for example.<sup>88</sup> As we have seen, one of Messiaen’s articles gives a reasonably upbeat assessment of a night at the *opéra-bouffe*, a genre apparently at

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<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, 85; *ibid.*, 100.

<sup>88</sup> See, e.g.: Olivier Messiaen, ‘Billet Parisien: *Les Fêtes de la lumière*’, *La Sirène* (Jul 1937), 18-19. See: Appendix I: II/5. For a discussion of the music of the 1937 Exposition, see: Nigel Simeone, ‘The Science of Enchantment: Music at the 1937 Paris Exposition’, *Musical Times* (Spring 2002), 9-17.

odds with our idea of his aesthetic preferences.<sup>89</sup> His wide concert-going habits and enthusiasms are indicated, and we can occasionally see where his concert-going experiences have had an impact on his own music – especially through the language that Messiaen employs in these reviews, which provides further examples of the self-positioning that may be seen more explicitly in his various discussions of his own music.

Messiaen's first article for *La Sirène* in March 1937 includes a very enthusiastic endorsement and detailed appreciation of Ivan Vyschnegradsky's experiments in quarter-tone music, and provides a particularly good example of what looks like covert self-positioning:

J'ai réservé pour la bonne bouche, le festival de musique à quarts de tons, consacré à l'audition exclusive des œuvres de Ivan Vyschnegradsky, qui me paraît être l'événement le plus important du mois.<sup>90</sup>

I have reserved the greater part of this review for the festival of quarter-tone music, devoted exclusively to the performance of the works of Ivan Vyschnegradsky, which strikes me as the most important event of the month.

Messiaen then describes in detail the programme performed and the mechanics of quarter-tone performance, before detailing his own reaction to the music:

Il y a donc ici, non seulement des contours mélodiques connus et appréciés des seuls Indous (grands fervents de modes à quarts de ton, comme chacun sait), mais encore un matériel harmonique absolument nouveau qui nous apporte des prismes, des grappes d'accords, des carillons touffus, d'aériennes guirlandes.<sup>91</sup>

Thus, one could find here not only the melodic contours known and appreciated solely by the Hindus (great devotees of quarter-tone modes as everyone knows) but also harmonic material that is absolutely new and which brings us prisms, chord clusters [grappes d'accords], dense carillons and airy garlands.

The tone of the article suggests that this was Messiaen's first experience of quarter-tone music, and so suggests that his own experimental work in quarter-tones was in some way inspired by this concert - the chronology would also seem to support such an assertion.<sup>92</sup> More

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<sup>89</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Billet Parisien: Quatre Opéras-bouffes', *La Sirène* (Sep 1937), 11. See: Appendix I: II/6.

<sup>90</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Chronique de Paris [March 1937]', *La Sirène* (Mar 1937), 14. See: Appendix I: II/1.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*, 14.

<sup>92</sup> There is one unpublished work in quarter-tones in the Messiaen catalogue: the *Deux Monodies en quarts de ton* for Ondes Martenot written in 1938. Although quarter-tone music seems to have been something of a tangent to Messiaen's career, Paul Griffiths and Anthony Pople both mention the possibility of the wider influence of the quarter-tone innovator Ivan Vyschnegradsky. They note Messiaen's awareness of the Russian composer by citing the brief references to Vyschnegradsky and quarter-tone music in *Technique de mon langage musical* of 1944, where Messiaen looks forward to the expansion of his 'modes of limited transposition' using quarter-tone scales. Vyschnegradsky published two articles in the mid-1930s that could have prompted Messiaen's interest in quarter-

significant, however, are Messiaen's terms of expression in the article, which strongly suggest that he saw affinities between Vyschnegradsky's music and his own compositions. Messiaen frequently uses the expression 'chord clusters' ('grappes d'accords') in connection with his own music, whilst 'prisms' are another preoccupation of the time – the *Chants de terre et de ciel* of 1938, for example, were originally entitled *Prismes*. The most significant expression here, however, is the reference to Hindu music. It is well known that Hindu rhythm was a touchstone for Messiaen throughout his life, but there is good evidence that in the 1930s Messiaen saw affinities between Hindu music and his own that extended beyond the rhythmic. This is made clear by the final exercise of his *Vingt Leçons d'harmonie* of 1939, for example, where an exercise in the distinctive *style Messiaen* is described as 'style très spécial, se rapprochant un peu des cantilènes hindoues' ('a very special style, almost like Hindu melodies').<sup>93</sup>

Since Messiaen apparently considered his own style to be related to Hindu music, it follows that any other music he described as 'Hindu' must have some affinity with his own. In this case, then, Messiaen's reference to 'the Hindus' suggests that he saw a link between Vyschnegradsky's music and his own. Elsewhere in the journalism, he detected affiliations with Hindu music in many other composers, such as Georges Migot, Paul Dukas and Elsa Barraine,<sup>94</sup> and as we shall see, these are composers with whom he had other personal connections.

Messiaen's review of Tournemire's *L'Orgue mystique* is one of the most fascinating of all his early writings. This extended organ cycle is often said to have exerted a special influence on Messiaen and yet there are no specific comments on it in his later writings or

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tones, but beyond this there has been no evidence of any connection between the two composers in the pre-war period. It is easier to trace an association between the two composers in later years: a concert devoted to Vyschnegradsky's music was given in 1945 by Yvette Grimaud, Serge Nigg, Pierre Boulez and Yvonne Loriod, all students of Messiaen, and in later life Messiaen corresponded with Vyschnegradsky. See: Lucile Gayden, Ivan Wyschnegradsky (Frankfurt, 1973), 22; *ibid.*, 31. Claire Delbos's setting of Psalm CXLI, composed between 1941 and 1945, also uses quarter-tones extensively.

<sup>93</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Vingt Leçons d'harmonie* (Paris, 1939), 4.

<sup>94</sup> Messiaen notes the use of a 'Hindu mode' in Tournemire's *Sept Choral-Poemes pour les sept paroles du Christ en croix* ['L'Orgue', *Le Monde musical* (31 Mar 1938), 84. See: Appendix I: III/12.]; Of Migot's *Premier Livre d'orgue*, he writes: 'Leurs lignes souples ou têtues — qu'il procèdent des modes grecs, de quelques modes indous et des maîtres français du 16<sup>e</sup> siècle' ['L'Orgue', *Le Monde musical* (31 Mar 1938), 84. See: Appendix I: III/12.]; The 'Chant des filles d'Orlamonde' in Dukas's *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue* contains 'quelques pimentations modales d'origine grecque ou indoue' [*Ariane et Barbe-bleue* de Paul Dukas', *La Revue musicale*, 166 (June 1936), 79-86. See: Appendix I: I/1.]; Barraine's *Fête des colonies* contains 'une poésie étonnante où frissonne toute l'âme orientale concentrée dans l'Inde et ses fleurs de lotus' ['Billet Parisien: Les Fêtes de la lumière', *La Sirène*, July 1937, 18-19. See: Appendix I: II/5.]

interviews.<sup>95</sup> In this 1938 article, however, Messiaen gives a detailed appreciation. He considers each of the different parts of the service in turn, but his most detailed description – and rapturous praise – is reserved for the ‘Pièce terminale’ that concludes each service:

La ‘Pièce terminale’ est le triomphe de l’art Tournemiresque. Elle est toujours très longue, et résume les idées religieuses importantes de chaque fête, en paraphrasant les textes des ‘séquences’, ‘hymnes’ ou ‘alléluias’ propres. Château intérieur des sentiments et grâces correspondant à chaque mystère, vitrail sonore où le fortissimo de l’orgue déploie ses splendeurs et prolonge le temps, la liberté rhapsodique de sa forme qui semble défier toute analyse, est cependant soigneusement agencée, édifiée. La fantaisie immatérielle de ses rythmes, la somptuosité de ses harmonies, les reflets changeants de ses modes caméléonesques, les pierres précieuses de ses mixtures, et surtout la joyeuse et suave fantaisie de ses mélodies alléluïatiques qui semblent percer la matière avec la subtilité d’un corps glorieux, en font une merveille d’art mi-gothique, mi-ultra moderne, de la plus éblouissante originalité.<sup>96</sup>

The ‘Pièce terminale’ is the great triumph of Tournemire’s art. It is always very long and summarises the important religious ideas of each feast-day by paraphrasing the music of the proper sequences, hymns and alleluias. Like an inner castle of sentiments and graces corresponding to each mystery, like a sounding stained-glass where the fortissimo of the organ reveals its splendours and prolongs time, its rhapsodic freedom of form seems to defy all analysis, despite being elegantly constructed. The ethereal fantasy of its rhythms, its sumptuous harmonies, the glittering reflections of its cameleonesque modes, the precious stones of its mixtures and above all the joyous and subtle fantasy of its alleluiaic melodies, which seem to move with the mysteriousness of a *corps glorieux*, combine in a marvel of dazzling originality: half gothic, half ultra-modern.

This paragraph clearly imparts a great enthusiasm for Tournemire’s work. The use of the phrase ‘subtilité d’un corps glorieux’ (one of the properties of the *corps glorieux*, or risen bodies of the elect, given in the 11<sup>th</sup> article of the Creed in the catechism of St. Pius X) is very arresting, since it is also the name of the first piece in Messiaen’s organ cycle of the following year, *Les Corps glorieux*. Furthermore, the assessment of Tournemire’s achievement as ‘half gothic, half ultra-modern’ foreshadows later comments made about Messiaen himself.

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<sup>95</sup> Paul Griffiths, for example, claims it as evidence that Tournemire was Messiaen’s ‘musical godparent’ on the basis of its title alone [Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 24.]. A detailed comparison of the work with Messiaen’s early music has not, it seems, been attempted, presumably because of the almost prohibitively grand scale of Tournemire’s cycle, in which each of the fifty-one services is a substantial work in itself. Messiaen’s article on *L’Orgue mystique*, however, gives an unprecedented opportunity to examine Tournemire’s work through the filter of his 1938 preoccupations. Not only does he pick out general aspects that he finds striking, but he also indicates specific parts of particular services which he considers worthy of praise. Taken as a whole, the article reads as a ‘map’ of Tournemire’s work through Messiaen’s eyes.

<sup>96</sup> Olivier Messiaen, ‘Billet Parisien: *L’Orgue mystique* de Tournemire’, *La Sylrinx* (May 1938), 27. See: Appendix I: II/12.

Messiaen draws particular attention to those aspects of Tournemire's style that show some affiliation with his own – noting Tournemire's 'ethereal' rhythms and his 'prolongation of time'. Once again, the real significance of this passage lies in the language in which Messiaen praises his elder contemporary, which is closely related to that which he later used to explain the aspirations of his own music: 'sounding stained-glass', 'precious stones' and 'chameleonesque modes'. Like his references to Hindu music elsewhere, Messiaen's use of these expressions constructs a link between Tournemire's music and his own. Describing his use of chord clusters to Claude Samuel, for example, Messiaen said:

Ces grappes d'accords donnent à mon écriture un aspect de pierreries, de chatoiement, de vitrail, assez caractéristique.<sup>97</sup>

Chord clusters give my writing an aspect of precious stones, of shimmering, of stained-glass, which is rather characteristic.

The image of 'precious stones' is one that Messiaen gleaned from Paul Dukas's opera *Ariane et Barbe-bleue*. In his article on that work for *La Revue musicale*, which is contemporaneous with the Tournemire article, Messiaen describes in some detail the 'jewel scene' in which the successive discovery of differently coloured jewels is accompanied by versions of a theme in different tonalities. These 'precious stones' are an early manifestation of Messiaen's curious unification of colour and sound. (Dukas's opera no doubt only helped cement ideas that were already well formed in the young composer's mind.)

The image of 'sounding stained glass' was a particularly apt one for Messiaen to use when explaining his desire to dazzle and overwhelm the listener, since it combines the religious intention and timelessness he sought with a tacit reminder of the human craftsmanship upon which it relies. The presence of these images in Messiaen's discussion of *L'Orgue mystique* prompts me to conclude that Tournemire's music embodied Messiaen's aesthetic aspirations for his own music, and that Messiaen had acknowledged this, at least to himself. Thus, it provides some evidence for Paul Griffiths's claim that Tournemire was Messiaen's 'musical godparent'.

In later discussions, however, Messiaen never referred to Tournemire in these terms, so I must also conclude that he later preferred to underplay Tournemire's role in his own development. Whilst Mozart, Debussy and Wagner are all described as 'coloured' composers in the Samuel interviews of 1967 and 1986, Tournemire is not, and he receives only a very

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<sup>97</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Oliver Messiaen*, 193.

brief mention as a figure that dominated the French organ school before Messiaen.<sup>98</sup> In these extensive interviews, Messiaen generally seems very open about his music, but there is much that is left unsaid and this article on Tournemire provides a good example of how Messiaen's attitude to public statements of any kind changed through his career. Messiaen's kinship with Tournemire leaps off the page in this early essay, while later pronouncements are measured almost to the point of secrecy.

Vocabulary that matches Messiaen's discussions of his own music, and references to Hindu music, feature prominently in Messiaen's early writing, prompting two possible conclusions. Either he did not feel isolated in his preoccupations, but, on the contrary, saw them as part of a larger movement among his contemporaries and immediate predecessors – Tournemire and Vyschnegradsky, but also Dukas, Migot, Barraine and others. Alternatively, he might have felt it necessary artificially to construct a wider framework for his own innovations. In either case, he was placing his music in a broader context, either by publicly setting out a network that he genuinely perceived, or by using his published writing to generate a framework with which his music could interlock. Messiaen was looking outwards, not inwards.

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<sup>98</sup> *ibid.*, 200-201.

## 5 Networks and Collaborations

### 5.1 Colleagues

#### Student Comrades

Olivier Messiaen, l'une des natures les plus sincèrement originales de la génération montante. A ses côtes [*sic*], une cohorte aussi nombreuse que prometteuse: Delannoy, Thiriet, Lesur, Grünenwald [*sic*], Langlais, Duruflé, Françaix, Tomasi, Barraud, Jolivet, Baudrier, Hubeau, et j'en passe.<sup>1</sup>

Olivier Messiaen is one of the most sincerely original characters of the younger generation. On either side of him, a cohort as numerous as it is promising: Delannoy, Thiriet, Lesur, Grunenwald, Langlais, Duruflé, Françaix, Tomasi, Barraud, Jolivet, Baudrier, Hubeau, and that's not all.

Already in 1937, Messiaen is marked out as the leader of his generation. But the striking image in Bernard's passage quoted above – of a young Messiaen flanked by contemporaries – contrasts notably with the 'apartness' that characterises later accounts of Messiaen. Of course, we could explain this disparity by reference to the stature that Messiaen gradually gained as a composer, which far outstripped even his nearest challenger on this list of 'cohorts'. Bernard's comment, however, reminds us that Messiaen was but one young composer among many, 'as numerous as they are promising'. In fact, many of the composers Bernard mentions, who were to form the core of the next generation of French musicians, teachers and administrators, were good friends of Messiaen and colleagues from his student years at the Paris Conservatoire. His early career was intertwined with theirs, especially in the period before the Second World War, and it is therefore essential that these relationships be considered. In this chapter, I examine different ways that Messiaen worked with and alongside his contemporaries in the early phase of his career – firstly by considering the student colleagues with whom he worked in his early career, then examining the various professional groups within which Messiaen operated. The picture that emerges is of a young composer who, in social and professional terms, is far from isolated from his contemporaries.

In 1922-23, Denis Joly and Daniel-Lesur joined Messiaen in Jean Gallon's harmony class, and they were, it seems, Messiaen's closest friends during his student years. Daniel-Lesur's friendship with Messiaen was life-long; Joly was perhaps less significant in the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Bernard, 'Coup d'Œil sur l'année musicale', *Etudes* (5 Oct 1937), 64.



development of Messiaen's career, but he was nonetheless an important friend during their student years. Parental letters from Cécile Sauvage to Denis Joly's mother detail the many afternoons that the two boys spent studying together; Joly later provided emotional support for Messiaen after his mother's death.<sup>2</sup>

Jean Gallon's class was the source of other friendships. In the academic year 1924-25, a precocious newcomer to the class won *1<sup>er</sup> Prix*, and she and Messiaen became good friends. This was Elsa Barraine, who later became only the third woman to win the *Premier Grand Prix de Rome*. Messiaen's fifth and final year in Gallon's class brought him into contact with other young students who were to prove important to his burgeoning career. Henriette Roget, who later premiered Messiaen's *Préludes* and is their dedicatee, also joined Gallon's class at this time. In the academic year 1927-28, Messiaen embarked on his studies with Paul Dukas and in this class he was again joined by Elsa Barraine, and by Claude Arrieu who became another close friend and confidante. Arrieu later won a *1<sup>er</sup> Prix* in composition in 1932 and was consistently promoted by Messiaen; she was also a very close friend of Barraine. The fellowship between Messiaen and Arrieu is recorded in many letters that are preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale. Messiaen's first letter to her is signed 'your comrade'<sup>3</sup> and the evidence suggests that this was not an idle expression. As we shall see, there was a genuine sense of camaraderie among this group of young musicians, an indication of which is given by

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<sup>2</sup> In a letter posted from Fuligny, the young composer confided:

Le 26 août approche. Tu sais quels tristes souvenirs il évoque pour moi. Comme je vois chaque jour la poésie et le rayonnement que ma pauvre mère mettait autour d'elle et de ceux qui vivaient avec elle! [F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, L.a. Messiaen. (Letter sent 17 Aug 1929).]

The 2 August approaches. You know what sad memories it evokes in me. As I see every day the poetry and radiance that my poor mother wove around her and those who lived with her!

In 1980, after Joly's death, Messiaen petitioned Leduc to publish Joly's *Variations pour Piano*. In the event, they were published elsewhere, but Messiaen provided an introduction that speaks fondly of their relationship:

Denis Joly fut mon camarade à la classe d'harmonie de Jean Gallon au Conservatoire de Paris. Nous étions, tous les deux, très jeunes à cette époque, et nous parlions beaucoup de musique ensemble, après les classes: nos discussions sur les maîtres musiciens du passé et du présent fortifiaient notre amitié. Cette amitié ne s'est jamais diminuée: elle a duré plus de cinquante ans, et quand la vie et des occupations différentes nous ont séparés, nous nous retrouvions cependant dans des réunions, au Conservatoire de Paris, et toujours avec les mêmes discussions sur la musique et le même enthousiasme. [Olivier Messiaen, preface to: Denis Joly, *Variations pour Piano* (Sainte-Étienne, 1987), [n.p.].]

Denis Joly was my comrade in Jean Gallon's harmony class at the Paris Conservatoire. We were both very young at this time and we talked a great deal about music together, after classes: our discussion on the great musicians of the past and present strengthened our friendship. This friendship never diminished: it lasted more than 50 years, and when life and work separated us, we met up nevertheless at the Paris Conservatoire, always with the same discussions on music and the same enthusiasm.

<sup>3</sup> F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, N.L.a. 27 (021). [Letter sent 13 Apr 1929.]

an undated sketch by Barraine that shows herself, Arrieu and Messiaen along with Dukas, Joly and André Chailleux in characterful silhouettes.<sup>4</sup>

Dupré's organ class, which Messiaen joined in October 1927, brought him into contact with other young musicians who would subsequently prove important. Among these was Jean Langlais, who became another close friend. Langlais was blind, and Messiaen devoted his Wednesday evenings to helping his friend learn to orchestrate. Messiaen would read scores aloud to him, allowing Langlais to learn from scores that were not available in Braille notation.<sup>5</sup> A sense of the closeness of these relationships is given by the circumstances of the marriage of Messiaen and Claire Delbos, on 22 June 1932. Langlais attended,<sup>6</sup> whilst Claude Arrieu was Delbos's *demoiselle d'honneur*.<sup>7</sup>

This network of friends and colleagues was crucial in the early part of Messiaen's career, and the young composer was obviously convinced of the mutually beneficial effects of joining forces with others. A concert for Les Amis de L'Orgue in February 1930 demonstrates the central role that Messiaen's colleagues played in the development of his career. In a concert that probably marked Messiaen's Paris *début* as recitalist, the young organist performed his *Diptyque* alongside music by Bach and Schütz, as well as new music by his colleagues Jean Langlais and Henriette Roget (dedicatee and first performer of Messiaen's *Préludes*). A critic for *Le Ménestrel* noted the sense of fellowship that this programming revealed:

M. Messiaen, animé d'un esprit de camaraderie que nul ne saurait blâmer, révéla à son auditoire quelques pièces inédites: ce furent, en dehors du *Diptyque* déjà cité, *Deux Préludes* de Jean Langlais, et une pièce, fort séduisante de couleur, de Mlle Roget.<sup>8</sup>

Messiaen, driven by a spirit of camaraderie for which no one can blame him, revealed to his audience some unpublished pieces: apart from the *Diptyque* which has already been mentioned, these were *Deux Préludes* by Jean Langlais, and a very seductively coloured piece by Mlle Roget.

These ties were maintained for some time after Messiaen left the Conservatoire. A 'Récital Olivier Messiaen' held on 29 January 1935 comprised several works by Messiaen –

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<sup>4</sup> Reproduced in Françoise Masset, *Une Femme, un compositeur: Claude Arrieu* (Doctoral diss., Univ. de Paris-Sorbonne, 1985), 36. [F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, Vmb 7274].

<sup>5</sup> Marie-Louise Jaquet-Langlais, *Ombre et lumière* (Paris, 1995), 83.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, 70.

<sup>7</sup> F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, N.L.a. 27 (021-2). [Letter sent 7 June 1932.]

<sup>8</sup> 'M.P.', 'Les Amis de L'Orgue (20 février)', *Le Ménestrel* (28 Feb 1930), 100.

*L'Ascension*, *Apparition de L'Eglise éternelle* and *Le Banquet céleste* – interspersed with music by Daniel-Lesur, Jean Langlais, Marcel Dupré and Claire Delbos.<sup>9</sup>

The spirit of fraternity worked both ways: the same colleagues often gave first and repeat performances of Messiaen's music. Henriette Roget's *première* of the *Préludes* in March 1930 shows the seriousness with which such tasks were undertaken – the relative difficulty of this work suggests it would have required considerable preparation and *Le Ménestrel* described her performance as 'penetrating'.<sup>10</sup> Jean Langlais was particularly supportive of Messiaen and incorporated practically all of his early organ music into his repertoire. He frequently performed *Le Banquet céleste*, *Diptyque* and *Apparition de L'Eglise éternelle*.<sup>11</sup>

The extent of this camaraderie is shown particularly well by a concert that was given in November 1932 by Le Cercle Musical de Paris. Messiaen was invited to present a concert devoted to his works, but asked Claude Arrieu to share the concert with him.<sup>12</sup> The programme included the *première* of Messiaen's *Thème et variations*, and Messiaen wrote to Jean Langlais explicitly asking for his support:

Tu seras bien gentil de faire beaucoup de bruit et de bisser cette œuvre [*Thème et variations*] qui est une de mes meilleures à moins que tu ne préfères siffler, ce qui ferait également beaucoup de bruit.<sup>13</sup>

It would be very kind of you if you could make lots of noise and cheer this work [*Thème et variations*] which is one of my best – that's to say if you don't want to hiss, though that will make just as much noise.

Messiaen's *Thème et variations* was accompanied by his *Préludes* and the *Trois Mélodies*, interspersed with some piano pieces and songs by Arrieu.<sup>14</sup> The two composers took turns at the piano, whilst in Messiaen's new work, Claire Delbos played the violin part and Arrieu turned the pages for the composer at the piano. Claude Altomont, writing in *Le Ménestrel*, noted that:

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<sup>9</sup> 'M.P.', 'Récital Olivier Messiaen (29 janvier)', *Le Ménestrel* (3 Feb 1935).

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Baruzi, 'Société Nationale de Musique (1<sup>er</sup> mars)', *Le Ménestrel* (7 Mar 1930).

<sup>11</sup> *Le Banquet céleste* performed, for example, at a concert on 6 Mar 1935, see: Marie-Louise Jaquet-Langlais, *Ombre et lumière*, 85; *Diptyque* performed, for example, at a concert on 28 Dec 1930, see: Marie-Louise Jaquet-Langlais, *Ombre et lumière*, 65; *Apparition de l'Eglise éternelle* performed, for example, at a concert in Aug 1933, see: Marie-Louise Jaquet-Langlais, *Ombre et lumière*, 72.

<sup>12</sup> F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, N.L.a 27 (021-2). [Letter sent 13 Oct 1932.]

<sup>13</sup> Marie-Louise Jaquet-Langlais, *Ombre et lumière*, 71.

<sup>14</sup> It is difficult to verify exactly what music these vague titles refer to. Arrieu composed several works for piano before 1932: *Petit Canard* (1928), *Marche*, *Etude*, *Choral* (1929) and *La Boîte à Malice* (1931, though the first performance is given by Françoise Masset as 28 Apr 1932). She had also composed several songs by this time.

D'analogues influences semblent s'être exercées sur ces diverses œuvres et ainsi il était intéressant qu'elles fussent rassemblées sur un même programme.<sup>15</sup>

Analogous influences seemed to be acting on the various works, and it was therefore interesting that they were combined in the same programme.

It is difficult now to see the similarities that Altomont mentions between the early music of Messiaen and Arrieu, since Arrieu's style seems closer to the sound world of Les Six.

Nonetheless, Altomont's comparison between Messiaen and Arrieu is striking because, like the quotation from Bernard that opened this chapter, it is in opposition to the preconceived image of the 'isolated' Messiaen. Direct comparison of Messiaen with his contemporaries is rare in post-war writing on the composer: whilst scholars have occasionally considered the composer in relation to his musical predecessors, or surveyed his influence on subsequent generations, his place among his own contemporaries has not, in general, been examined.<sup>16</sup>

This casual remark by Altomont thus becomes a vivid reminder that Messiaen was but the most famous of an entire generation of Conservatoire-trained musicians and composers.

## Friendly Reviews

Messiaen's journalism reveals that he was generous and forthright in his public support of his colleagues – often to the point of naïvety. It was a rather sarcastic commentary on Messiaen's tendency to write glowing reviews of his friends' music that first drew my attention to the possibility that the Messiaen bibliography was incomplete. In the 1930s, *La Revue musicale* published a regular 'review of reviews', an index and commentary of articles from the world's musical press, presented with occasional commentary. In the review for May 1937, an article published in what was then a new Belgian journal, *La Sirène*, prompted this response:

Une chronique de Paris, signée par Olivier Messiaen, débute par ces mots désenchantés: 'Musique morne, grise, beaucoup de faux classique et de Scarlatti dissonancé, pauvreté rythmique générale, perte totale de l'émotion mélodique.' Qu'on se rassure! L'espoir renaît bientôt dans le cœur ulcéré de M. Messiaen. Deux (sur trois) des quatre musiciens dont il est lui-même l'un des représentants sont capables d'écrire des œuvres 'courts, délicieusement polytonales, et d'une suave qualité de

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<sup>15</sup> Claude Altomont, 'Cercle musical de Paris (22 Novembre)', *Le Ménestrel* (2 Dec 1932), 490.

<sup>16</sup> There are a few exceptions, like, for example, Bridget Conrad's thesis on Jolivet, Messiaen and Varèse. [Bridget F. Conrad, *The Sources of Jolivet's Musical Language and his Relationships with Varèse and Messiaen* (Doctoral diss: City University of New York, 1994).]

timbre' ou d'autres dont 'les dissonances... c'est décidément un parti pris – [sic] raffinés ou cruelles s'allient à une grande maîtrise d'écriture et de forme.'

C'est déjà beaucoup d'être à la fois compositeur et critique, et l'on risque fort de passer, aux heures de misanthropie, pour un mauvais camarade. Le problème se complique pour le critique doublé d'un compositeur et d'un militant appartenant à un groupe. On risque fort d'écrire de critiques qu'on voudrait impartiales et qui, en toute bonne foi, pourraient passer pour des placards de publicité.<sup>17</sup>

A 'Parisian Chronicle', signed by Olivier Messiaen, begins with these disenchanted words: 'Doleful, dull music, lots of fake classicism and dissonanced Scarlatti, a general lack of rhythm and a total absence of melodic emotion'. But, we can feel reassured! Hope remains in M. Messiaen's ulcerated heart. Two (out of three) of the four musicians of whom he is himself a representative are capable of writing works that are 'short, deliciously polytonal with a smooth timbral quality' or in which 'both refined and cruel dissonances are combined' – on purpose, of course – 'with great artistry in the writing and form'

It is already a lot to be both critic and composer, and one greatly risks – in one's misanthropic hours – coming across as a poor comrade. The problem is even more complex for the critic who doubles as a composer and as a militant member of a group. One greatly risks writing critiques that one intends impartially, but which might in all honesty pass for publicity material.

(Note the editor's description of Messiaen as a 'militant' – to which I will return in 8.1.) This rather stinging rebuke was the result of Messiaen's first review for *La Sirène*, in which works by his Jeune France colleagues Daniel-Lesur and Jolivet are compared to 'rays of light' brightening a 'sad landscape'. Such conspicuous criticism from *La Revue musicale* did not discourage Messiaen from supporting his friends again. In fact, Messiaen consistently promoted the music of Jean Langlais, Georges Dandelot, Elsa Barraine, André Jolivet, Georges Migot, Daniel-Lesur – who were all good friends – and that of Claire Delbos. Such comradely endorsement could range from a brief mention, indicating the 'significance' of a work, to the extensive article that Messiaen wrote for *La Syrinx* about Jolivet's *Mana*, an article that later formed the basis for a preface to the work.<sup>18</sup>

In 1936 and 1937 he penned two short reviews of the organist Guy Lambert,<sup>19</sup> in which he praised Lambert's performance and choice of programme:

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<sup>17</sup> [unsigned editorial], *La Revue musicale* 174 (1937), viii.

<sup>18</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Billet Parisien: Le *Mana* de Jolivet', *La Sirène* (Dec 1937), 8-10. See: Appendix I: II/8. Olivier Messiaen, preface to: André Jolivet, *Mana* (Paris, 1946).

<sup>19</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Récital Guy Lambert', *Le Monde musical* (30 Apr 1936), 124. See: Appendix I: III/5. Olivier Messiaen, 'Les Récitals d'orgue: Albert Beauchamp et Guy Lambert', *Le Monde musical* (31 Mar 1937), 74. See: Appendix I: III/8.

Programme très intéressant [...] Guy Lambert est un vaillant. Il défend régulièrement à Lyon (au concert ou à l'office) les œuvres de jeunes écrivains de l'orgue: Duruflé, Langlais, Claire Delbos, Daniel-Lesur, Fleury, Litaize, *etc.*<sup>20</sup>

A very interesting programme... Guy Lambert is a man of bravery. He regularly performs in Lyon the works of the young organ composers, whether in concert or during services: Duruflé, Langlais, Claire Delbos, Daniel-Lesur, Fleury, Litaize, *etc.*

All the young composers cited are, without exception, Messiaen's friends, colleagues or family. Like Langlais and Daniel-Lesur, Litaize and Duruflé were colleagues from the Conservatoire, whilst André Fleury was another member of the Parisian organ community, with whom Messiaen had shared concerts and who gave an early performance in London of *La Nativité*.<sup>21</sup> I cannot but assume that modesty prompted Messiaen to subsume himself into the '*etc.*'.

Messiaen's article for *La Sirène* in June 1937 reveals considerable audacity:

Dans les concerts privés, il faut signaler tout d'abord à la Spirale un cycle de mélodies pour chant et piano de Claire Delbos *L'Ame en bourgeon*. Ce cycle, d'une ardente, tendre et triste sensibilité féminine orne et épouse à ravir les poèmes de maternité de Cécile Sauvage. La déclamation – toujours vocale et si proche du 'parlé' cependant – y est admirable de naturel. Le bout enrichi d'harmonies délicatement et subtilement audacieuses. Mentionnons encore le retissant concert symphonique 'Jeune France' qui sous la direction du magique Roger Désormière, a réjouit tout le public parisien par quelques somptueuses premières auditions d'Yves Baudrier, André Jolivet et Daniel-Lesur.<sup>22</sup>

Among the private concerts, I must point out first of all a cycle of melodies for voice and piano by Claire Delbos: *L'Ame en bourgeon*, given by La Spirale. This cycle, of a passionate, tender and sad feminine sensibility, ornaments and delightfully embraces Cécile Sauvage's maternity poems. The declamation here is admirably natural – always vocal and sometimes very close to 'speaking'. The whole is enriched by delicately and subtly audacious harmonies. I must also mention the sensational Jeune France symphonic concert that, under the magical direction of Roger Désormière, delighted the Parisian public with some sumptuous *premières* by Yves Baudrier, André Jolivet and Daniel-Lesur.

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<sup>20</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Récital Guy Lambert', *Le Monde musical* (30 Apr 1936), 124. See: Appendix I: III/5.

<sup>21</sup> Duruflé was in the same piano accompaniment class as Messiaen in the academic years 1923-4 and 1924-5 and in the same composition classes as Messiaen in academic years 1926-7 (Widor) and 1927-8 (Dukas). F-Pan, Fonds AJ<sup>37</sup> 147 *Tableau annuel des classes. Première Série* 1923-4; F-Pan, Fonds AJ<sup>37</sup> 148 *Tableau annuel des classes. Première Série* 1924-5; F-Pan, Fonds AJ<sup>37</sup> 490 *Tableau annuel des classes. Première Série* 1926-7; F-Pan, Fonds AJ<sup>37</sup> 491 *Tableau annuel des classes. Première Série* 1927-8. Litaize studied with Dupré at the same time as Messiaen, in academic year 1927-8 and 1928-9. F-Pan, Fonds AJ<sup>37</sup> 491 *Tableau annuel des classes. Première Série* 1927-8; F-Pan, Fonds AJ<sup>37</sup> 492 *Tableau annuel des classes. Première Série* 1928-9. For Fleury's performance of *La Nativité*, see: ed. and tr. Nigel Simeone, "Bien Cher Félix..." *Letters from Olivier Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod to Felix Aprahamian* (Cambridge, 1998), 7.

<sup>22</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Billet Parisien [June 1937]', *La Sirène* (Jun 1937), 14. See: Appendix I: II/4.

The poetry upon which Delbos's music was based was, of course, the famed cycle that Cécile Sauvage had composed whilst expecting Messiaen. The poems frequently address him directly and are dedicated 'pour Olivier Messiaen'. Thus, Messiaen was reviewing music composed by his wife, to words by his mother that are addressed to him. The reference to the Jeune France concert also skirts daintily around Messiaen himself: the greatest success of this concert was the *première* of 'Action de grâces' from the *Poèmes pour Mi*, in its orchestral form.<sup>23</sup> Doubtless, Messiaen felt his colleagues were worthy of such praise, but we have to question his judgement in electing to promote them so prominently in articles that purport to be objective reviews. It is difficult to discern whether he was taking a calculated risk or acting naïvely. Perhaps he felt that he could support them so explicitly because the article would be published outside his immediate musical circle in Brussels and not in Paris; in any case, it was a highly partisan exploitation of his position as reviewer.

Messiaen's public support for his colleagues was returned by them, some of whom penned positive reviews of his music, or of music by Claire Delbos. Daniel-Lesur, for example, enthusiastically reviewed a concert that included Messiaen's *Fantaisie burlesque* and *Thème et variations*, in which he noted 'harmonies vraiment neuves et une saisissante transfiguration de thème' ('Harmonies that are truly new, and a striking thematic transformation').<sup>24</sup> Messiaen received public support from various other colleagues, including his Conservatoire classmates Jean Langlais and Tony Aubin, and others with whom (as we shall see) he collaborated professionally, like Georges Dandelot, and Paul Le Flem.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> 'Action de grâces', the first movement of *Poèmes pour Mi* was performed at this concert (4 Jun 1937) by Marcelle Bunlet and the Orchestre Symphonique de Paris under the direction of Roger Désormière.

<sup>24</sup> Daniel-Lesur, 'Cercle Musical de Paris', *Le Monde musical* (31 Mar 1934), 97. See also his review of a Société Nationale performance by Messiaen: Daniel-Lesur, [Review], *Le Monde musical* (28 Feb 1935), 65.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g.: Jean Langlais, 'La Sérénade', *Le Monde musical* (31 Mar 1939), 94-95; Tony Aubin, [Review of Messiaen's *Préludes*], *Le Ménestrel* (15 Feb 1932), [...]; Georges Dandelot, 'Société Nationale', *Le Monde musical* (31 Jan 1936), [...]. Also, Paul Le Flem's reviews for *Comœdia*: Paul Le Flem, [review of *Les Offrandes oubliées*], *Comœdia* (23 Feb 1931), [...]; Paul Le Flem, [review of *La Mort du nombre*], *Comœdia* (18 Feb 1933), [...]; Paul Le Flem, [review of *Hymne au Saint Sacrement*], *Comœdia* (27 Mar 1933), [...].

## 5.2 Alliances

### Friends and Early Partnerships

Messiaen's collaboration with Daniel-Lesur, Yves Baudrier and André Jolivet as La Jeune France is noted in all the Messiaen literature and is discussed in Serge Gut's book on the group.<sup>26</sup> Messiaen's contribution to other concert societies and composers' groups is only now beginning to be acknowledged,<sup>27</sup> and investigation in this area reveals illuminating relationships and associations.

Messiaen's close association with the Société Nationale de Musique and more limited contact with the Société Musicale Indépendente (SMI) have already been discussed, but these were not Messiaen's only collaborations. From the correspondence available, it seems that he was also involved in an abortive attempt to form a more exclusive group in 1933. This group was to include Messiaen, Arrieu, Elsa Barraine, and one other (unknown) member, and the intention was to organise orchestral concerts that showcased the four young composers.<sup>28</sup> Plans must have been made mostly in person through the spring of 1933 because the correspondence deals only with major developments. In June of that year, Messiaen decided to visit Roger Désormière to persuade him to conduct their concert. A letter to Arrieu outlines the situation:

Chère amie,  
Je vais chez M. Désormière mardi 20 à 7h. J'irai *seul*: c'est préférable. Mais du nom des 'quatre'. *Envoyez-moi par retour une liste de vos œuvres d'orchestre avec le minutage, et vous préférences.*<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Serge Gut, *Le Groupe Jeune France* (Paris, 1977).

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g.: Nigel Simeone, 'Group Identities: La Spirale and La Jeune France', *Musical Times* (Autumn 2002), 10-36.

<sup>28</sup> Nigel Simeone suggests Jean Cartan, who was a friend of Arrieu and Messiaen who had died the previous year. Messiaen and Arrieu certainly wanted to include music by Cartan in a concert, as correspondence shows, but the idea of a 'composer's group' including a dead composer seems unusual. See: Nigel Simeone, 'Offrandes oubliées: Messiaen in the 1930s', *Musical Times* (Winter 2000), 35. Jacques Porte is also a possibility, since he wrote to Messiaen in late 1932 to suggest a group (see 8.2). His name, however, is mentioned nowhere in the subsequent correspondence. See: F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, N.L.a.27 (021-2) [Letter sent 1 Dec 1932].

<sup>29</sup> F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, N.L.a.27 (021-3). [Letter sent 16 Jun 1933. Original underlining is rendered in italics.]



Dear Friend,

I am going to M. Désormière's house on Tuesday 20 at seven. I will go *alone*. This is preferable. But in the name of the 'four'. *Send me by return a list of your orchestral works with lengths, and your preferences.*

The meeting did not go well however, and the following letter reveals the discouragement Messiaen felt:

Chère amie,

Je sors de chez Désormière. Lamentable! Il nous connaît, nous estime etc. mais ne fera rien sans 50.000frs! Il est très gentil, seulement c'est cher! Il m'a dit de m'adresser à M. Marie (administrateur de l'OSP [Orchestre Symphonique de Paris]). En ce cas il dirigerait l'OSP, séance relativement courte: 20.000F!

Ou: taper Mme de Polignac, ce qui me paraît chanceux.

Je crois qu'il n'y a qu'à renoncer.

Ne m'en veuillez pas: ce n'est pas ma faute et j'ai parlé avec toute la vigueur possible. Mais l'argent est le nerf de la guerre... [original elipsis] Les amateurs connus se lancent à coup d'argent et Les Six ont profité de relations mondaines que nous n'aurons jamais et de circonstances spéciales qui n'existent plus: la peinture cubiste, Picasso, Chirico, la dadaïsme etc.

Mon avis, qui est je crois celui d'un sage:

Cela ne sert à rien de se faire jouer pour être à côté de médiocres et faire soi-même des demi-œuvres. Puisque ce nous sommes quatre talents, vrais, cherchons, recueillons-nous et faisons chacun notre chef-d'œuvre. Ce jour-là nous sortirons par la force de la beauté et sinon nous aurons du moins la satisfaction d'être grands, tout seuls.

Voilà.

J'ai vu Barraine que sera, je crois, de mon avis. Croyez à mes meilleures amitiés. S'il se présente une circonstance favorable, je ne demande pas mieux que de reprendre les choses en main. Vous savez quelle est mon amitié et mon estime pour mes 3 bons camarades. Mais il serait vain et vil de dépenser tant d'argent pour une gloire douteuse et passagère.<sup>30</sup>

Dear friend,

I have left Désormière. Lamentable! He knows us, admires us *etc.* but will not do anything without 50 000 francs! He is very kind, just expensive! He told me to contact M. Marie (administrator of the OSP [Orchestre Symphonique de Paris]). In this case, he would conduct a relatively short programme with the OSP, 20 000 francs!

Or: tap Mme de Polignac, which seems risky to me.

I think we have no option but to give up.

Don't blame me: it is not my fault, and I spoke with all possible vigour. But money is the sinews of war... The well-known amateurs launched themselves on a spending spree and Les Six profited from social connections which we will never have, and special circumstances which don't exist any more: cubist painting, Picasso, Chirico, Dadaïsm *etc.*

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<sup>30</sup> F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, N.L.a.27 (021-3). [Letter sent 21 Jun 1933.]. Also reproduced in translation in: Nigel Simeone, 'Offrandes oubliées: Messiaen in the 1930s', 35.

My advice, which I believe is wise:

There is no point in going among mediocrities to write half-works ourselves. Since we are four talents – true and inquiring – let us succeed by each writing our own masterpiece. At that time, we will find fame through the force of beauty, and if not, we will at least have the satisfaction of being great, alone.

That's it.

I have seen Barraine who will, I think, share my opinion. Best wishes. If a favourable circumstance arises, I could not ask for anything more than to take matters back in hand. You know my friendship and regard for my three comrades. But: it would be vain and vile to spend so much money on such a doubtful and fleeting glory.

These letters are highly revealing of Messiaen's role in this abortive attempt to form a composers' group. Messiaen's reference to the 'force de la beauté' suggests that the aesthetic of what might be called 'Les Quatre' was similar to that of La Jeune France; that is, a reaction against superficiality and a belief instead in the power of sincerity. A comparison with Les Six is made explicitly by Messiaen in the first letter through his use of the expression 'the four'. At the same time a real desire for recognition is revealed, tempered by moral unease at the sums of money involved – highlighting the financial practicalities of forming such a group. Finally, and crucially, the two letters above reveal that Messiaen himself was leading the organisation of the new group; it was he who decided to go to see Désormière alone, taking full control of the negotiations. Messiaen was not a half-hearted and passive participant; he was effectively leading the group.

The plans for 'Les Quatre' may be seen in a wider context as a reaction against two things. Messiaen and the other young composers were working in an environment where opposing dogmas were common. In many cases, rival factions had crystallised into concert societies that promoted particular styles or that were associated with particular institutions; the environment was partisan. At the same time, there were few concert societies or composers' groups whose aspirations Messiaen could readily share. La Sérénade, for example, tended to promote the neoclassical style that Messiaen and his colleagues wished to oppose.<sup>31</sup> The group Triton was considered more experimental but as with La Sérénade, the popular neoclassical style prevailed, and the slightly older and more established composers such as Milhaud, Honegger and Rivier dominated it. In such a position, a new union of likeminded colleagues must have seemed the only way forward. Messiaen later succeeded in this with La Jeune France, but we must remember that 'Les Quatre' was conceived some four years earlier.

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<sup>31</sup> Messiaen did, however, perform a concert for La Sérénade in 1939. This was a concert that included Claire Delbos's *Paraphrase* alongside Messiaen's *La Nativité*. See 5.2 (below).

Evidently, few significant changes in this partisan musical environment occurred in the period between 1932 and 1936.

## Later Collaborations

Messiaen's career as organist and composer was not his only focus in the first part of the 1930s; Messiaen's illustrious teaching career finds its comparatively humble beginnings only a few years after he left the Conservatoire. Jean Boivin's account of Messiaen's teaching, *La Classe de Messiaen*, is a superb source of detail on the style and content of the famous class that he later gave at the Conservatoire, but the exact chronology of Messiaen's first steps in teaching are difficult to ascertain. Boivin writes:

En fait, les repères chronologiques se révèlent plutôt contradictoires mais nous croyons comprendre qu'en 1934, Messiaen se voit confier, à l'École normale de musique, une classe d'accompagnement au piano, puis, en 1936, une classe d'improvisation à l'orgue; cette même année, il supervise aussi une classe de musique de chambre à la Schola Cantorum.

[Continues in a footnote:] C'est à Carla Huston Bell [...] que nous devons cette datation, qu'il nous a été impossible de vérifier auprès des deux institutions concernées, les archives de la Schola Cantorum ayant été détruites pendant la guerre par les Allemands – qui les ont brûlées pour se chauffer – tandis que celle de l'École normale ne gardent aucune trace de cet engagement. La majorité des biographes situent la double nomination à l'année 1936. Quant à Messiaen, il déclare à Claude Samuel avoir occupé ce double poste de 1934 à 1939, – on imagine concurremment – mais donne ailleurs l'année 1932 comme étant celle de son engagement [in Honegger's dictionary].

[...] Il est probable qu'à cette époque Messiaen enseigne également à titre privé, puisqu'en 1933, sans être attaché à aucune institution, il collabore à un traité collectif de solfège Vingt leçons de solfège moderne [*sic*].<sup>32</sup>

In fact, the chronology appears to be somewhat contradictory, but we believe that from 1934, Messiaen was entrusted with a piano accompaniment class at the Ecole normale de musique and then, in 1936, with a class in organ improvisation; this same year, he also supervised a class in chamber music at the Schola Cantorum.

[Continues in a footnote:] Carla Huston Bell [...] gives us this date, which has been impossible to verify at the two institutions concerned, the archives of the Schola Cantorum having been destroyed during the war by the Germans – who burnt them to keep warm – whilst the Ecole normale holds no record of this engagement. The majority of biographies place the double nomination in the year 1936. As for Messiaen, he told Claude Samuel that he occupied this double post from 1934 to 1939, – concurrently, one imagines – but gave the year 1932 as being that of his engagement [in Honegger's dictionary].

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<sup>32</sup> Jean Boivin, *La Classe de Messiaen* (Mesnil-sur-L'Estrée, 1995), 28.

[...] It is probable that at this time, Messiaen also taught privately, for in 1933, without being attached to any institution, he collaborated in a collective solfège treatise: *Vingt Leçons de solfège modernes*.

Since official records cannot provide corroboration, we are forced to look elsewhere.<sup>33</sup> Details about Messiaen's appointment at the Schola are few, but press notices allow one an insight into the chronology of Messiaen's career at the Ecole. In September 1933, *Le Monde musical* published a *Solfège* by Messiaen in its musical album, and introduced it thus:

Même dans un travail purement scolaire, un grand musicien peut donner la mesure de sa valeur. C'est le cas de M. Olivier Messiaen à qui nous avons demandé une leçon de solfège pour les examens du Diplôme d'enseignement de l'Ecole Normale de Musique et qui nous a envoyé la délicieuse page que nous publions aujourd'hui.<sup>34</sup>

Even in a purely scholarly endeavour, a great musician may show his value. This is the case of M. Olivier Messiaen, who was required to write a solfège exercise for the teaching diploma exam at the Ecole Normale de Musique and who provided the delightful page that we publish today.

The music is in Messiaen's own hand and is subtitled 'donné au Diplôme d'enseignement de l'Ecole Normale de Musique'. Looking back to the announcements that appeared at the end of the previous academic year, we find Messiaen's name listed among the examiners for the exams in solfège and sight-reading at the piano.<sup>35</sup> This strongly suggests that Messiaen did indeed teach at the Ecole Normale de Musique in the academic year 1932-33, confirming the information given in Honegger's dictionary.

The solfège exercise published by *Le Monde musical* forms part of Messiaen's contribution to *Vingt Leçons de solfège modernes* – being example 14 in that publication.<sup>36</sup> This first didactic publication was a collaborative affair: *Vingt Leçons de solfège modernes* was published in 1933 and included contributions from Georges Dandelot, Georges Hugon and Marc Starominsky, as well as Claude Arrieu and Messiaen.<sup>37</sup> Each exercise takes the form

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<sup>33</sup> Sources like the *Tribune de Saint Gervaise* were, unfortunately, discontinued at this time.

<sup>34</sup> [unsigned], 'Notre Album musicale', *Le Monde musical* (30 Sep 1933).

<sup>35</sup> [unsigned], 'Ecole Normale de Musique', *Le Monde musical* (30 Jun 1933).

<sup>36</sup> As Nigel Simeone has noted, there are some differences between the original exercise and the version published in *Vingt Leçons de solfège modernes*. See: Nigel Simeone, 'Offrandes oubliées: Messiaen in the 1930s', 38.

<sup>37</sup> A (perhaps mercifully) unsigned review of *Vingt Leçons de solfège modernes* in *Le Monde musical* mistakenly cites Stravinsky rather than Starominsky as the fifth contributor. ['Editions Musicales', *Le Monde musical* (31 Mar 1935).]

of a short piece with a solo line and piano accompaniment, with the solo line utilising the seven different clefs. Messiaen contributes five examples.<sup>38</sup>

Messiaen's association with the Schola, the beginnings of which are impossible to date precisely, seems to have had more important consequences for him in the long term. In any case, his appointment at the Schola made him part of a large professional body that included Georges Migot, Paul Le Flem, his old Conservatoire friend Daniel-Lesur, and Charles Kœchlin, one of the most prominent teachers of the day. Messiaen supported these colleagues in the same way that he had supported his Conservatoire friends, playing, for example, Kœchlin's *Premier Sonatine pour orgue* at a concert devoted to his colleague in April 1935, and promoting Migot's *Premier Livre d'orgue* in a glowing review for *La Revue musicale* in March 1938.<sup>39</sup>

An important result of this new group of comrades was the formation in 1935 of a new concert society – La Spirale – presided over by Georges Migot and administered by André Jolivet, Édouard Sciortino and Claire Delbos, with assistance from Messiaen, Le Flem, Le Fesvre and Daniel-Lesur.<sup>40</sup> The aims of the society were distinct from the other prevalent concert societies, and the programme of the first concert explained them like this:

Le Comité de 'La Spirale' se propose de coopérer à la diffusion des œuvres musicales contemporaines par des concerts d'œuvres françaises et par l'organisation de concerts d'échange avec les compositeurs des autres pays.

Il veut servir la musique et pour cela se propose moins de donner des 'premières auditions' que de faire réentendre des œuvres significatives.<sup>41</sup>

The Committee of 'La Spirale' proposes to cooperate in the dissemination of contemporary musical works through concerts of French works and by the organisation of exchange concerts with composers of other countries.

It wishes to serve music, and to that end it proposes to give fewer *premières* in order that repeat performances of significant works may be given.

Elsewhere, in the Belgian journal *Revue internationale de musique*, the group was more pithily described as a 'nouvelle organisation de propagande pour la musique moderne' ('new propaganda organisation for modern music').<sup>42</sup> La Spirale was therefore to provide a platform

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<sup>38</sup> Messiaen contributes 5 exercises; Hugon 5; Dandelot 6; Arrieu 3; and Starominsky 1. Olivier Messiaen [and other various authors], *Vingt Leçons de solfège modernes* (Paris, 1934).

<sup>39</sup> 'J.V.', 'Œuvres de Charles Kœchlin', *Le Ménestrel* (12 Apr 1935), 129. Olivier Messiaen, 'Le Premier Livre d'orgue de Georges Migot', *La Revue musicale* 182 (1938), 228. See: Appendix I: 1/2.

<sup>40</sup> Michel Duchesneau, *L'Avant-garde musicale à Paris de 1871 à 1939* (Liège, 1997), 142.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in: *ibid.*, 142.

<sup>42</sup> [unsigned], 'Les Anniversaires musicaux: petites nouvelles musicales', *Revue internationale de musique* 4 (1935), 716.

that would promote the familiarity of ‘significant works’ and would perform both French and foreign work (more international, therefore, in its outlook than the Société Nationale). The criteria for ‘significance’ are not laid out; presumably the committee would judge them. We might, therefore, expect the programmes to reflect a collective aesthetic position, but this is not at all obvious from the programming – indeed, what is most striking about the concerts organised by La Spirale is their diversity. Concerts were devoted to music from other countries, including evenings devoted to music from Holland on 14 May 1936 and a programme of American music on 6 March 1936 during which Messiaen accompanied a performance of songs by Ives to a disbelieving audience.<sup>43</sup> Also featured was music by Webern – his *5 Movements* (op. 5) – in a concert on 19 November 1936, a piece of programming that undermines Messiaen’s later claim that Webern was known in Paris only after the Second World War: ‘le nom de Webern n’avait jamais été prononcé à cette époque-là’ (the name Webern was never uttered at that time’).<sup>44</sup> At the same time, the new society was not ashamed to promote the music of its founders, and so we find the frequent programming of music by Messiaen, Delbos, Jolivet and Daniel-Lesur. The first performance of *Poèmes pour Mi* with Delbos’s *L’Ame en Bourgeon* on 28 April 1937, which Messiaen reviewed so enthusiastically, is but one example of such programming.

La Spirale’s key aim of allowing repeat performances of ‘significant’ works was enthusiastically and personally endorsed by Messiaen. Given the composer’s received image, we might expect his role in the society to be relatively discreet, but as with the case of ‘Les Quatre’, Messiaen played a prominent part. In 1936, Messiaen wrote a curious polemic against the cult of the *première* for the short-lived Parisian music journal *La Page musicale*:

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<sup>43</sup> Michel Duchesneau, *L’Avant-garde musicale à Paris de 1871 à 1939*, 143. Also: Nigel Simeone, ‘Group Identities: La Spirale and La Jeune France’, 28. The concert was also reviewed in *La Revue musicale*. Of *A Farewell to Land* the reviewer writes:

Cas extrême, et par là instructif, de naïveté anarchique et qui au fond n’est que la contrepreuve du conformisme le plus indigent. C’est la fièvre du mouton enragé. Je concède d’ailleurs volontiers que ledit mouton a un tempérament plus attachant que la muse empruntée à Tosto par J. -E. Carpentier. Et voilà pour la partie vocale du concert dont M.V. Prahl assumait la responsabilité mélodieuse, accompagné par Olivier Messiaen comme par une divinité hindou, impassible et multibrachiale’ [[unsigned review of La Spirale], *La Revue musicale* 165 (1936), 293.]

An extreme, and therefore instructive, case of anarchic naivety that is, fundamentally, no more than proof of the most impoverished kind of conservatism. This is the fever of a rabid sheep. [...] I will freely concede that said sheep has a more attractive temperament than the muse borrowed from Tosto by J.-E. Carpentier. And that is the vocal part for which M. V. Prahl assumed the melodious responsibility, accompanied by Olivier Messiaen as though by a Hindu priest, unperturbed and multilimbed.

<sup>44</sup> Michel Duchesneau, *L’Avant-garde musicale à Paris de 1871 à 1939*, 143. Claude Samuel, *Permanences d’Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1999), 188.

‘Eclairages de compositeurs’

1<sup>e</sup> Lampe Portative

Allô, oui! C’est moi-même... J’ai écrit une symphonie pendant mes vacances! Et aussi un ballet... et encore un quatuor avec saxophone, et n’oubliez pas que j’ai sorti des placards quelques vieilles mélodies recuites à point... Oui, de vraies premières auditions sur toute la ligne. Et puis, vous savez, j’ai encore beaucoup de choses en chantier. Je la veux, ma place sous le soleil! Puisqu’on ne joue que des premières – ponds, ponds, que je te ponde – j’en pondrai jusqu’à la fin!

2<sup>e</sup> Lumière sous le boisseau

Non, je n’ai pas terminé cette œuvre. Le titre? je ne sais pas; le sujet? je préfère le garder pour moi: il perdrait sa poésie sur les lèvres des autres! Retourner en arrière? Pourquoi? Mieux vaudrait méditer l’exemple des classiques ne s’appauvrissant que pour s’enrichir... Non, je ne suis pas partisan des laideurs inutiles. Je veux des dissonances qui charment et des mélodies pleines d’amour; je veux des modes en arc-en-ciel et des rythmes zigzaguant comme la foudre; je veux du spirituel, un élan vers la vie de plus tard... Non, je n’ai pas de première audition et ne serai pas joué cette saison. Qu’est-ce que cela peut faire? Ce n’est pas ma faute si j’aime la musique.<sup>45</sup>

‘The light cast by composers’

1 Portable lamps

Hi, yes!, it’s me... I’ve written a symphony during my holiday! And a ballet, too... and also a saxophone quartet, and don’t forget that I’ve just dusted off a great pile of old melodies reheated to perfection... Yes, real *premières* all across the board. And then, you know, I’ve got lots more in the pipeline. I want my place in the sun! Since they only play *premières*, I churn them out – churn them out, churn them out – forever!

2 Light under a bushel

No, I haven’t finished this piece. The title? I do not know. The subject? I would rather keep that to myself as it would lose its poetry on the lips of others! Turning backwards? Why? I would rather consider the example of the classics, impoverishing themselves only for enrichment... No, I’m not in favour of useless ugliness. I want dissonances that charm, and melodies filled with love; I want rainbow modes and rhythms that zigzag like thunderbolts; I want spirituality, an impulse towards the afterlife... No, I don’t have any *premières* and won’t be played this season. What can I do? It’s not my fault if I love music.

This rather ruthless parody of those who pander to the cult of the *première* demonstrates that Messiaen was anything but a passive member of the group – particularly as it was published on the front page of the paper, under a large byline ‘by Olivier Messiaen’. He was ready to be publicly identified with the agenda of the group.

La Spirale did not advance a particular musical aesthetic in the way that Les Six or La Sérénade did. It did, however, promote an internationalism that welcomed diverse styles for

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<sup>45</sup> Olivier Messiaen, ‘Eclairages de compositeurs’, *La Page musicale* (29 Nov 1936), 1. See: Appendix I: IV/3.  
109

the potential they offered, and perhaps it would not be too much to describe the group as ‘super-eclectic’ – certainly, such openmindedness was in contrast to other groupings. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a greater disparity of style than that represented by Webern’s 5 *Movements* and Ives’s songs. Yet within the active body of the society were three musicians who felt it was necessary to stake out a distinctive aesthetic position in a more explicitly political way. These three were Olivier Messiaen, Daniel-Lesur and André Jolivet.

According to Serge Gut, Yves Baudrier approached Messiaen with the idea of forming just such a new group in 1936, and Messiaen referred him to Daniel-Lesur and Jolivet, realising that the group was in effect already half-formed. In this account, Baudrier the outsider is welcomed into a group of friends who share the aspirations he has expressed to Messiaen; Baudrier is regarded as the initiator. This account does not, however, consider Messiaen’s earlier attempt to create a composers’ group with Barraine and Arrieu, and other details that have recently come to light.

In the last quarter of 1932, Messiaen had been approached by Jacques Porte who was in the process of forming a new group.<sup>46</sup> Porte wanted Messiaen to become Vice-President and was, it seems, keen to have Claude Arrieu as a member too. He had also determined a striking name for his new group: Les Jeunes Musiciens Français.<sup>47</sup> It seems highly unlikely that the similarity in the names between this (apparently abortive) group and La Jeune France is purely coincidental, and since Messiaen is the only connection between the two groups, we must conclude that he played a more important role in the later group’s ingenious manipulation of identity than has generally been acknowledged. The implication is that the name had been lying dormant in Messiaen’s mind for four years, since his involvement with Porte. (Perhaps, also, Jacques Porte should receive some recognition for a shrewd choice of name.)

This name is the group’s single most politically charged aspect, and a cunning political move that will be examined in more detail later. It was, of course, ridiculed by some critics (‘Je ne ferai point à Olivier Messiaen, Yves Baudrier, Daniel-Lesur, André Jolivet, l’injure de les croire capables de s’imaginer être la jeune France à eux tous seuls.’<sup>48</sup> (I will not do Olivier Messiaen, Yves Baudrier, Daniel-Lesur, André Jolivet the disservice of believing that they

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<sup>46</sup> Two of Porte’s works were performed in concerts of the Société Nationale in the 1930s (*Quatre Danses* for piano (from a ballet *Blanc sur noir*) performed 20 Feb 1937 and *Deux Chants tragiques* for voice and piano performed 5 Feb 1938. See: Michel Duchesneau, *L’Avant-garde musicale à Paris de 1871 à 1939*, 300, 302.). Porte seems to have abandoned his aspirations to become a composer in favour of musicology. He edited an *Encyclopédie de musiques sacrées* [ed. Jacques Porte, *Encyclopédie de musiques sacrées* (Paris, 1969)], and in the preface to this work he reveals a similar outlook to Messiaen, including a fascination with rhythm.

<sup>47</sup> F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, N.L.a.27 (021-2). [Letter sent 1 Dec 1932.]



imagine themselves to be all of young France by themselves.’)) but, as is explained in the group’s manifesto, the title was supposedly a reference to Messiaen’s hero Berlioz, an emblem of French romanticism.

The early Jeune France concerts were large-scale events, and the opening concert was given by the Orchestre Symphonique de Paris under Roger Désormière. Here, information about Messiaen’s 1933 group ‘Les Quatre’ sheds light on the later group, for if Désormière had intended to charge 50 000FF in 1933, it is inconceivable that he would have charged less in 1936. Jean Boivin states that Yves Baudrier financed La Jeune France, and in so doing indirectly provides a rather different picture of the group’s formation than was later propagated by Messiaen. What was financially impossible (and even distasteful) in 1933 became possible in 1936 because Baudrier could provide the necessary money – the least known and least acclaimed of ‘the four’ was indeed crucial to the group’s formation, but for reasons that were more monetary than artistic.<sup>48</sup> Given Messiaen’s reaction to such sums in his attempts to get the earlier group off the ground (‘vain et vile’), it is hardly surprising that this aspect of La Jeune France has been played down.

The concerts of La Jeune France gave Messiaen the opportunity to have orchestral works from his back-catalogue performed, and a survey of the critical response reveals that he was perceived to be the outstanding member of the group. With their distinct agendas, La Jeune France and La Spirale co-existed with active participation from Messiaen in both.

It is essential to acknowledge the importance of the network of teachers, friends and colleagues that Messiaen built up during his student years and in the early part of his career. Firstly, we must recognise the important mutual benefits that these shared efforts brought in the early stages of a career: Messiaen gained crucial peer and critical recognition (the first two of Bowness’s ‘circles of success’) precisely because he was able and willing to work with his student colleagues, as individuals, or within larger organisations. Thanks in part to these collaborative efforts, Messiaen’s career was beginning to take flight: an undated manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale (which must date from after the summer of 1936 since it mentions the first orchestral concert of Le Jeune France) provides an insight into the development of Messiaen’s burgeoning career. It mentions performances of *Les Offrandes oubliées* at ‘Grands Concerts de Lyon et de Monte-Carlo’, indicating that Messiaen’s music was already reaching

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<sup>48</sup> Suzanne Demarquez, ‘Premier Concert de Jeune France’, *La Revue musicale* 167 (1936), 49.

<sup>49</sup> Jean Boivin, *La Classe de Messiaen*, 29. Antoine Goléa, *Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1960), 76.

a wider audience by 1936.<sup>50</sup> Two performances of his organ music took place in London in 1936, the earliest known performances of Messiaen's music in the United Kingdom.<sup>51</sup> Secondly, it must be remembered that these same colleagues went on to fulfil important roles in the musical life of France, whether by working in radio (such as Tony Aubin or Elsa Barraine), or in the country's major musical institutions (such as Daniel-Lesur or Denis Joly). Messiaen's student colleagues were crucial in the development of his career, but they were also a network for life. Messiaen's position in the musical life of France was prepared in the earliest phase of his career.<sup>52</sup>

### Postscript: Messiaen and 'Mi'

Messiaen's first wife, Claire Delbos (1906-1959), is a neglected figure.<sup>53</sup> She was the daughter of Victor Delbos – a professor at the Sorbonne and an authority on Kant and Spinoza whose books have been republished as recently as 1990.<sup>54</sup> She is usually referred to in the Messiaen literature as a violinist, but during the 1930s the focus of her musical work was composition. Concerts that featured the music of Delbos alongside Messiaen were frequent in the pre-war period, and from critical responses to her music, it would seem that she shared many of her husband's aesthetic aims. Michel-Léon Hirsch, who seems to have been no great fan of Messiaen's style, was also unsparing in his criticism of Delbos's work:

Quant à *Primevère* de Mme Claire Delbos, mélodies pour chant et piano composées sur des poèmes de Cécile Sauvage et qui, paraît-il, relatent les émotions d'une jeune fiancée, leur naïveté et leur présomption provoquent des sourires que certes n'avait prévus ni voulus l'auteur.<sup>55</sup>

As for *Primevère* by Mme. Claire Delbos, songs for voice and piano written on poems by Cécile Sauvage and which, it seems, relate the emotions of a young fiancée, their

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<sup>50</sup> F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, Fonds Montpensier Dossier Messiaen.

<sup>51</sup> Concerts at the Organ Music Society at St. John's, Red Lion Square, with Noëlie Pierront and André Marchal on 20 Oct 1936 and 12 Nov 1936 respectively. See: ed. and tr. Nigel Simeone, "*Bien Cher Félix...*" *Letters from Olivier Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod to Felix Aprahamian*, 53.

<sup>52</sup> Some indication of this is given by the circumstances of the award of that most distinguished French honour, the *Légion d'honneur*. Marcel Dupré awarded Messiaen his *Légion* in a private ceremony at Dupré's home. In turn, Messiaen bestowed the same honour on Jean Langlais and Daniel-Lesur. See: Marie-Louise Jaquet-Langlais, *Ombre et lumière*, 262.

<sup>53</sup> Claire Delbos was a pseudonym: her real name was Louise Justine Delbos.

<sup>54</sup> See, e.g.: Victor Delbos, *Le Problème moral dans la philosophie de Spinoza et dans l'histoire du spinozisme* (Paris, 1990).

<sup>55</sup> Michel-Léon Hirsch, [Review of Delbos's *Primevère*], *Le Ménestrel* (17 Jan 1936), 22.

naivety and pretentiousness provoked smiles that were certainly neither expected nor intended by the author.

La *Paraphrase* de Mme. Claire Delbos, qui reflète de l'application et de la sincérité dans une forme que l'auteur a voulue ardue, apparait en dernière analyse creuse, boursoufflée et d'une emphase quelque peu cinématographique.<sup>56</sup>

The *Paraphrase* by Mme. Claire Delbos, which showed application and sincerity in a form that the author found difficult, seemed in the final analysis crude, overblown and of a rather cinematic pomposity.

Other reviewers were as taken with her work as Hirsch was repelled by it. The following review deals with the same work at the same performance as the second extract quoted above. It also indicates Delbos's aesthetic impulse for the music, revealing obvious similarities to her husband.

Une autre première audition est encore donnée, intitulée: *Paraphrase* de Claire Delbos. L'orgue devient ici dramatique, puisqu'il s'agit du Jugement dernier; comme celui de Bach dans le fameux Choral *Aus Tiefer Noth*, il marque l'angoisse des morts, leur résurrection, leurs clameurs, et la sonnerie des Trompettes ébranlant le monde. En opposition vient ensuite l'appel à Marie, d'une douceur obstinée, puis les cantiques: celui des hommes, celui des anges... [original ellipsis] Parlant de la musique religieuse, en général, l'un des membre du Comité de cette même Sérénade, disait, une fois, qu'il existe des Requiem, comme celui de Fauré, où 'les choses s'arrangent', s'apaisent; d'autres, tels ceux de Verdi ou de Berlioz, donnent la victoire au drame. La présente *Paraphrase* – pour notre plus grande espérance – est de la première catégorie.<sup>57</sup>

Another *première* was also given, entitled *Paraphrase* by Claire Delbos. Here, the organ became dramatic, since the work was concerned with the Last Judgement; as in Bach's famous Chorale *Aus Tiefer Noth*, it showed the anguish of the dead, their resurrection, their clamouring, and the sounding of the Trumpets shaking the earth. In contrast, there then came the appeal to Mary, sweetly persistent, then the hymns: those of man, those of the angels... Speaking of religious music in general, one of the members of the Committee of La Sérénade once said that there exist Requiems, like that of Fauré, where 'things work out' and quieten down. Others, such as those by Verdi or Berlioz, give the victory to the drama. This *Paraphrase* is of the first category – and thus offers greater hope.

Although Messiaen quickly gained fame through the 1930s, critics regarded Claire Delbos as a talent more comparable to her husband than might now be expected. She retained her maiden name for all professional engagements and was referred to as Mme Messiaen only

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<sup>56</sup> Michel-Léon Hirsch, [Review of Delbos's *Paraphrase*], *Le Ménestrel* (24 Mar 1939), 84.

<sup>57</sup> 'S.R.', 'La Sérénade (Eglise de la Trinité)', *La Revue musicale* 189 (Mar 1939), 131.

rarely. The American composer Virgil Thomson, who spent several years in Paris in the 1930s, considered her music superior to Messiaen's and wrote:

*Paraphrase* by Claire Delbos (Madame Olivier Messiaen) pleased me a great deal [...] It is full of interesting chaos.

In the same review, he dismisses *La Nativité* as 'routine super-mastery':

Messiaen has plenty of routine skill at composition and a lively imagination about sonorities. He knows everything you can do with a theme and he wouldn't think of stopping a piece till he has done it all.<sup>58</sup>

Sadly, very little of Claire Delbos's music is now accessible, but the handful of works that were published (among them the *Paraphrase* reviewed above) reveal that though she was close to Messiaen in aesthetic outlook, her musical style contrasted with his in certain notable respects. Some of the techniques that Messiaen developed, such as the added-value procedure, may be found in her music – her *Parce Domine* contains particularly striking examples of the use of this technique. In contrast, Messiaen's modes of limited transposition and his special chords (such as the 'chord on the dominant') are not to be found in Delbos's music. Indeed, the work that Virgil Thomson praised in the quotation above, *Paraphrase*, is based upon a musical cell that contains in sequence all the tempered intervals between the minor second and the minor sixth. Jean Langlais reviewed the work in great detail for *Le Monde musical* (another example of comradely support), and his discussion reveals that this cell was seen as evidence of the influence of atonal music:

Cette œuvre, précise de forme et symbolique de tendance tient à la fois d'un certain choral de Bach pour orgue (Liv. VI, no. 31) et des audacieuses élaborations sonores des musiciens de l'atonalité auxquels elle s'apparente par la présence d'une 'série'.<sup>59</sup>

This work, precise in form and of symbolic tendencies, draws at once from a certain chorale by Bach for organ (Book VI, no. 31) and on the audacious sonorous elaborations of the atonal musicians to whom she is allied by the presence of a 'series'.

Of course, *Paraphrase* is not serial in the Schoenbergian sense, since Delbos's 'series' repeats certain pitch-classes and does not contain all twelve notes of the tempered scale. It does, however, mark her out in contradistinction to Messiaen. As noted above, the same concert

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<sup>58</sup> Virgil Thomson, 'More and More from Paris', *Modern Music* 16 (Nov 1939), 229.

<sup>59</sup> Jean Langlais, 'La Sérénade', *Le Monde musical* (31 Mar 1939), 94. The Chorale upon which Delbos's piece is based is either BWV 686 or BWV 687.

included Messiaen's *La Nativité*, a work whose harmonic resources could hardly contrast more greatly with Delbos's 'series'. Since Messiaen later came to develop his own concepts of 'series' in his brief experimental period, I am tempted to wonder how important Delbos's researches were in Messiaen's development.

An extraordinary unpublished setting of the Psalm CXLI that was probably Delbos's last work, is preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale.<sup>60</sup> Composed, according to the manuscript, between October 1941 and March 1945, the work is scored for solo soprano, a choir of female voices, four ondes martenots and solo piano. Quarter-tones are used extensively in the onde parts, and there is much sophisticated use of additive rhythm. Of course, the instrumental forces of the work bear a similarity to those of Messiaen's *Trois Petites Liturgies de la Présence Divine* (composed within the same period), but the choice of psalm could not form a greater contrast with Messiaen's hymn of ecstatic love and joy. The French version of the Psalm, as set by Delbos, contains the following exhortation:

Je vous implore, Seigneur  
Je dis: vous êtes mon asile, mon partage dans la terre des vivants  
Soyez attention à mon cri d'angoisse car je suis dans un langueur extrême  
Delivrez-moi de mes persécuteurs car ils sont plus fort que moi

I cried unto thee, O Lord:  
I said, Thou art my refuge and my portion in the land of the living  
Attend unto my cry; for I am brought low:  
Deliver me from my persecutors, for they are stronger than I.<sup>61</sup>

It is difficult to conceive of a greater contrast to Messiaen's surreal and exuberantly optimistic text for *Trois Petites Liturgies de la Présence Divine*. This extract is also addressed directly to God:

L'arc-en-ciel de l'Amour, c'est vous,  
L'unique oiseau de l'Eternité, c'est vous!  
Elles s'alignent lentement, les cloches de la profondeur  
Posez-vous comme un sceau sur mon cœur.

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<sup>60</sup> Note that Psalms are numbered differently in different bibles (owing to the splitting and elision of some Psalms in certain editions). In the King James Version, the Psalm set by Delbos is Psalm CXLII.

<sup>61</sup> Psalm CXLII, 5-6. See, e.g.: [...], *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* ed. and with an introduction and notes by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford, 1997), 719.

You are the rainbow of Love,  
You are the single bird of Eternity  
The bells of the deep fall into line  
Place yourself like a seal on my heart.

Delbos's astringent style is deployed in her Psalm setting with great effectiveness to underline the overwhelming pain in the text. In its style and choice of words, it forms almost a inverse counterpart to the joyous and largely diatonic *Trois Petites Liturgies de la Présence Divine*.

Messiaen and Delbos seem genuinely to have sought a professional and musical partnership, and nowhere else is this shown better than in the concert discussed previously that was given on the 28th April 1937 under the auspices of La Spirale. The evening included the first complete performance of *Poèmes pour Mi* coupled with the *première* of Delbos's setting of poems from Cécile Sauvage's maternal cycle *L'Ame en bourgeon*. Roger Vinteuil wrote:

Le programme comportait deux premières auditions également dignes de retenir l'attention, et auxquelles Mlle Marcelle Bunlet prêtait l'intelligente autorité de son jeune talent.

Ce fut d'abord *L'Ame en bourgeon* de Claire Delbos, sur des poèmes de Cécile Sauvage. Cette suite de huit mélodies nous dit la joie animale et sublime de la maternité, joie que viennent toucher l'angoisse et la crainte. Le musicien traite la voix humaine sans égard aux grâces mélodiques qu'on en peut tirer, ne s'écartant que peu de temps d'une sorte de mélodie unie et comme mystique. Mais autour du chant, l'accompagnement du piano enroule un commentaire riche, nuancé, divers.

Ce fut ensuite – paroles et musique d'Olivier Messiaen – *Poèmes pour Mi*, cycle de neuf mélodies exaltant le sacrement du mariage. Je ne sais pourquoi, mais il m'est apparu qu'une manière de lien profond unissait ce cycle au précédent: même sentiment de ce qu'ont de sérieux, d'auguste, de religieux, les grandes réalités de la vie. De la voix, Olivier Messiaen n'a cure de faire un emploi traditionnel et respectueux de ses possibilités. Il exige sans mesure. Mais l'accompagnement du piano est plein de choses et nous persuade mieux que cette déclamation lyrique qui tient du récitatif et de la psalmodie, et que viennent couper de périlleuses et arbitraires vocalises.

Olivier Messiaen, qu'on peut n'approuver pas toujours mais qu'une inspiration indiscutablement élevée et forte conduit, tint le clavier durant toute la séance avec une autorité justement applaudie.<sup>62</sup>

The programme consisted of two *premières*, equally worthy of retaining our attention, and to which Mlle. Marcelle Bunlet brought the intelligent authority of her young talent.

Firstly, *L'Ame en bourgeon* by Claire Delbos, on the poems by Cécile Sauvage. This suite of eight songs speaks to us of the animal and sublime joy of maternity, a joy

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<sup>62</sup> Roger Vinteuil, 'La Spirale (28 avril)', *Le Ménestrel* (7 May 1937), 147-148.

that can touch on anguish and fear. The composer treats the human voice without regard for the melodic charms that one can draw from it, rarely abandoning a sort of serene and mystical recitative. But around the voice, the piano accompaniment wove a rich, nuanced and variegated commentary.

Following this – with words and music by Olivier Messiaen – came *Poèmes pour Mi*, a cycle of nine songs celebrating the sacrament of marriage. I do not know why, but it seemed to me that some deep bond united this cycle to the previous one: they have the same serious, noble, religious feelings of the great truths of life. As for the voice, Olivier Messiaen is not interested in the traditional, respectful use of its possibilities. He is infinitely demanding. But the piano accompaniment is full of things and makes this lyrical declamation – which draws on recitative and psalmody, and which is shot through with perilous and arbitrary vocalises – more convincing.

Olivier Messiaen, of whom one cannot always approve but whose inspiration is undeniably elevated and strongly driven, took the piano part throughout the evening with a justly applauded authority.

It is impossible to discern now if Vinteuil was relying on personal knowledge of Messiaen and Delbos to perceive the ‘lien profond’ (‘deep bond’) between the two cycles. Nonetheless, the timing of this *première* suggests that the two new works would have had special resonance for their composers: Delbos was about seven months pregnant with their son Pascal at the time of the concert. Unfortunately, though her setting of *L’Ame en bourgeon* was to be published by Fortin, it appears never to have been printed as no copy has been found.

## 6 Techniques of Our Musical Language

As much as anything, [*Technique de mon langage musical*] is important for what it reveals about Messiaen's mind, and in particular of his obsession for categories and catalogues. After a page of typically fulsome, the book guides the reader through the composer's workshop, with its rows of tools neatly labelled as to their use.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I introduce Messiaen-the-theorist and his relationship to some relevant predecessors. I begin by considering Messiaen's organ lessons with Marcel Dupré, whose teaching combined an extraordinary technical training at the console with a thorough theoretical grounding in form, harmony and counterpoint. I then go on to consider the importance of theoretical or historical 'justification' for Messiaen, before turning to a case study that places a particular technique dear to Messiaen – in this case, the 'added value' – in a wider historical context.

### 6.1 The Theoretical Mode of Thought

#### Marcel Dupré, His Organ Class and the *Cours complet d'improvisation*

Vous savez [...] que pour moi il n'y a qu'un organiste au monde, je dirai même: qu'un ami! [Olivier Messiaen, from a letter to Marcel Dupré, 1936.<sup>2</sup>]

You know [...] that for me there is but one organist in the world. I would even say, one friend!

Messiaen came to the organ comparatively late in his years of study at the Conservatoire. According to the composer, he considered it only after Jean Gallon noted a talent for improvisation that would serve him well as an organist.<sup>3</sup> Thus it was agreed that he should join Marcel Dupré's class. Messiaen was initially taught privately at Dupré's house in Meudon, only later joining the Conservatoire class,<sup>4</sup> and he seems to have made a significant impact on his teacher. According to Jeanette Dupré, Messiaen's presence in the class presented something of a challenge to Dupré, who felt compelled to ask Messiaen's father for advice:

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Hill, 'Introduction', *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (London and Boston, 1995), 6.

<sup>2</sup> F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, L.a. Messiaen (Dupré 1). [Undated letter to Dupré sent in the first few months of 1936.]

<sup>3</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1999), 27.

<sup>4</sup> Olivier Messiaen, preface to: Marcel Dupré, *Recollections* (Melville NY, 1975), viii.



‘Sir’, Jeanette recalls Dupré saying, ‘I have not had great experience as a teacher, and I cannot understand your son, though it is obvious he is gifted. Can you help me?’ To which Père Messiaen replied: ‘Of all the pupils I have had in twenty-five years of teaching, my son is the only one I cannot begin to comprehend!’<sup>5</sup>

The organ class is the only class Messiaen took for which detailed records are currently available for consultation in the Archives Nationales, and we can follow his progress through the class in some detail.<sup>6</sup> After just a few months with his new student, Dupré was delighted to note that they could already work on Bach, and commented ‘admirablement doué. A déjà fait de progrès en exécution’ (‘Admirably gifted. Has already made progress in execution’).<sup>7</sup> A short time later, in May 1928, Dupré decided to allow Messiaen to take part in the organ competition for that year after hearing him perform a programme of Bach and Franck. Dupré commented on the young musician’s ‘magnifique nature musicale’ (‘magnificent musical nature’).<sup>8</sup> Messiaen did well in his plainchant accompaniment, gaining the highest mark in the class, but was less proficient in the other aspects of the exam: his fugue development was considered ‘banal’ whilst his improvisation on a free theme was judged ‘sans ordre’ (‘formless’).<sup>9</sup> The following year, Messiaen marked himself out in the May exams by programming Widor’s Second Symphony instead of music by Franck, which was the standard repertoire performed by all his classmates. He was once again permitted to compete for the organ prize, and was timetabled to play last in the competition. The adjudication record suggests that Messiaen must have been significantly superior to his classmates, because the judge records only the very first of Messiaen’s entries on the adjudication sheet and awards him the *1<sup>er</sup> Prix* without making any further notes.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Murray, *Marcel Dupré: The Work of a Master Organist* (Boston MA, 1985), 195n2.

<sup>6</sup> The composer’s other student records are currently reserved under Archives Nationales regulations. The records of the organ competitions include the various given themes for improvisation and composition that suggest an answer to a minor but perplexing question posed by the work catalogue that Messiaen included in *Technique de mon langage musical*. Messiaen lists a set of *Variations écossaises* for organ that were composed in 1928 but never published. Griffiths suggests that these were written as Conservatoire tasks, a proposal that is lent significant credence by the selection of melodies which were offered for the organ students’ composition exam in 1928. One of the themes offered is the Scots song known as *Coming Through the Rye*, which, though not labelled, is instantly recognisable to anyone familiar with the music of Scotland. This was probably the theme upon which Messiaen’s enigmatic variations were based.

<sup>7</sup> F-Pan, Fonds AJ<sup>37</sup> 521 3a, *Examens d’orgue (textes, notes de séances) 1928*. [Quoted from document: ‘Rapports du professeur, Examen de janvier 1928’].

<sup>8</sup> F-Pan, Fonds AJ<sup>37</sup> 521 3a, *Examens d’orgue (textes, notes de séances) 1928*. [Quoted from document: ‘Rapports du professeur, Examen de mai 1928’].

<sup>9</sup> F-Pan, Fonds AJ<sup>37</sup> 521 3a, *Examens d’orgue (textes, notes de séances) 1928*. [Quoted from document: ‘Concours d’Orgue du 1<sup>er</sup> juin 1928’].

<sup>10</sup> F-Pan, Fonds AJ<sup>37</sup> 521 3a, *Examens d’orgue (textes, notes de séances) 1929*. [Quoted from document: ‘Concours de 1929, Séance du 31 mai’].

Dupré receives a place of honour in the acknowledgements that preface *Technique de mon langage musical*, where Messiaen thanks him for ‘orienting [him] towards counterpoint and form’.<sup>11</sup> In other places, Messiaen acknowledges Dupré for ‘passing on the technique of playing the organ’.<sup>12</sup> Paul Griffiths emphasises this second aspect in his account of Dupré’s influence on Messiaen:

His influence on Messiaen becomes clear in the latter’s big show-pieces for the organ, but as a pupil of Vierne, Widor and Alexandre Guilmant he was also responsible for passing on to Messiaen a tradition of French organ playing and composition that went back to Franck.<sup>13</sup>

The organ lineage is, however, only part of the story. A survey of the Dupré’s treatise *Cours complet d’improvisation à l’orgue* reveals that Messiaen received from his teacher not only a thorough instrumental technique, but also a particular attitude towards the craft of music.

The formal plan of much of Messiaen’s early works is built upon melody,<sup>14</sup> an emphasis that is reflected in Messiaen’s proclamation at the beginning of *Technique de mon langage musical*:

La mélodie est point de départ. Qu’elle reste souveraine! et quelle que soit la complexité de nos rythmes et de nos harmonies, ils ne l’entraîneront pas dans leur sillage, mais, au contraire, lui obéiront comme de fidèles serviteurs.<sup>15</sup>

The melody is the starting point. Long may it reign! And however complex our rhythms and harmonies are, they should never pull it along in their train, but, on the contrary, should obey it like faithful servants.

This statement may be deconstructed in several ways (in the light of French aesthetic discourse on the relationship between melody and harmony, for example, a debate that dated from the time of Rameau that will be reconsidered later). For the moment, it will be considered only in the light of Dupré’s teaching in the *Cours complet*. The first volume of this treatise begins with a brief discussion of the harmonisation of scales and themes, before moving on to thematic construction. The concept of ‘theme’ then underpins all subsequent discussions of form. Chapter 8 of the second volume, for example, is devoted to the ‘symphonic forms’ and includes an account of sonata form that emphasises the thematic

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<sup>11</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical* (Paris, 1999), 5.

<sup>12</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d’Olivier Messiaen*, 188.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (London and Boston, 1985), 26.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen* (London, 2/1989), 22-31.

<sup>15</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical*, 6.

components of the form rather than their manipulation. The exposition, for example, is described thus:

The exposition is formed by the successive presentation of two themes linked by a bridge. If the first theme is major, the second theme will be in key of the dominant. If the first theme is minor, the second will be in the relative major key.<sup>16</sup>

The primacy of melodic material is reflected at all levels. It has been noted that Messiaen's approach to traditional forms like the sonata is highly sectional,<sup>17</sup> and Messiaen's derivation in *Technique de mon langage musical* of 'new' forms from the sonata clearly shows this:

'L'Allegro à 2 thèmes' synthétise toute la Sonate. Ayant écrit des 'Allegros à 2 thèmes' absolument réguliers, nous constaterons qu'une chose a vieilli dans cette forme: la Réexposition. Nous chercherons donc encore une fois à en conserver le plus essentiel: le Développement. Il y en a deux dans un Allegro: le développement central modulant; le développement terminal, généralement établi sur des pédales de dominante et de tonique sous-entendues.<sup>18</sup>

'The Allegro with two themes' generates all of the Sonata. Having written absolutely regular 'Allegros with two themes', we note that one aspect of this form has dated: the recapitulation. Once again, we therefore seek to preserve the most essential idea: the development. There are two in an Allegro: the central, modulating development and the terminal development, generally built on implied dominant and tonic pedal notes.

Messiaen's expression 'Allegro with two themes' is translated as 'Sonata-Allegro' by John Satterfield in his English translation of *Technique de mon langage musical* of 1956, but this rendering alters the emphasis of Messiaen's text. For Messiaen, the themes form a chassis upon which the Sonata is constructed. Sherlaw Johnson comments:

As a result, the forms which he derives from [the Sonata] have very little to do with its real spirit. The nature of the sonata is such that one could not detach parts of it in the way he does and still retain the essential element of organic growth and development.<sup>19</sup>

Other statements in *Technique de mon langage musical* reveal the importance of melody in Messiaen's formal processes to be even more far-reaching. His exposition of other 'formal' processes in *Technique de mon langage musical* shows that melodic construction and form were virtually interchangeable concepts for Messiaen at this time. This is most clearly

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<sup>16</sup> Marcel Dupré, *Cours complet d'improvisation à l'orgue* (Paris, 1926), Volume 2; Eng. edn. tr. John Fenstermaker (Paris, 1974), 118.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g.: Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical*, 50.

<sup>19</sup> In this assessment, Sherlaw Johnson critiques Messiaen's use of the 'Sonata' with reference to a very

illustrated in his account of ‘plainchant forms’, in which he explains that ‘Subtilité des Corps glorieux’ (from *Les Corps glorieux*) is in the ‘form’ of an antiphon. By this, however, he means that the melodic periods are ordered and repeated as in an antiphon. Sherlaw Johnson dismisses such ‘plainchant forms’ as ‘melodic rather than formal processes’, but this is to ignore the fact that the composer himself saw them as ‘forms’. Messiaen’s description of such processes as ‘formal’ reveals how intimately related large-scale structure and thematic construction were for him at this time.

Comparison of Dupré’s approach to form in the *Cours complet d’improvisation* with the relevant sections in *Technique de mon langage musical* confirms that in the early works, Messiaen was carrying forward an approach to form that reflected Dupré’s teaching. The parallels between Dupré’s and Messiaen’s thought are extensive. Even in Messiaen’s earlier works, for example, there may be found relationships between large-scale form and small-scale rhythmic devices, with the latter found mirrored in the former (Sherlaw Johnson illustrates this in great detail in the case of ‘Par lui tout a été fait’ from *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus*, showing that the form of this movement shows a direct correspondence with the Hindu rhythm *râgavardhana*).<sup>20</sup> Dupré, in the *Cours*, anticipates the possibility of relating constructional proportions to small-scale rhythmic devices when he claims that ‘rhythm engenders the diverse musical forms of which it is truly the first cause’ – a statement of synthesis of which Messiaen would undoubtedly have been aware.<sup>21</sup>

The influence of Dupré’s teaching as it is reflected in the treatise may be seen in other aspects of Messiaen’s music. In some accounts, for example, Messiaen claims that Emmanuel and Dupré introduced him to Greek metrics almost simultaneously; certainly, Greek rhythm forms a significant section in Dupré’s treatise.<sup>22</sup> Also relevant to Messiaen is Dupré’s instruction in the small-scale manipulation of melody, particularly the technique of ‘interversion’, discussed in Chapter 10 of *Technique*, which also owes a debt to Dupré – as Messiaen notes in the text.<sup>23</sup>

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particular, quasi-Shekerian, Sonata ideal. See: Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen*, 38.

<sup>21</sup> Marcel Dupré, *Cours complet d’improvisation à l’orgue*, 37.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, 37.

<sup>23</sup> In the early interview with José Bruyr, Messiaen indicates that the quick succession of chords in *Diptyque* is also a technique which was inspired by Dupré:

Dans l’écriture de ces pages, je reconnais de bonne grâce qu’il y a une façon de formule qui me vient de Marcel Dupré: ce sont des accords qui se succèdent avec une rapidité telle qu’ils créent une impalpable impression harmonique, et non des harmonies. [José Bruyr, *Ecran des musiciens, seconde série* (Paris, 1933), 126.]

In the writing of these pages, I recognise with good grace that these is a formula that comes to me from

More important than these ‘surface’ musical features, however, is a theoretical cast of mind demonstrated in the *Cours* and reflected in Messiaen’s treatise. In Chapter 2 of the *Cours*, Dupré includes a section entitled ‘Resolution of Polytonal Aggregates’ that offers a theoretical argument for the ‘normal resolution’ of such aggregates. The theory is based on the concept of resonance. Dupré claims that a bitonal chord that combines the two chords of C major and G major, for example, has a low D as its ‘natural fundamental’ since the notes of the aggregate comprise the harmonics of this low D. He then asserts that this bitonal chord ‘resolves’ to this D ‘and consequently belongs in the key of G’.<sup>24</sup> For readers with a close knowledge of Messiaen’s treatise, the rather arbitrary use to which acoustic theory is put in this argument immediately suggests a connection with a notorious paragraph in *Technique de mon langage musical* in which Messiaen attempts to justify his use of the descending augmented fourth. This passage has received much comment. Anthony Pople writes:

The factual tone [of *Technique*] serves to disguise a number of assumptions, however, such as a constant reliance on the overtone series to validate modal and harmonic formulae that might otherwise seem merely contrived. For example, one of his favoured devices of melodic cadence, the falling tritone, is introduced by the statement that ‘a very fine ear clearly perceives an F# in the natural resonance of a low C’. So far, so good: there is nothing here with which a psycho-acoustician would disagree. ‘This F#’, Messiaen however continues, ‘is endowed with an attraction toward the C, which becomes its *normal resolution*’ (my italics). This certainly does not follow from the acoustical premise, but it is more useful to examine the underlying reason for Messiaen’s difficulty than to criticise his logic – since, plainly, a composer may use his materials however he chooses.<sup>25</sup>

Pople then goes on to explain that it is Messiaen’s desire to have a concept of ‘resolution’ within a modal framework that prevents him from coming up with a better argument, a criticism that may equally be levied against Dupré in his search for the ‘resolution’ of polytonal aggregates. Indeed, the comprehensive parallels between the two arguments strongly suggest that Messiaen was following his teacher’s lead. It is not just the argument itself that has been transmitted from teacher to pupil, but also the pseudo-scientific approach and terminology that has been employed to give an appearance of rigour – a thirst for justification and ‘theory’ for new techniques also seems to have been passed down.

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Marcel Dupré: these are the chords that follow one another with such rapidity that they create an impalpable harmonic impression, rather than harmonies.

<sup>24</sup> Marcel Dupré, *Cours complet d'improvisation à l'orgue*, 27.

<sup>25</sup> Anthony Pople, ‘Messiaen’s Musical Language — an Introduction’, *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (London and Boston, 1995), 19. Sherlaw Johnson also comments on Messiaen’s ‘derivation’. See: Robert

Dupré's treatise shows that master and pupil shared the deep-seated conflict that Pople identifies. In each case, a theory of 'resolution' is sought in a context within which the concept has little meaning: synthetic modality in Messiaen's case, polytonality in Dupré's. In each case, the same doubtful acoustic premise is employed as the cornerstone of the argument. It is not just the basic methodology that Messiaen borrows from Dupré, however. The younger composer also adopts his teacher's fascinating term for the process – the 'normal resolution'. This expression brings with it a disarming matter-of-factness that distracts from the theoretical sleight-of-hand but at the same time reminds us of what Dupré and Messiaen are really up to: normalising wayward phenomena (the descending tritone and polytonal aggregates) into an existing theoretical framework ('resolving' tonality).

Old theory and new techniques sit uncomfortably in the two arguments, and a shared desire to reconcile the past with the present is revealed. Messiaen and Dupré both seem caught between a determination to explore new ideas, and an urge to bring these ideas into congruence with established principles.

### **The Need for Justification**

The arguments examined above could be seen as evidence of Dupré and Messiaen's shared desire to justify their musical choices. Self-justification is, indeed, a major feature of *Technique de mon langage musical*. The section on intervals 'and their choice' is one of the most fascinating in the volume, on account of the way that Messiaen attempts to justify his use of these basic musical elements – especially as we might ask why such elements need justification at all. The first 'interval of choice' is the descending augmented fourth, the quasi-theoretical 'justification' of which has just been considered. His second favoured interval is the descending sixth for which Messiaen pleads historical precedent:

A cause de l'importance de la sixte ajoutée dans l'accord parfait, pressentie par Rameau et instaurée par Debussy [...], et parce que Mozart, ce grand mélodiste, s'est souvent servi de la sixte majeure descendante, nous choisirons encore cet intervalle.<sup>26</sup>

Because of the importance of the added sixth in the triad, foreseen by Rameau and established by Debussy [...], and because the great melodist Mozart frequently made use of the descending major sixth, we also choose this interval.

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Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen*, 14.

<sup>26</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical*, 30.

The justification of intervals is only the clearest example of a trend apparent throughout the treatise: Messiaen's constant desire to validate the features of his musical language. To fulfil this urge, he employs two basic strategies that are exemplified by the cases above. The first method involves constructing a theoretical argument to support the musical feature in question; the second invokes historical precedent. Messiaen employs both techniques liberally throughout the treatise, sometimes applying them together or in close succession, and both strategies inadvertently show Messiaen's relationship to the traditions of French writing about music.

As we have seen, Messiaen's argument for the 'normal resolution' of the augmented fourth – one of the best examples of the first strategy – finds a direct antecedent in the theoretical writings of Marcel Dupré. In its elaborate construction, however, it recalls at least two hundred years of theoretical reasoning. A derivation of the minor triad from a theory of 'inferior' resonance, for example, was a long-standing and acoustically spurious argument that appears in d'Indy's *Cours de composition* and Emmanuel's *Histoire de la langue musicale*, but dates back, in essence at least, to Rameau's *Traité d'harmonie*.<sup>27</sup> The use of such arguments in *Technique de mon langage musicale* is designed to give the impression of rigour in Messiaen's musical thought, and his desire to show this – even if it means providing an unconvincing theory – places him in a long line of French writing on music. It is also a tendency that he shares with his contemporaries – even those with different aesthetic outlooks – as passages from Nadia Boulanger's lectures on music confirm.<sup>28</sup>

Messiaen's second strategy for self-justification is perhaps more complex, and is linked with his desire (examined in 4.2) to place himself in a historical context. In the example above, Messiaen's love of the falling sixth in melodies is justified by invoking Rameau's theoretical argument in the *Traité d'harmonie*, but also by the precedent provided by Debussy and Mozart.<sup>29</sup> Another example of how a predecessor is invoked to justify an aspect of Messiaen's music is given when the composer comments that an unlabelled example (Messiaen's example 149) and 'Amen des étoiles, de la planète à l'anneau' from *Visions de*

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<sup>27</sup> See: Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Treatise on Harmony*, tr. and annotated by Philip Gossett (New York, 1971), 15-16; Maurice Emmanuel, *Histoire de la langue musicale* (Paris, 1911), Vol. 1, 23-24; Vincent d'Indy, *Cours de composition musicale* (Paris, 1902-1950), Vol. 1, 98-100.

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g.: Nadia Boulanger, 'Lectures on Music I: Modern French Music', *The Rice Institute Pamphlet* xiii/2 (Apr 1926), 115ff.

<sup>29</sup> Messiaen seems to be referring to Chapters Seven and Eight of Volume One of Rameau's treatise. See: Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Treatise on Harmony*, 35-52.

*L'Amen* (Messiaen's example 150) 'quote Rameau as their authority'.<sup>30</sup> [Musical Example 1, page 154]. Messiaen even goes so far as to draw an analogy between this last example and the form of a Rigadoun:

L'exemple 150 est une phrase complète en 5 périodes, dont la coupe a quelque analogie avec celle d'un rigaudon. A1, première période, partant sur X; A2, première période répétée et concluant sur le 3<sup>e</sup> degré. Période B, partant sur X rétrograde, et modulant à la dominante. Reprise de la période A, légèrement variée. Période C, développant surtout X qui servira à conclure en un rapide arpegge; les notes encadrées Y, de la première période, y sont reprises en un ordre nouveau.<sup>31</sup>

Example 150 is a complete phrase in 5 periods, whose shape has some analogy with that of a rigaudon. A1, the first period, begins with X; A2, the first period repeated and concluding on the 3<sup>rd</sup> note of the scale. Period B begins with the retrograde of X and modulates to the dominant. Reprise of period A, slightly varied. Period C is essentially a development of X which serves to conclude on a rapid arpeggio which includes the framing notes of Y from the first period, reprised in a new order.

There are many examples of the kind just cited, where Messiaen appeals to illustrious predecessors in the Western tradition to provide a 'rational' explanation for aspects of his musical language. We are repeatedly invited to conclude that since the 'rules' of his language are not discontinuous with the past, they are consequently legitimate. This approach to self-justification is clearly predicated on a complex relationship to the past that evokes various concepts of progress in music: this is an issue to which I will turn in 7.2.

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<sup>30</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical*, 48.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, 48.





## 6.2 Rhythmicians

### Mocquereau and the Rhythmic Tradition

Most discussions of Messiaen's rhythmic innovations draw on the composer's accounts, but, in general, commentators have focused more or less exclusively on the individual rhythms that Messiaen deployed, and the new procedures that he seemed to derive from them, rather than the wider references that he makes. Whilst the Greek and Hindu rhythms that Messiaen quotes in his music have been the object of considerable study, his relationship to theorists like Dom André Mocquereau – to whom Messiaen refers prominently in the second chapter of *Technique de mon langage musical*<sup>32</sup> – has received less attention.

Mocquereau trained firstly as a musician and was ordained at the Abbey of Solesmes in 1879 at the age of thirty. There, he became a leading plainchant scholar, publishing thirteen volumes of the *Paléographie musicale*, which reproduced plainchant manuscripts with detailed critical commentary. As part of his work, he undertook a study of rhythm and its application to plainchant, and published the results of this work as *Le Nombre musical grégorien*, which came out in two volumes in 1908 and 1927. This treatise was, it seems, read by Messiaen whilst he was still a student at the Conservatoire.<sup>33</sup>

Messiaen makes frequent reference to Mocquereau's work and though he occasionally cites him explicitly, many more allusive references are present in Messiaen's discussions of rhythm. An example may be found in the composer's *Conférence de Bruxelles* of 1958, where he writes:

Supposons un seul frappe dans tout l'univers. Un frappe: il y a éternité avant, l'éternité après. Un avant, un après, c'est la naissance du Temps.<sup>34</sup>

Suppose that there were a single beat in all the universe; one beat with eternity before it and eternity after it. A before and an after. That is the birth of Time.

Here, Messiaen is unmistakably mirroring a passage in *Le Nombre musical grégorien*:

Représentons le silencieux écoulement du Temps par une ligne continue, de longueur indéfinie [...] Tous ces coups ou ictus ont le pouvoir de diviser cette Ligne du Temps

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Pierrette Mari, *Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1965), 14.

<sup>34</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Conférence de Bruxelles* (Paris, 1960), 11. Note that the paper was given in 1958 and published in 1960.

en deux grandes parties: tout ce qui précède le son, l'ictus, tous ce qui le suit [...] Voilà une première perception auditive du mouvement sonore et de la division du temps.<sup>35</sup>

We can represent the passing silence of time by a continuous line of indefinite length [...] Any beat has the ability to divide this time line into two large parts: everything that precedes the sound, the *ictus*, everything that follows it [...] Here is the first aural perception of sounding movement and the first division of time.

Direct references to Mocquereau's theories are also common. When asked by Claude Samuel to define rhythm, for example, Messiaen answered:

On en a proposé d'innombrables définitions, à la fois bonnes et mauvaises selon la perspective dans laquelle on les envisage. L'une d'entre elles est très célèbre, elle est de Dom Mocquereau et résume les idées de Platon et des anciens Grecs à ce sujet: 'Le rythme est l'ordonnance du mouvement'. Cette définition présente l'avantage de s'appliquer à la fois à la danse, à la parole et à la musique, mais elle est incomplète.<sup>36</sup>

Innumerable definitions have been suggested, both good and bad depending to the perspective from which they're viewed. One of them – by Dom Mocquereau – is very famous and sums up the ideas of Plato and the ancient Greeks on this subject: 'Rhythm is the ordering of movement.' This definition presents the advantage of being applicable to dance, words and music, but it's incomplete.

Whatever the drawbacks of Mocquereau's definition, Messiaen plainly considered it to be very important because he repeated it in the *Conférence de Bruxelles* and in the *Traité de rythme, de couleur et d'ornithologie*, where it is the first in a list of 'those definitions that seem best to me'.<sup>37</sup> After singling out Mocquereau's definition of rhythm in conversation with Samuel, Messiaen turns to him again when asked for an example of strongly rhythmic music:

Il faut envisager les différents aspects du rythme. Tout d'abord la cinématique qui correspond à la définition du rythme que j'avais donnée tout à l'heure, c'est-à-dire 'l'ordonnance du mouvement'; il s'agit de l'alternance des élans et des repos que les Grecs appelaient si bien les arsis et les thésis. Or, toute musique bien faite comporte, de façon constante, cette alternance d'élans et de repos. Le plain-chant, pour ne citer que ce cas, est une succession ininterrompue d'arsis et de thésis, d'élévations et de dispositions, d'élans et de repos, ce qui fut parfaitement mis en lumière par le plus grand théoricien du plain-chant, Dom Mocquereau.<sup>38</sup>

One has to consider the different aspects of rhythm. Firstly, there is the kinematic aspect which corresponds to definition of rhythm I gave a moment ago, that is 'the

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<sup>35</sup> André Mocquereau, *Le Nombre musical grégorien* (Tournai, 1908-27), Vol. 1, 35.

<sup>36</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen*, 101.

<sup>37</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Traité de rythme, de couleur et d'ornithologie* (Paris, 1994-2002), Vol. 1, 41.

<sup>38</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen*, 103.

ordering of movement'; this is the alternation of rises and falls that the Greeks so aptly called *arses* and *theses*. Now, all well-written music contains this constant alteration. Plainchant, to cite just one example, is an uninterrupted succession of *arses* and *theses*, elevations and drops, rises and falls, as was perfectly explained by the greatest theoretician of plainchant, Dom Mocquereau.

Messiaen brings Mocquereau to the fore in other places in the *Traité de rythme*. In Volume one, Messiaen concerns himself firstly with time and then turns to rhythm. The first chapter on rhythm is divided up in five parts. Firstly, Messiaen discusses the origins of the words 'rhythm' and 'music', then he goes on to discuss the primacy of rhythm and give the list of definitions mentioned previously. Finally, he discusses different kinds of rhythm and various non-musical rhythms and here he returns to Mocquereau again by paraphrasing freely the plainchant theoretician's dissection of rhythm into five types. Messiaen includes the work of other theorists, but Mocquereau is unmistakably highlighted by the design of the argument; his theories are discussed further in volume four of the treatise.

In the *Conférence de Notre Dame*, Messiaen reveals how he understands diverse musical sources as part of a larger theoretical whole:

Les Neumes sont des formules mélodiques [...] On les trouve dans le chant des oiseaux: la fauvette des jardins, la fauvette à tête noir, la grive musicien, l'alouette des champs, le rouge-gorge, font des neumes. Et ce qui est admirable dans le neume, c'est la souplesse rythmique qu'il engendre. Cette souplesse qui nous vient de l'Anaclase de vers ioniques (métrique grecque), du *candrakalâ* et de ses ajouts du point (*déçî-tâlas* de l'Inde).<sup>39</sup>

Neumes are melodic formulæ... One also finds them in the songs of birds: the garden warbler, the blackcap, the song thrush, the skylark, the robin, all use neumes. And the wonderful thing about neumes is the rhythmic suppleness they engender. We see this suppleness in the Anaclase of ionic verse (Greek metres), in the *candrakalâ* and its added values (Indian *déçî-tâlas*).

Very strikingly, the largest printed entity on the page here is the name of that 'greatest theoretician', Dom André Mocquereau [Figure 3, page 131].

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<sup>39</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Conférence de Notre Dame* (Paris, 1978), 3-4. [Bird translations from Robert Sherlaw Johnson.]

## LA MUSIQUE LITURGIQUE

Il n'y en a qu'une : *le plain-chant*. Seul, le plain-chant possède à la fois la pureté, la joie, la légèreté nécessaires à l'envol de l'âme vers la Vérité. Malheureusement - si l'on excepte quelques moines dans les couvents, quelques grands théoriciens comme DOM MOCQUEREAU, et quelques musiciens professionnels qui savent encore le lire - le plain-chant est mal connu. Il est mal connu surtout parce qu'il est mal chanté. Et le premier tort qu'ont eu nos ancêtres immédiats, c'est son harmonisation. Il a été écrit à une époque où l'on ne connaissait pas l'embarras des accords classés, des complexes de sons, et même du simple soutien instrumental. Il faut donc le chanter sans aucun accompagnement. Il faut aussi le chanter avec toutes les voix : d'hommes, de femmes, d'enfants. Enfin, il faut le chanter en appréciant et en respectant les Neumes. Les « histoires de la musique » parlent beaucoup des modes du plain-chant : mode de RÉ, mode de MI, de FA, de SOL - et il est certain que chacun de ces modes a une poésie et une couleur particulières. Mais ce n'est là qu'un matériau. La chose merveilleuse du plain-chant : ce sont les « Neumes ».

Les Neumes sont des formules mélodiques, analogues à ce que les traités d'harmonie appellent des broderies, des appoggiatures, des notes de passage - mais en beaucoup plus vaste.

Figure 3: The first page of *Conférence de Notre Dame* [Olivier Messiaen, *Conférence de Notre Dame* (Paris, 1978), 3.]

This suggests that an important distinction may be drawn between the metric theories of Mocquereau and Messiaen's absorption of Greek and Hindu rhythms. Greek and Hindu theories provide a means to label and discuss specific rhythmic entities, while Messiaen turns to Mocquereau as keeper of the general principle. It becomes clear that, for Messiaen, the Greek and Hindu rhythms are individual instances of the general rules laid out by Mocquereau, and the distinction, therefore, is between a theoretical framework and the individual rhythmic manifestations within it.

Messiaen frequently foregrounded Mocquereau's work, and its importance needs to be acknowledged if one is fully to understand the composer's outlook. Firstly, Mocquereau's framework fulfils the composer's desire for 'theory' and has the advantage of being very widely applicable. Being a theory of plainchant, which Messiaen saw as the purest form of Christian music, it also has other ideological implications. Mocquereau provides supposedly universal principles derived from the study of Christian music. In the introduction to *Technique de mon langage musical*, Messiaen expresses his desire to write a music 'qui touche à tous les sujets sans cesser de toucher à Dieu' (that touches all subjects without ceasing to touch God'),<sup>40</sup> and Mocquereau's theories may have found extra resonance with Messiaen because they sit easily within the theology. In the account of his rhythmic development that was discussed in 4.1, Messiaen claimed that it was the study of plainchant that initially prompted him to study Greek and Hindu rhythm. The allusion to Mocquereau is once again prominent, but the manner in which Greek and Hindu rhythms are indicated as the 'natural' subsidiaries of the study of plainchant places even greater emphasis on him as Messiaen's primary 'rhythmic godparent':

J'ai commencé l'étude des neumes, de l'*arsis* et de la *thesis* (du grec, 'élan' et 'repos'). De là, j'en suis venu, naturellement, à l'étude de la métrique grecque et des *dēcî-tâlas* (rythmes des provinces de l'Inde).<sup>41</sup>

I began to study the neumes, the *arsis* and *thesis* (in Greek, the *élan* and *repos*). From there, I naturally came to the study of Greek metre and the *dēcî-tâlas* (Indian provincial rhythms).

Mocquereau was not working in isolation and his rhythmic theories, which seem to have influenced Messiaen so much, were themselves part of a tradition of Francophone

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<sup>40</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Martine Cadieu, 'Duo avec Messiaen', *Nouvelles littéraires* (29 Dec 1960).

rhythmic theorising that dated back through the nineteenth century. In *Paléographie musicale*, for example, Mocquereau explains the importance of the Belgian theorist Jérôme Le Momigny (1762-1842):

Chose vraiment curieuse et digne de remarque, Momigny, à l'encontre des musiciens de son époque, a donné du rythme une théorie juste, vraie dans presque tous ses détails. Les principes fondamentaux qu'il émet sur cet intéressant et périlleux sujet sont ceux que nous avons donnés nous-même.<sup>42</sup>

It is a truly curious thing, worthy of comment, that Momigny, in opposition to the musicians of his era, offered an accurate theory of rhythm, correct in almost all its details. The fundamental principles that he offered on this interesting and perilous subject are those which we have given ourselves.

Momigny also influenced other theorists like Mathis-Lussy (1828-1910), who in turn taught Emile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950), inventor of the 'Dalcroze' system of music education based around what he termed 'eurhythmics'. Messiaen's debt to Mocquereau is, in fact, part of a larger debt to wider tradition of 'rhythmicians' and the great rhythmic innovations of *La Nativité*, with its Hindu quotations, should be seen in this wider context.

### Case Study: The 'Added Value'

The added-value is Messiaen's name for a technique he developed early in his compositional career, that is, the addition or subtraction of a small extra note-value or rest to an existing rhythm. The added value has usually been viewed as a derivation from a version of one of the Hindu *déçî-tâlas*, *râgavardhana*. Sherlaw Johnson, for example, writes 'The second part of this rhythm is a diminution of the first part with the addition of an added value on the second note. From this example Messiaen derives the principal of added values'.<sup>43</sup> Similar explanations are found in other commentaries on Messiaen's rhythmic language, and they all cite as their source Messiaen's *Technique de mon langage musical*. In fact, Messiaen writes in his treatise that the *râgavardhana* rhythm 'constitutes an added value'<sup>44</sup> (my italics); he does not actually claim *râgavardhana* as his source, but uses it as a justification for the technique.

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<sup>42</sup> André Mocquereau, 'Jérôme de Momigny et le rythme musical', *Paléographie musicale* Series 1 Vol. 7 (1901), 356.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen*, 33.

<sup>44</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical*, 7.

Nonetheless, the prevailing impression is of a technique developed from the close study of Hindu theory.<sup>45</sup>

A wider understanding of French rhythmic theory, and in particular of Mocquereau's development of the theory of *arses* and *theses* in *Le Nombre musical grégorien*, allows us to place Messiaen's innovation in context. Mocquereau begins by quoting the 'unequal' or iambic rhythm, which he writes as a quaver followed by a crotchet [Musical Example 2.1, page 135]. From a series of these durations he derives a relationship between the two notes:

Quelle est cette relation? La brève paraît un début, un point de départ, un élan; elle semble animée, vivante; elle est en mouvement. La longue, au contraire, paraît une fin, une arrivée, une cadence ou chute; elle est un arrêt, un repos.<sup>46</sup>

What is this relationship? The short note is a beginning, a point of departure, a lift. It seems animated, living, it is in motion. The long note, on the other hand, is an ending, an arrival, a cadence or fall; it is a stop, or resting place.

This basic relationship then forms the basis of his theory of *arses* and *theses*. Having dealt with this 'unequal' rhythm, he then comes to address the 'equal' or spondaic rhythm by presenting a series of equal durations [Musical Example 2.2, page 135] and asking:

Comment les rythmer? Il faut leur appliquer les principes qui ont été déjà décrits donner de la vie, de l'animation, de l'élan, du mouvement au premier temps, et au second un allongement, si minime soit-il, ou au moins le sentiment d'un temps de repos provisoire.<sup>47</sup>

How do we rhythmicise them? We must apply to them the principles that have already been described, giving life, animation, lift and movement to the first note and to the second a tiny lengthening, or at least a feeling of provisional rest.

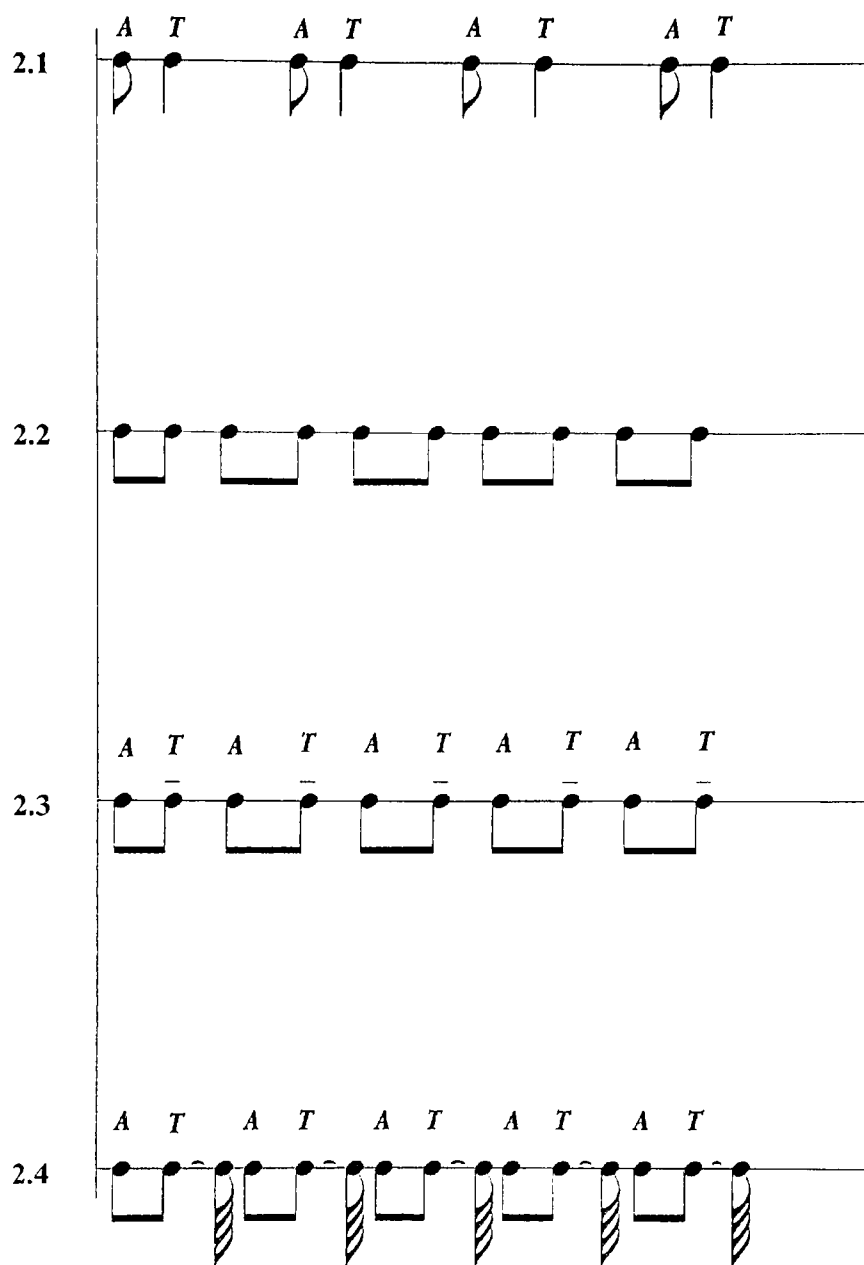
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<sup>45</sup> Though Messiaen later lists the technique as one 'derived from the study of the *déçi-tâlas*' in *Traité de rythme, de couleur et d'ornithologie*, the earliest expositions of the technique in the prefaces to *La Nativité* and *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* make no direct reference to Hindu rhythms at all.

<sup>46</sup> André Mocquereau, *Le Nombre musical grégorien*, Vol. 1, 45.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, 50.





*A = Arsis T = Thesis*

## Musical Example 2: The Added Value

He then rewrites the series of equal durations so that every second one is marked with a horizontal tenuto-like mark that he calls an ‘episema’, indicating a slight lengthening of the note [Musical Example 2.3, page 135].<sup>48</sup>

Mocquereau’s question ‘How do we rhythmicise them?’ is a very telling one. Only by adding a feeling of repose to the second sound in each spondaic pair – by a small lengthening – does the series become ‘rhythmic’. The implication is that a series of exactly equal note values cannot be ‘rhythmic’ and that this term implies more than mere ordering of movement. It demands comparison with some of the distinctive statements Messiaen has made about rhythm. In discussion with Samuel, for example, Messiaen says:

Aux œuvres de Bach ou de Prokofiev, elles paraissent rythmiques précisément parce qu’elles n’ont pas de rythme. L’explication est la suivante: on entend dans ces œuvres une succession ininterrompue de durées égales qui plongent l’auditeur dans un état de satisfaction béate; rien ne vient contrecarrer son pouls, sa respiration et les battements de son cœur.<sup>49</sup>

The works of Bach or Prokofiev... seem rhythmic precisely because there is no rhythm. The explanation is as follows: in these works we hear an uninterrupted succession of equal durations that puts the listener in a state of beatific satisfaction; nothing interferes with his pulse, breathing, or heartbeat.<sup>50</sup>

Je vais prendre un autre exemple très frappant de musique non rythmique considérée comme rythmique: les marches militaires. La marche au pas cadencé, avec sa succession ininterrompue de valeurs absolument égales, est antinaturelle.<sup>51</sup>

I’ll take another very striking example of nonrhythmic music that is considered rhythmic: military marches. The march with its cadential gait, with its uninterrupted succession of absolutely equal note-values is anti-natural.<sup>52</sup>

Messiaen evidently shares Mocquereau’s strict definition of what is rhythmic (or, more precisely, what is not rhythmic). But now we must consider the composer’s use of the added value. It has been noted that these added values often seem to be superimposed on an essentially metrical rhythm. Sherlaw Johnson, for example, writes that ‘the effect of these

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<sup>48</sup> Mocquereau gives all his examples in both square-note and ‘modern’ notation, and uses the same ‘tenuto-episema’ indication in each notation. Such differences as there may be between Mocquereau’s episema and the modern tenuto may be ignored for the purposes of this argument.

<sup>49</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d’Olivier Messiaen*, 102.

<sup>50</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Olivier Messiaen: Musique et couleur* (Paris, 1986); Eng. edn., *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, tr. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland OR, 1994), 68.

<sup>51</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d’Olivier Messiaen*, 103.

added values is usually a stretching or contraction of the time-values in a passage which is basically metrical'<sup>53</sup> while Pople notes that 'the added value in each case is calculated to knock the rhythmic pattern from the realm of Western (hyper-) metrical music into Messiaen's ametrical style.'<sup>54</sup>

Messiaen's belief in the 'anti-rhythmic' quality of equal durations could be broadened to embrace metrical music more generally, since such music consists of an 'uninterrupted succession of equal' beats. Added values then become a means of 'rhythmicising' music that is not rhythmic in Messiaen and Mocquereau's strict sense. If the extrapolation is valid, then these added-values are closely related to Mocquereau's episemas, those 'tiny lengthenings' that are needed to 'rhythmicise' a succession of equal durations.

The chapter on Mocquereau in Messiaen's *Traité de rythme* gives a fascinating reinforcement of this hypothesis. Messiaen gives a vastly abbreviated account of Mocquereau's theory, while retaining the form of the original and quoting extensively. He begins, like Mocquereau, with the unequal or iambic rhythm, and quotes the derivation of *arses* and *theses* from this rhythm. He then goes on to the equal rhythm, applying the theory and lengthening to the second note in each spondaic pair by a tenuto. Then, in a striking departure from Mocquereau's text, Messiaen illustrates the idea of lengthening by showing the second note of each pair as a crotchet tied over to a hemi-demi-semi-quaver, precisely in the manner of his own added values [Musical Example 2.4, page 135].<sup>55</sup> By this small but crucial change to Mocquereau's text, he demonstrates a clear relationship between the Mocquereau's theory and his own practice.

This affinity between Messiaen's added-value and the Solesmes episema was suggested by Marcel Fremiot in 1948 in a now neglected article on Messiaen's rhythmic techniques for the journal *Polyphonie*<sup>56</sup> (and as a former student of Messiaen, it is possible that Fremiot was prompted to make the connection by Messiaen himself). The above argument is not presented here with the intention that it should supplant the 'authorised' account (which represents the added-value as a derivation from the Hindu *décî-tâlas*), but as a case study that demonstrates how Messiaen's rhythmic procedures can be seen within a larger

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<sup>52</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, 58.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen*, 33.

<sup>54</sup> Anthony Pople, 'Messiaen's Musical Language — an Introduction', 36.

<sup>55</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Traité de rythme, de couleur et d'ornithologie*, Vol. 4, 46.

<sup>56</sup> Marcel Fremiot, 'Le Rythme dans le langage d'Olivier Messiaen', *Polyphonie* 2 (1948), 62. The next article in this edition of the journal is a fascinating essay by the young Boulez, entitled 'Propositions'. [Pierre Boulez, 'Propositions', *Polyphonie* 2 (1948), 65-72.]

tradition of rhythmic theory. Mocquereau's contribution to the added value is conceptual: his *Nombre musical grégorien* was a part of the wider context in which Messiaen developed such rhythmic techniques.

The concepts of 'theory' and 'technique' are key elements of Messiaen's paradigm of music. In this chapter, it has been shown by reference to selected particularities of his 'technique' that others shared this outlook, and that Messiaen's theories and arguments interlock with theirs. The legacy of the past, be it the nineteenth-century organ music, the melodic 'formulae' of Mozart, or the tradition of theorising on rhythm, is a central pillar of this theoretical mode of thought, and it is to Messiaen's wider relationship with the past that we now turn.

## 7 Playing with History<sup>1</sup>

In the context of ‘justification’ for particular techniques, the previous chapter touched briefly on Messiaen’s relationship with his predecessors. Here, I examine this issue in more detail by looking at various facets of Messiaen’s relationship with the past. We have already seen how Messiaen involved himself with a range of composers’ groupings in the 1930s, but in addition to his compositional activity, Messiaen was of course also a professional organist. In this chapter, his links with the main professional organisation for French organists provides a starting point for an examination of how representations of the past were used by musicians in 1930s Paris. I then go on to consider the wider questions of ‘history’ and ‘evolution’ as they were perceived by Messiaen and others. Finally, in a postscript, I look at the links between Messiaen and Charles-Marie Widor, his first composition teacher.

### 7.1 Les Amis de L’Orgue: Historicism in Practice.

By June 1930, Messiaen had already been recognised by several critics as a composer of great promise and acclaimed as a superb organist. As early as January 1930, *Le Ménestrel* had described him as an ‘élève de composition chez qui s’affirment les meilleurs dons, qui font présager un grand musicien futur...’ (‘composition student who is revealing the finest gifts, which suggest a great musician of the future...’), and less than a month later the same journal praised Messiaen’s skill at the organ, pronouncing ‘M. Messiaen possède une indéniable technique basée sur un mécanisme à la fois souple et assuré’ (‘M. Messiaen possesses an undeniable technique based on a facility that is at once supple and assured’).<sup>2</sup>

Between 1929 and 1931, Messiaen frequently deputized for the organist of the Eglise de la Sainte Trinité, Charles Quef.<sup>3</sup> He also worked for a time as organist of the Music Hall ‘Olympia’, and played the organ at the cinema of the Théâtre Pigalle.<sup>4</sup>

On Quef’s death, the opportunity for a permanent position at La Trinité arose and Messiaen declared his candidature in a letter to the priest sent on 14 July 1931. Although he

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<sup>1</sup> With apologies to Professors John Wallace and John Butt, who coined this title for their seminar at the RMA Conference ‘Crossing Borders’, November 2002. John Butt has also used the expression in a monograph on historical performance. See: John Butt, *Playing with History: The Historical Approach to the Musical Performance* (Cambridge, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> [unsigned], ‘Au Conservatoire’, *Le Ménestrel* (31 Jan 1930), 55. ‘M.P.’, ‘Les Amis de L’Orgue (20 février)’, *Le Ménestrel* (28 Feb 1930), 100.

<sup>3</sup> Marie-Louise Jaquet-Langlais, *Ombre et lumière* (Paris, 1995), 64.

<sup>4</sup> F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, L.a. *Messiaen* (Mergier 3). This information is conveyed in a note added to a

was very young (only 22), Messiaen was in a strong position because he was known at the church and had recently received considerable publicity in respect of the first performance of *Les Offrandes oubliées* on 19 February, which had been reviewed extensively in the Parisian press. He also had a barrage of referees including his illustrious teacher, Marcel Dupré, his hero Charles Tournemire, Charles-Marie Widor, Maurice Emmanuel and others.<sup>5</sup> From a letter sent on 8 August, we can discern that the priest had several reservations about Messiaen's application.<sup>6</sup> He was concerned firstly that Messiaen's national service might interfere with work at La Trinité, so the young composer replied that he hoped to fulfil those obligations in Paris without disturbing his duties. The priest also worried that Messiaen would abandon La Trinité for the Villa Medici if he won the *Prix de Rome*. Messiaen reassured him that if he was made titular organist he would give up any thoughts of the *Prix* (neglecting to mention that he had just learned that his second attempt had proved unsuccessful as a letter to Jean Langlais of 3 Aug 1931 reveals).<sup>7</sup> Finally, the priest must have expressed some doubts about 'musique dissonante', because Messiaen replied:

J'ai, en effet, lors de mes remplacements à la Trinité manifesté des tendances un peu trop modernes que je regrette maintenant.<sup>8</sup>

In effect, I showed tendencies that were rather too modern during my periods deputising at La Trinité, and I now regret these.

The priest's doubts show that Messiaen was perceived as a radical choice; an experimental musician whose tendencies might be at odds with the duties of a church musician. Messiaen was obviously aware that this perception might adversely affect his application and played down the relationship between his work as composer and organist. He continued:

Il faut en musique toujours chercher du nouveau mais réserver cela pour les œuvres de musique de chambre ou d'orchestre qui admettent la fantaisie. Pour l'orgue et en particulier l'orgue d'église, ce qui compte avant tout c'est la liturgie. Le cadre,

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letter from Messiaen to his cousin Paul Mergier, who had helped arrange the appointments.

<sup>5</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1999), 90; Nigel Simeone, "'Chez Messiaen, tout est prière': Messiaen's appointment at the Trinité", *Musical Times* (Winter 2004), 39.

<sup>6</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Oliver Messiaen*, 90.

<sup>7</sup> Marie-Louise Jaquet-Langlais, *Ombre et lumière*, 64.

<sup>8</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Oliver Messiaen*, 91. Nigel Simeone gives a detailed account of Messiaen's appointment at La Trinité, which includes other fascinating correspondence surrounding the event, including extracts from Messiaen's extraordinary references. See: Nigel Simeone, "'Chez Messiaen, tout est prière': Messiaen's appointment at the Trinité", *Musical Times* (Winter 2004), 36–53.

l'instrument s'accommodent mal de la musique moderne et il ne faut pas troubler le piété des fidèles par des accords trop anarchistes.<sup>9</sup>

One must always seek innovation in music, but reserve it for chamber and orchestral works in which fantasy is permitted. For the organ, and in particular the church organ, the liturgy counts above all else. The context and the instrument are ill-suited to modern music and one should not trouble the piety of the faithful with chords that are too anarchic.

Despite the concerns of the priest, Messiaen was appointed organist of La Trinité in the autumn of 1931, and became the youngest titular organist in France. But the question of 'musique dissonante' did not go away: Messiaen was permitted to play his own music and improvise in his own style, but only within strictly defined limits. In conversation with Claude Samuel, he explained:

Mes offices étaient, par le fait des différents curés qui se sont succédé à la Trinité, assez sagement répartis de la manière suivante: à la grand-messe du dimanche, je faisais seulement du plain-chant; à la messe de onze heures du dimanche: musique classique et romantique; à la messe de midi, toujours le dimanche, j'avais le droit de jouer mes œuvres [...] Les différents curés de la Trinité ont très sagement fait la part des choses, adaptent chaque style aux besoins de chaque public.<sup>10</sup>

My services were rather sensibly divided up, on account of the different priests in charge. For High Mass on Sundays, I played only plainchant; for the eleven o'clock mass on Sundays, classical and romantic music; for the noon mass, always on Sundays, I was permitted to play my own works [...] The different priests at the Trinité worked things out very wisely, asking that I adapt a style to the needs of each audience.<sup>11</sup>

Despite these careful arrangements, Messiaen's 'musique dissonante' remained controversial with the congregation of La Trinité. According to Spycket, it was, for example, the root of an 'undercurrent of hostility' between Messiaen and one of the church's most famous parishioners, Nadia Boulanger. Messiaen improvised extensively in his own style during a service in memory of Lili Boulanger in 1934 and was comprehensively reprimanded for it.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> ed. Catherine Massip, *Portrait(s) d'Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1996), 11. Although this letter seems ironic in the light of Messiaen's later organ works, it also indicates one of the paradoxes of Messiaen's *œuvre*. Whilst the majority of Messiaen's music is religious in intention, he has, in marked contrast to his friend and contemporary Jean Langlais, written very little music for liturgical use.

<sup>10</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Oliver Messiaen*, 30-31.

<sup>11</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Olivier Messiaen: Musique et couleur* (Paris, 1986); Eng. edn. *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, tr. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland OR, 1994), 25. Translation amended.

<sup>12</sup> Jérôme Spycket, *Nadia Boulanger* (Stuyvesant NY, 1992), 74. See also: Nigel Simeone, 'Offrandes oubliées 2: Messiaen, Boulanger, and José Bruyr', *Musical Times* (Spring 2001), 17-22.

It is easy to imagine that any friction between his duties as an organist and his aspirations as a composer was the result of Messiaen's particular compositional style. This, however, is a simplification that serves to make Messiaen seem like an special case; in reality, this friction was widely felt, as we shall see. The role of church organist involves the constant generation of music, but convention sets limits on the degree of innovation that is acceptable within the rites of the church and while he could draw widely on the music of the past (Messiaen speaks of improvising 'faux Bach', 'faux Mozart', 'faux Schumann' and 'faux Debussy' as part of services at La Trinité),<sup>13</sup> the music of the present was more problematic. His role as organist was one of an anonymous servant of the church while his vocation of composer and performer was one of an individual creative personality.

It seems that the conflict between the roles of the organist was a major force in the formation of the Parisian society Les Amis de L'Orgue. This organisation was formed in 1927 by Béranger de Miramon Fitz-James,<sup>14</sup> and from its quarterly bulletin it is evident that its main aims were to promote the organ as a concert instrument, champion the organist as an individual and support organ music and composers, old and new. In 1937, Messiaen described the society thus:

Les 'Amis de l'orgue?' [*sic*] un 'nom'! Un nom que tous les organistes connaissent.

Tout dans cette Société a été mis en œuvre pour faire apprécier l'orgue et la musique d'orgue: conférences, visites de consoles diverses, concerts réguliers surtout – dont les programmes éclectiques offrent chaque année un prisme délicat de registrations et de littératures choisies, depuis les poétiques récits de nazard du XVI<sup>e</sup> jusqu'aux harmonies audacieusement veloutées des ultra-modernes, en passant par les fugues jubilatoires du père Bach et les anches foudroyantes des romantiques.<sup>15</sup>

Les Amis de L'Orgue? A 'name'! A name that all organists know.

Everything in this society is geared towards the appreciation of the organ and organ music: conferences, visits to various consoles and above all regular concerts – the eclectic programmes of which offer each year a delicate prism of registrations and selected repertoire, from the poetic *récits de nazard* of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the velvety and audacious harmonies of the ultra-moderns, by way of the celebratory fugues of father Bach and the thundering reeds of the romantics.

It is clear from Messiaen's description that the society was more concerned with the organ in its role as a concert instrument than as a functionary of the church. To gain a full picture of

<sup>13</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Oliver Messiaen*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Some references give Béranger in place of Béranger.

<sup>15</sup> Olivier Messiaen, [Contribution to 'Ce que compositeurs et organistes Français pensent de notre croisade'], *Dix Années au service de l'orgue* (Numéro spéciale de la 'Bulletin trimestriel des Amis de L'Orgue') (Paris, 1937), 32.



why such a society might have been formed, we may consider the underlying situation as it is revealed in the other actions of the society. The *raison d'être* of the society is made clear by the controversy that arose in 1937 when Louis Vierne died and a successor as titular organist at Notre-Dame had to be found. Although the final decision rested with the clergy of the church involved, it was usual for a new organist to be chosen by a panel of distinguished organists after an exhaustive competitive audition. When it came to choosing a successor to Vierne, there was some debate that this custom might be altered and this suggestion sparked a sharp response from the organists represented by Les Amis de L'Orgue who, in an open letter of 6 June 1937, demanded that a competition in the established form be held to elect the new organist:

Nous croyons possible une conciliation entre le droit incontestable du clergé de choisir les auxiliaires du Culte et le devoir de maintenir la première Ecole d'Orgue du monde au rang où l'ont élevée Saint-Saëns, Franck, Widor, Guilmant, Gigout et Vierne.<sup>16</sup>

We believe that it is possible to reconcile the incontestable right of the clergy to choose the servants of the Faith with the necessity of maintaining the greatest Organ School in the world at the height to which it was raised by Saint-Saëns, Franck, Widor, Guilmant, Gigout and Vierne.

This episode shows that the Society functioned not only as a promoter of the organ in its multifarious roles, but also as a lobby for the rights of the organist within the church. It provided a means for organists to act together to greater effect: an organists' 'union', in effect. Additionally, it was concerned with maintaining the excellence and prestige of the French titular organist. The concatenation of Saint-Saëns, Franck, Widor, Guilmant, Gigout and Vierne in the quotation above brings together six great organists and claims them as a 'school' – the 'greatest organ school in the world'.

As well as organising concerts and console visits, the society also published a quarterly bulletin, and it is in the pages of this journal that its promotion of the concept of a 'school' is shown most clearly. The newsletter was directed by Norbert Dufourcq who, in several extensive articles for the bulletin and for the *La Revue musicale*, argued for the existence and continuation of a 'French organ school' that found its origins in the music and playing of César Franck and continued uninterrupted right up to the present day.<sup>17</sup> Promoting

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<sup>16</sup> [Béranger de Miramon Fitz-James], [Editorial], *Bulletin trimestriel des Amis de L'Orgue* (Dec 1937), 5. Messiaen signed this open letter, as did Dupré, Dufourcq, Langlais, Lioncourt, Litaize, Pierné and Tournemire, amongst many others.

<sup>17</sup> For example: Norbert Dufourcq, 'Les Grands Formes de la musique d'orgue', *La Revue musicale* 172

the concept of a 'school' fulfilled several of the aims of the society: it maintained the prestige of the organ and lent legitimacy to contemporary organists and their music by linking them with the great names of the past. At the same time, it fulfilled these aims in a way that was compatible with the organist's role as servant of the church. The new and current was legitimised by linking it with the old and past. At first sight, this fascination with the past may seem conservative, maintaining the status quo by insisting on a 'tradition' to be preserved. But Norbert Dufourcq and Les Amis de L'Orgue used the premises of historicism in a free and pragmatic way.

Connection between old and new was not a vague concept – it was made explicitly with specific examples. Norbert Dufourcq spoke in the mid-thirties of 'Notre Jeune Ecole' – the organists of Messiaen's generation – and was eager to show that they were the legitimate and inevitable offspring of previous generations of organists. In 1938, he published a 'Panorama de la musique d'orgue français au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle' that included a diagram sketching the relationship of this 'young school' to the great organists of previous generations [Figure 4, page 146]. In this genealogical tree, Messiaen is seen as the 'son' of Dupré and Tournemire, and is already regarded as the 'father' of a new 'school' comprising Daniel-Lesur, Alain and Grunenwald.

The importance of geneology may be seen in the reviews published in the Bulletin. After the first performance of *La Nativité*, Amédée de Montrichard discussed the work, observing that 'quant aux moyens employés ils dériveront des sources les plus pures, les grégoriennes parmi d'autres.' ('As for the means employed, they derive from the purest sources, Gregorian chant among others').<sup>18</sup> Drawing attention to the plainchant element in this way would immediately have suggested to the reader a chain of antecedents: Widor (who used chant paraphrases in his last two symphonies), Dupré (whose *Symphonie-Passion* is also based on chant material) and above all Tournemire and his *L'Orgue mystique*. Only when this is established does Montrichard explain that 'la nouveauté mélodique, harmonique, rythmique, est audacieusement propre à l'auteur' ('the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic means are audaciously unique to the composer').<sup>19</sup> Messiaen may have been considered 'audacious',

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(February 1937), 83. Norbert Dufourcq, 'Panorama de la musique d'orgue française au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle', [in four parts], *La Revue musicale* 184 (Jun 1938), 369-376; 185 (Jul 1938), 35-44; 186 (Sep-Nov 1938), 120-125; 188 (Jan-Feb 1939), 103-116. Norbert Dufourcq, *La Musique d'orgue française de Jehan Titelouze à Jehan Alain* (Paris, 2/1949).

<sup>18</sup> Amédée de Montrichard, 'La Nativité du Seigneur, Olivier Messiaen', *Bulletin trimestriel des Amis de L'Orgue* (Jun 1936), 18.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, 18.

but he was also carefully shown to be both a product and a part of the French organ school.

Elsewhere, Norbert Dufourcq went further in his assessment of Messiaen's relationship to the organists of the past by comparing him with Widor, and drew a parallel between Messiaen's organ cycles *La Nativité* and *Les Corps glorieux*, and the final organ symphonies of Widor – the *Symphonie Gothique* and the *Symphonie Romane*. Although there is no explicit reference in the titles of Widor's symphonies, the Christmas and Easter stories are implicit in these works through the pairing of a Christmas chant in the *Gothique* with an Easter chant in the *Romane*.<sup>20</sup> Christmas and Easter are likewise implied in Messiaen's cycles. (Dufourcq may have been further influenced in his perception of a link between the two composers by the preface to the *Symphonie Romane*, in which Widor discusses the rhythmic freedom that he sees as inherent in the *Hæc Dies* chant upon which that symphony is based. Since the rhythmic ingenuity of Messiaen's works was one of their most striking features, Dufourcq may have seen a foreshadowing of Messiaen's techniques in Widor's discussion and attempt at rhythmic flexibility.) What is conspicuous about Dufourcq's comparison is that it was made in a discussion of Messiaen (not Widor) but, in fact, reveals very little about the younger composer's music. Thus, as a comparison it seems more ideological than musical, designed to reinforce the unity of Dufourcq's French 'school', by 'grounding' Messiaen in the tradition.

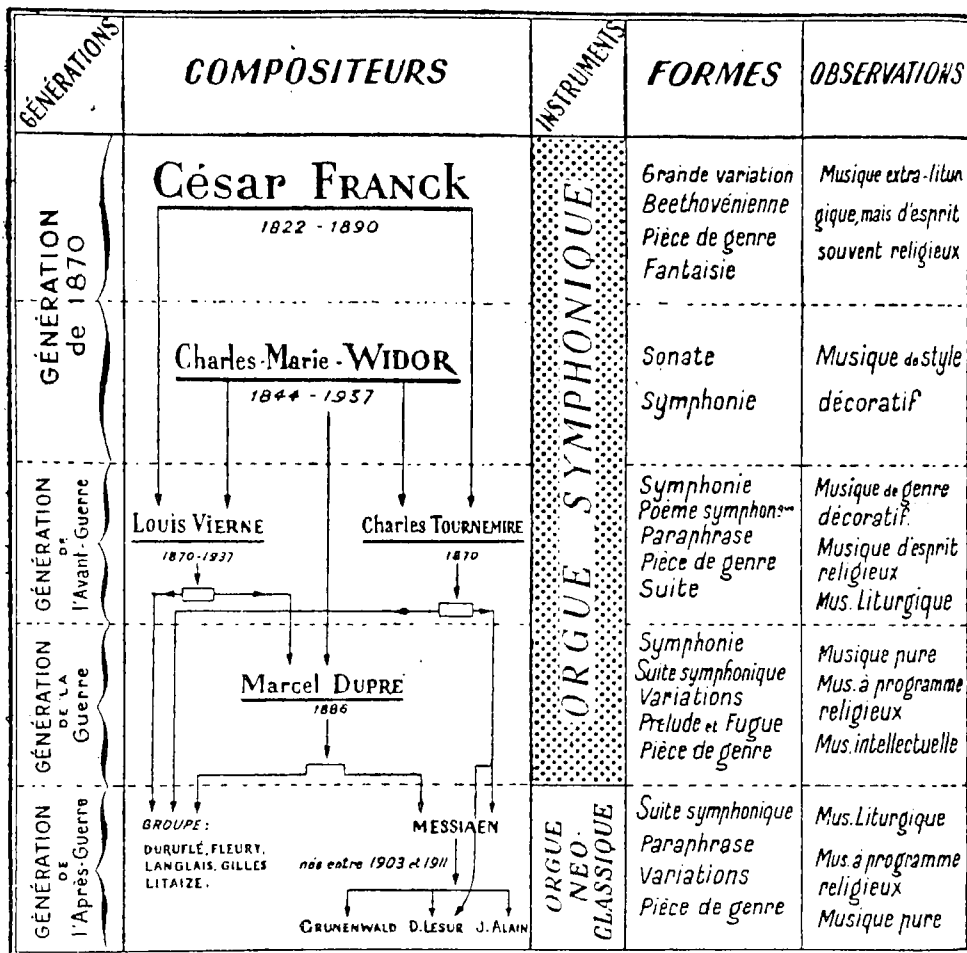
This pragmatic use of historicism had mutually beneficial effects for both organist and tradition (as represented by Les Amis de L'Orgue), as may be seen by considering the first performance of *La Nativité*:

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<sup>20</sup> The *Gothique* is based on the Christmas chant *Puer natus est*, which is treated like a *cantus firmus*, whilst the *Gothique* is based freely on the Easter chant *Hæc Dies*.

# L'évolution de la musique d'Orgue Française depuis soixante-dix ans

## INFLUENCES - AFFINITÉS - TENDANCES



Nous ne savons que trop ce qu'un semblable schéma peut présenter de systématique. De ceux dont nous n'avons pas cru devoir ici inscrire les noms, nous ne nions ni l'action (Gigoul, Guilmant, Saint-Saëns. etc.), ni le prestige qui s'attache à leurs œuvres, (J. Erb, A. Barié, E. Bonnal). De même nous ne nions pas les influences extérieures (Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, Fauré, Strawinsky) qui ont pu s'exercer sur l'un ou l'autre de nos artistes. S'il ne nous était pas possible de faire figurer sur ce tableau tous les compositeurs rencontrés au cours des pages précédentes, nous souhaitons par contre attirer l'attention du lecteur sur ceux qui, dans l'histoire de la Musique d'orgue française, jalon- nent la route, conduisant de César-Franck à Jehan Alain.

Figure 4 'L'Evolution de la musique d'orgue française' [Norbert Dufourcq, 'Panorama de la musique d'orgue française au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle', La Revue musicale 188 (Jan-Feb 1939), 116.]

S'il est une date qui comptera dans les annales de notre Association, c'est bien celle du 27 février 1936 où, pour permettre à Olivier Messiaen, organiste de la Sainte-Trinité, de présenter à une assistance choisie ses neuf méditations sur *La Nativité du Seigneur*, à la veille de leur publication, nous avons organisé dans cette église une séance hors série à laquelle étaient convié nos amis et de nombreuses personnalités de l'orgue, de la musique et de la critique.<sup>21</sup>

If there is one date that will stand out in the annals of our Association, it is certainly 27 February 1936 when, in order to give Olivier Messiaen, organist of La Sainte-Trinité, the chance to present his nine meditations on the *Nativité du Seigneur* to a select audience in advance of their publication, we organised a special meeting at which gathered our friends and numerous personalities from the organ, musical and critical worlds.

The three performers in this *première* performance – Daniel-Lesur, Jean Langlais and Jean-Jacques Grunenwald – were all, naturally, members of Les Amis de L'Orgue. *La Nativité* quickly gained popularity amongst organists thanks to the wide exposure this society concert gave the work (though Messiaen himself played an important part in ensuring its success, petitioning widely for friends and colleagues to attend).<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the work was a wider critical success that reflected well on the state of the 'French Organ School' and so indirectly benefited Les Amis de L'Orgue.

Messiaen's association with Les Amis de L'Orgue shows that he understood the value of being seen as part of a profession and in this sense, Les Amis formed another network of support, like those discussed in Chapter 5. The writings of Norbert Dufourcq and others who wanted to propagate the notion of a 'French Organ School' dealt with the aspects of Messiaen's organ music that could be interpreted as being handed down from the great organists of the past. Messiaen's organ music was thereby legitimated by the society because they promoted the idea that, revolutionary or not, he was a product of 'la première Ecole d'Orgue du monde' ('the greatest organ school in the world').<sup>23</sup> At the same time, they could

<sup>21</sup> [Editorial], *Bulletin trimestriel des Amis de L'Orgue* (Jun 1936), 15.

<sup>22</sup> Amongst others, he invited Georges Dandelot (colleague at the Schola, and an influential critic), Marcel Dupré and Maurice Emmanuel. See: F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, L.a. *Messiaen* [Note to Dandelot]; F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, L.a. *Messiaen* [Letter to Dupré]; Marie-Christine Valette, Michèle Ledroit, Anne-Marie Chartreux, Jacqueline Cretel, *Contribution à l'étude de l'œuvre musical de Maurice Emmanuel: mémoires de maîtrise* (Strasbourg, 1972), n.p.. Through explicatory articles written after the concert in response to 'numerous queries', Messiaen explained some of his techniques (reusing material from the work's preface) and gained further publicity. See: Olivier Messiaen, '*La Nativité du Seigneur*, neuf méditations pour orgue, d'Olivier Messiaen', *Tablettes de la Schola Cantorum* (Jan-Feb 1936), n.p.; Olivier Messiaen, '*La Nativité du Seigneur*. Neuf méditations pour orgue, d'après Messiaen', *Le Monde musical* (30 Apr 1936), 123-124; Olivier Messiaen, 'Autour d'une Œuvre d'orgue', *L'Art sacré* (Apr 1939), 123.

<sup>23</sup> [Béranger de Miramon Fitz-James], [Editorial], *Bulletin trimestriel des Amis de L'Orgue* (Dec 1937), 5.

then use Messiaen and his music as evidence of the continuing vitality of the 'French Organ School'. The society, and the beneficial consequences it could have for the individual organist, were the result of drawing generously on the concept of a professional and musical tradition and its continuation in the very latest generation – perhaps even when the latest trends stretched the notion to its limits. This pragmatic historicism provided a means for the individual organist to survive conflicting duties as musician and functionary, and for Messiaen, Les Amis de L'Orgue was a way of reconciling his role as organist at La Trinité with his passion for 'musique dissonante'.

## 7.2 Continuity and Progress

### The Generation of the *Fin-de-siècle*.

A corollary to Messiaen's historicism is a belief in continuity that flows against the current of revolution typified by Jean Cocteau's *Le Coq et l'arlequin*, but is in sympathy with a range of older ideas on progress. In 'Paris: Conflicting Notions of Progress', Jann Pasler identifies three broad conceptions of progress in music that were prevalent around the turn of the twentieth century, and then goes on to show that all three were bound together in *Le Sacre du printemps*.<sup>24</sup> The three notions she distinguishes are that of 'progress as a linear evolution', which she associates particularly with the Conservatoire; 'progress as unbounded expansion', in which non-European traditions are seen as sources of renewal for Western composers; and 'progress as a spiral', a model in which musical language is seen as an edifice that is extended by each 'true' artist, and which Pasler associates with d'Indy and the Schola Cantorum (though Carlo Caballero has convincingly shown that it was an image used by Fauré, director of the Conservatoire and a severe critic of the Schola<sup>25</sup>). In this section, I use these concepts of progress as a framework within which to explore Messiaen's relationship to history.

A reflection of the supposedly Conservatoire-led notion of 'progress as a linear evolution' (a sort of aetiological sense of history in which the past is conceived as an explanation for present trends) may be seen in various comments Messiaen made. In conversation with Claude Samuel, he says:

Il y a [...] dans l'histoire de la musique une succession ordonnée d'événements. Dans la civilisation occidentale, en tout cas, la mélodie est apparue en premier lieu, puis l'harmonie, ensuite le souci du timbre, plus tard le souci rythmique.<sup>26</sup>

The history of music is [...] an ordered sequence of events. In Western civilisation, in any case, melody appeared first, then harmony, followed by a concern for timbre, and later the concern for rhythm.<sup>27</sup>

Passages in *Technique de mon langage musical* confirm this viewpoint:

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<sup>24</sup> Jann Pasler, 'Paris: Conflicting Notions of Progress', *Man and Music: The Late Romantic Era from the Mid-19th Century to World War I*, ed. Jim Samson (London, 1991), 389-416.

<sup>25</sup> Carlo Caballero, *Faure and French Musical Aesthetics* (Cambridge, 2001), 73.

<sup>26</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Oliver Messiaen*, 82.

<sup>27</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, 54.

Il est curieux de voir comment, depuis l'*Orfeo* et les extraordinaires Madrigaux de Monteverdi, la science harmonique a évolué d'un compositeur à l'autre.<sup>28</sup>

It is curious to see how, ever since *Orfeo* and the extraordinary madrigals of Monteverdi, harmonic science has evolved from one composer to another.

This quotation is drawn from a passage that precedes some of the 'derivations' discussed in 4.2 and 6.1, indicating that Messiaen is aiming to show that his music has evolved from that of his predecessors. It is also virtually a restatement of Théodore Dubois's statement at the head of the chapter on music teaching in Lavignac's encyclopaedia: 'L'Art évolue, progresse, il ne se developpe jamais par saccades' ('Art evolves and progresses; it never develops by fits and starts').<sup>29</sup> Messiaen's derivation of new procedures from the fugue and sonata, mentioned previously in 6.1, also shows his regard for evolution:

Sans nous astreindre à faire des fugues régulières, nous en conservons le plus essentiel: le Divertissement, la Strette.

Without forcing ourselves to write traditional fugues, we retain their most essential elements: the episode and the stretto.

Ayant écrit des 'Allegros à 2 thèmes' absolument réguliers, nous constatons qu'une chose a vieilli dans cette forme: la Réexposition. Nous chercherons donc encore une fois à en conserver le plus essentiel: le Développement.<sup>30</sup>

Having written absolutely regular 'Allegros with two themes', we note that one aspect of this form has dated: the recapitulation. Once again, we therefore seek to preserve the most essential idea: the development.

Messiaen then goes on to give examples drawn from his music that relate to the preserved elements from the fugue and sonata. An 'evolution' is suggested because certain 'essential' aspects of the 'old' forms are preserved, whilst simultaneously other 'dated' elements are discarded, exactly as in theories of biological evolution.<sup>31</sup> The way that Messiaen

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<sup>28</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical* (Paris, 1999), 72.

<sup>29</sup> Théodore Dubois, 'L'Enseignement musical', *Encyclopédie de la musique et dictionnaire du Conservatoire*, eds. Albert Lavignac and Lionel de la Laurencie (Paris, 1913-31), Part 2, 3437. Also quoted in: Jann Pasler, 'Paris: Conflicting Notions of Progress', *Man and Music: The Late Romantic Era from the Mid-19th Century to World War I*, ed. Jim Samson (London, 1991), 398.

<sup>30</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical*, 49-50.

<sup>31</sup> Some commentators have noted that the music which Messiaen claims is inspired by the fugue and sonata has little to do with these forms, but whether or not Messiaen is justified in considering his own procedures as the evolutionary products of the fugue and sonata is irrelevant here (See, e.g.: Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen* (London, 2/1989), 22-23.)



presents his new materials shows his regard for this evolutionary model. Other statements, however, suggest that such an aetiological concept of history does not embrace all Messiaen's innovations:

Nous ne rejetterons pas les vieilles règles de l'harmonie et de la forme: souvenons-nous en constamment, soit pour les observer, soit pour les agrandir, soit pour leur en ajouter d'autres plus vieilles encore (celles du plain-chant et de la rythmique hindoue) ou plus récentes (celles suggérées par Debussy et toute la musique contemporaine).<sup>32</sup>

We do not reject the old rules of harmony and form: let us always remember them, whether it be to observe them, to extend them, or to add to them others which are older still (those of plainchant and Hindu rhythm) or more recent (those suggested by Debussy and by all contemporary music).

When Messiaen writes that the rules of the past are to be 'observed' and 'enlarged', he emphasises an 'organic' progression in music. But the idea of new rules being 'added' indicates another force acting on the composer and shows that 'organicism' was not his only outlook.

For an insight into Messiaen's 'additions' to the 'old rules', we must consider the second of Pasler's notions of progress, that of progress as an 'unbounded expansion'. In this paradigm, the musical traditions of the world are available for appropriation, allowing a renewal of Western musical language. Pasler cites work of the composer, musicologist and professor of music history at the Conservatoire Louis-Albert Bourgault-Ducoudray who, in his *Conférence sur la modalité dans la musique grecque* writes of the appropriation of materials from the total span of history and geography.

Tous les modes, anciens ou modernes, européens ou étrangers, par cela seul qu'ils sont aptes à engendrer une impression, doivent conquérir droit de cité parmi nous et peuvent être employés par les compositeurs.<sup>33</sup>

All modes, old or new, European or exotic, insofar as they are capable of serving an expressive purpose, must be admitted by us and used by composers.<sup>34</sup>

It is well known that Messiaen, like so many of his contemporaries, was influenced by the music of other cultures, a wider trend that Glenn Watkins has traced and discussed in detail in

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<sup>32</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> L. A. Bourgault-Ducoudray, *Conférence sur la modalité dans la musique grecque* (Paris, 1879), 8.

<sup>34</sup> Jann Pasler, 'Paris: Conflicting Notions of Progress', 392.

his book *Pyramids at the Louvre: Music, Culture, and Collage from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists*.<sup>35</sup>

Messiaen's rhythmic techniques are the most important feature of his musical language which are influenced by the other (or, indeed, Other) music – though they are by no means the only aspect of his music to be acted on by 'the exotic'.<sup>36</sup> At first sight, Messiaen's music seems to provide an excellent example of a renewal of musical language through the absorption of features from other traditions. Messiaen appears to be embracing the notion of progress as 'boundless expansion' by adding to his vocabulary in the way Bourgault-Ducoudray suggested. But once again, such a notion of progress does not allow us to explore fully Messiaen's relationship with the past.

The problem lies in the fact that Messiaen does not merely borrow musical techniques from Hindu theory, as others had (notably Maurice Emmanuel in his Fourth Sonatina 'sur des modes hindous' of 1920). To be sure, he does quote the rhythms of Çârngadeva in his music, but his relationship to this source is more complex than that of a *pasticheur*. In *Technique de mon langage musical*, the Hindu tradition is not only a source of musical ideas, but a means of justifying the techniques he has developed. In his first chapter on rhythm in the treatise, for example, Messiaen quotes the Hindu rhythm *râgavardhana*, and proceeds to show that it embodies certain rhythmic procedures:

Çârngadeva, théoricien hindou du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, nous a laissé un tableau de 120 Decîtalas [*sic*] ou rythmes hindous. Nous trouvons dans ce tableau le rythme 'râgavardhana': [Musical Example 3.1, page 154]

Renversons ce rythme: [Musical Example 3.2, page 154]

Ainsi renversé, il contient 3 noires (A), et 3 croches (B): diminution classique des 3 noires; plus le point ajouté à la 2<sup>e</sup> croche (à la croix), ce qui rend la diminution inexacte, nous ouvre une nouvelle perspective d'augmentation ou diminution (par ajout ou retrait du point) et surtout constitue une 'valeur ajoutée'; enfin le fragment B est un rythme non rétrogradable. [Musical Example 3.3, page 154]

De ces constatations, bien anodines en apparence, nous pouvons conclure: 1) il est possible d'ajouter à un rythme quelconque une petite valeur brève qui transforme son balancement métrique; 2) tout rythmique peut être suivi de son augmentation ou diminution selon des formes plus complexes que les simples redoublements classiques; 3) il existe des rythmes impossibles à rétrograder.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Glenn Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre: Music, Culture, and Collage from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists* (Cambridge MA, 1994).

<sup>36</sup> Other examples of Messiaen's appropriation of 'exotic' techniques include his use of Hindu *jâtis* as a source of melodic contours, his use of gamelan timbres in *Trois Petites Liturgies de la Présence Divine* and the use of Quechua words in *Harawi*.

<sup>37</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical*, 7-8.

Çarngadeva, the thirteenth-century Indian theoretician, has left us a table of 120 *décî-tâlas*, or Hindu rhythms. In this table, we find the rhythm *râgavardhana*: [Musical Example 3.1, page 154]

Let us retrograde this rhythm: [Musical Example 3.2, page 154]

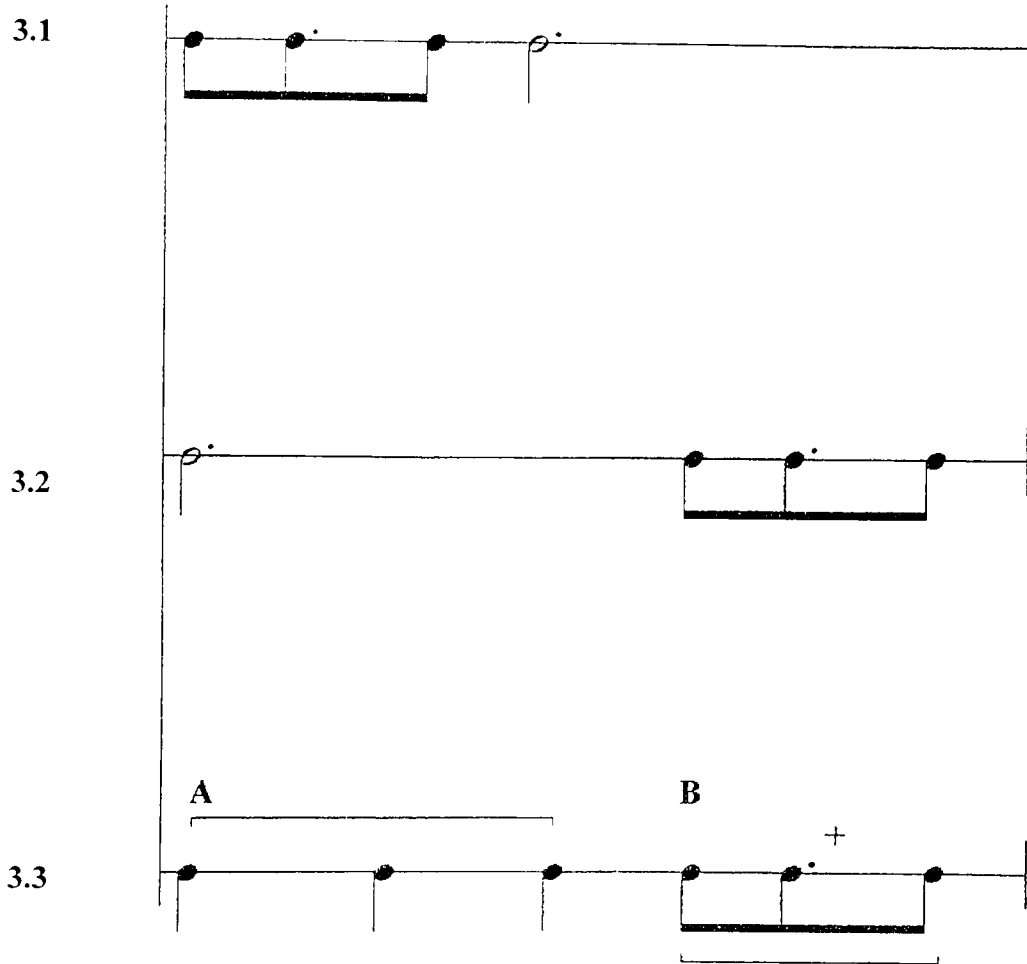
Reversed like this, it contains three crotchets (A) and three quavers (B): the classical diminution of three crotchets; plus an added dot on the second quaver (indicated by the cross), which renders the diminution inexact, revealing to us a new perspective on augmentation and diminution (by the addition or removal of a dot), and above all constitutes an ‘added value’; finally, the fragment B is a non-retrogradable rhythm. [Musical Example 3.3, page 154]

From these findings, which seem very tame, we are permitted to conclude: 1) it is possible to add to any rhythm a short value which transforms its metric balance; 2) all rhythms may be followed by their augmentations or diminutions which are more complex than the simple classical doubling; 3) there exist rhythms which are impossible to retrograde.

The last paragraph reveals Messiaen’s relationship to his source in the didactic context of *Technique*: it is the *râgavardhana* rhythm, passed down by a ‘great theoretician’, that ‘permits us to conclude’ that the addition of a small added value, and the unequal augmentation and diminution of a fragment, are both possible and permissible means of manipulating a rhythm. For Messiaen, in the context of *Technique de mon langage musical*, these techniques are made more legitimate because they are embodied by an ancient source.

In his quotation of Hindu rhythms, Messiaen seems to be in accordance with Bourgault-Ducoudray’s belief that musical language could be reinvigorated by the assimilation of ‘exotic’ techniques. But for Messiaen, these techniques were not only sources to be quoted – the fact that they came from a great and ancient tradition also provided a pedigree that justified his own innovations.

Messiaen was not alone in this belief, of course. In the nineteenth century, ancient Indian culture was elevated in the eyes of many Europeans to the status of a newly-discovered Classical civilisation. Just as Latin and Greek were seen as the key to the Classical civilisations of the Mediterranean, so Sanskrit was considered the key to this tradition in the East. Likewise, just as scholars had drawn connections between ancient Greece and modern



**Musical Example 3: Messiaen's 'derivation' of the added value from the Hindu rhythm *râgavardhana*.  
[Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical* (Paris, 1999), 7-8.]**

Europe, so connections were now drawn between Europe and the ancient Indian traditions. Popular theories implied a single underlying tradition.<sup>38</sup> Works like Adolphe Pictet's *L'Affinité des Langues celtiques avec le sanskrit* (1837), for example, attempted to unearth tangible connections between what he termed 'la grande famille des langues indo-européennes' ('The great family of indo-european languages').<sup>39</sup>

Messiaen's citation of Hindu theory as a justification for modern devices is, then, a manifestation of a long-held belief that 'ancient' and 'exotic' are equivalent to 'universal' – and among artists, Messiaen is in good company, as Glenn Watkins has underlined:

In the act of filtering the Orient through their Western eyes and ears, Goethe, Delacroix, Baudelaire, and Berlioz; Hesse, Hauer, Cowell, and Cage; Messiaen, McPhee, Stockhausen, and Boulez have all promoted the notion that the consideration of an alien culture could provide *new sources of authority* and aid in the expansion of resources, sonorities, and themes in the search for global values.<sup>40</sup>

Messiaen's other famous 'sources' – Greek rhythms and plainchant, for example – may be seen in a similar light. Their antiquity makes them part of a wider, supposedly universal, tradition, and places them beyond reproach as sources for quotation or for the justification of a new technique. Indeed, the equivalence of these musics to Messiaen may be seen in the composer's polemical article 'Contre la paresse', which will be discussed later: 'S'ils entendaient du plain-chant pur, d'authentiques râgas indous, peut-être siffleraient-ils?' ('If they heard a pure plainchant, or an authentic Hindu raga, would they hiss?'). Such traditions are 'pure' and 'authentic', and so new music inspired by them is similarly 'true'. Messiaen's relationship to 'exotic' sources is in fact identical with his relationship to 'ancient' materials (we could say that 'ancient' materials are those made 'exotic' by the passage of time).

The third of Pasler's notions of progress, the concept of a 'spiral', a great and ever-growing edifice, is one that she has adopted from the man with whom she associates it, Vincent d'Indy:

I cannot conceive of progress as a straight road extending on a plain: but, to the contrary, I see the monument-art... in the form of a spiral whose volutes are linked to each other and strengthened by stays, reinforcements – the immutable feelings on

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<sup>38</sup> See, e.g.: Félix Nève, *Les Epoques littéraires de L'Inde* (Paris and Brussels, 1883), 27ff.

<sup>39</sup> Adolphe Pictet, *De L'Affinité des Langues celtiques avec le sanscrit* (Paris, 1837), v. [This volume is available in a reprint using the original plates (London, 2000).]

<sup>40</sup> Glenn Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre: Music, Culture, and Collage from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists*, 16. My italics.

which each of the volutes relies, while stretching the spiral always ever higher towards the infinite.<sup>41</sup>

Pasler notes that this concept of progress was the result of two contrasting relationships with the past. A sense of continuity and of evolution was the first relationship. At the same time, however, those who espoused this position were politically and socially conservative and could not accept politically that the future would be built on the immediate (that is to say post-revolutionary republican) past. Thus, D'Indy, who was of aristocratic origins, conceived the image of an artistic 'edifice' or 'monument-art' as something eternal to which true artists would contribute. This 'edifice' stands alone, preserved through time, and added to by composers of worth. D'Indy explains:

[The ideal artist is a] creator bringing to the old artistic edifice, eternally in construction, new materials that are solid and coherent with the old ones, materials taken from the life of his heart and shaped by his intelligence with the goal of serving the good of mankind and feeding the progressive life of humanity.<sup>42</sup>

The artist worthy of the name, after endeeptening his knowledge of the great earlier expressions of art,... will build on those immutable foundations a new cycle of the magnificent spiral, loyally expressing the ever-same human feelings as he perceives them and endures them.<sup>43</sup>

As well as showing that such a conception of history and progress was shared by Gabriel Fauré, the head of the Conservatoire, Caballero has gone further and explained some of the resonances that this notion of progress would have had. After quoting an extract from Fauré in which he calls for artists to 'add a stone to the great edifice', Caballero notes that idea of a monument-art is for Fauré:

A critique of personal pride [...that] implicitly questions the ambitions of any artist who would set out to destroy what he calls 'the great edifice' rather than simply 'adding a stone' and enjoying the effort of a personal contribution. The conservative intent of this statement is clear. But, characteristically, Fauré modulates it in a progressive direction; he calls upon the artist to try to add *something new* to the accumulated edifice of art, to carefully place his unique and solid stone. [...] Zealots of a chimerical modernity who claimed to foresee the demolition of the 'great edifice', we must remember, created a great stir in Paris and across Europe between 1910 and 1922. [...] Fauré could admit no role for arbitrary rebellions, hate, or wilful destruction in artistic endeavor.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Jann Pasler, 'Paris: Conflicting Notions of Progress', 402.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, 403.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, 404

<sup>44</sup> Carlo Caballero, *Faure and French Musical Aesthetics*, 73-74.

Messiaen may be seen to be striving towards Fauré's ideal in *Technique de mon langage musical*. Recall Messiaen's attitude to the 'rules of harmony' that I quoted earlier:

Nous ne rejetterons pas les vieilles règles de l'harmonie et de la forme: souvenons-nous en constamment, soit pour les observer, soit pour les agrandir, soit pour leur en ajouter d'autres plus vieilles encore (celles du plain-chant et de la rythmique hindoue) ou plus récentes (celles suggérées par Debussy et toute la musique contemporaine).<sup>45</sup>

We do not reject the old rules of harmony and form: let us always remember them, whether it be to observe them, to extend them, or to add to them others which are older still (those of plainchant and Hindu rhythm) or more recent (those suggested by Debussy and by all contemporary music).

This passage strongly recalls the notion of the artistic edifice, 'observed', 'extended' and 'added to' but never torn down and replaced. Throughout *Technique de mon langage musical*, Messiaen speaks in terms of supplementing rather than supplanting the musical past:

Dans cette multitude de 'notes ajoutées', que deviennent les vieilles notes étrangères: pédale, note de passage, broderie, appoggiature? Elles sont indispensable à la vie expressive et contrapuntique de la musique: conservons-les, en les agrandissant.<sup>46</sup>

In this multitude of 'added notes', what becomes of the old foreign notes: the pedal note, passing note, embellishment, appoggiatura? They are indispensable to the expressive and contrapuntal life of the music: let us preserve them, whilst adding to them.

A 'loyalty' to the past is also evident throughout such passages. Even when Messiaen embraces materials from 'exotic' sources, both the specific instances and the general 'rules' he has gleaned from them are shown to be consistent with the edifice of 'musical language'. This trait has already been encountered in the various 'justifications' discussed in 6.1: in the case of certain rhythmic innovations, for example, the coherence is provided by referring to Mocquereau's plainchant researches, Emmanuel's studies in Greek rhythm, and the 'Danse sacrée' as indications of the pedigree of 'unmeasured music'. Elsewhere, in turning to the Hindu *décî-tâlas* for justification, Messiaen is invoking d'Indy's 'immutable foundations', one of the 'great earlier expressions of art.'

Messiaen's journalism provides further evidence that he shared D'Indy and Fauré's regard for continuity:

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<sup>45</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, 81.

Lorsque ceux de ma génération et moi-même sommes venus au monde de la musique, nous avons dû essayer de faire le point, tant l'époque était troublée ou nous semblait telle à nos maîtres et à nous. La question dans son ensemble se posait ainsi: quelle est l'essence permanente de la musique ou 'sa vie intérieure'?<sup>47</sup>

When those of my generation first entered the world of music we had to try to take our bearings, because the era was troubled, or seemed so to us and our teachers alike. The question, in a nutshell, was this: what is the permanent essence of musique, its 'internal life'?

By speaking of music's 'permanent essence', Messiaen is implicitly advocating that the artist 'loyally [expresses] the ever-same human feelings as he perceives them and endures them'. Like d'Indy and Fauré, Messiaen sees the continuity of musical language, along with its coherent extension, as the goal of the sincere artist. D'Indy writes:

Quand l'œuvre est vraiment sincère, c'est-à-dire, quand elle n'a point été conçue dans un but de gloire personnelle ou de profit, mais dans un esprit d'enseignement, elle mérite de durer et elle durera. [...] La sincérité de l'œuvre relève de la conscience artistique.<sup>48</sup>

When a work is truly sincere, that is to say, when it has at no point been conceived for personal glory or profit, but in a spirit of learning, it deserves to live on, and it will live on. [...] The sincerity of the work is a matter for artistic conscience.

Jann Pasler quotes the passages above to expound d'Indy's vision of progress, but one may also recall that they represent the vision given in d'Indy's *Cours de composition musicale*, which Messiaen had known since childhood. Of the different concepts of progress that Jann Pasler identifies, the notion of progress as a 'spiral' is the one that most closely matches Messiaen's own, as revealed in *Technique de mon langage musical*.

Messiaen's distaste for the casual adoption of fashions and the rejection of the traditional that marked the era of Les Six, together with the orientations of his teachers (whom he so carefully thanks in the introduction to the treatise), makes it clear why these older themes of 'progress' are crucial in understanding Messiaen's attitude to the past. The figures that helped to form Messiaen's outlook on music were the generation of the *fin-de-siècle*: Debussy, d'Indy, Dukas, Emmanuel, Mocquereau and Tournemire. As we shall see in 8.1.

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<sup>47</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'La Transmutation des enthousiasmes', *La Page musicale* (16 Apr 1936), 1. See: Appendix I: IV/1. Also quoted in: Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Oliver Messiaen*, 51.

<sup>48</sup> D'Indy, *Cours de composition musicale* (Paris, 1902), Vol. 1, 14.



some of the aesthetic trends of the 1920s were anathema to Messiaen: it was in the musical and philosophical venturing of the older generation that he found inspiration.

### **Messiaen's own Monument-Art**

In 1989, Robert Sherlaw Johnson made the following comments on the span of Messiaen's musical development:

If an assessment of Messiaen's development had been taken in 1960, one would have traced a line away from the lush harmonies and modes of limited transposition of the early period to a more dissonant, non-tonal style which was much more uncompromising and abstract in its expression. [...] Because of the much more considerable use of harmonies which one associates with Messiaen's earlier music in works after this time, it is tempting to consider them in some way retrogressive, a return to an earlier style [...] If one traces Stravinsky's development from the extravagant early works, through the neo-classical period to the final serial period, there is always some element of rejection of an earlier aesthetic, and ultimately no sense of return to the nature of the early music. With Messiaen, this is not so, at each stage of his development he has exploited new ideas and ultimately achieved an integration of all his earlier procedures in the late music.<sup>49</sup>

Messiaen's musical development might be seen as a microcosm of the 'monument-art' that d'Indy claimed for the whole of music history: a gradual building-up of an edifice of techniques to which new materials are periodically added, and which stands strong by the integration of its constituent parts. In a sense, his own musical career may be seen as a testament to a belief in this concept. Continuity, and the continual embellishment of his own 'monument-art' have characterised his approach to musical means across the span of his composing life.

Continuity was important to Messiaen even in the early part of his career: the article that he wrote to defend his *Chants de terre et de ciel* in 1939, for example, clearly emphasises continuity in his musical language:

Si dans cette œuvre, il y a plus de vigueur que dans les précédentes, mes chers 'modes à transposition limitées' sont toujours là, et aussi mes contrepoint d'accords, mes pédales d'accords, mes grappes d'accords.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen*, 190-191.

<sup>50</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Autour d'une Parution', *Le Monde musical* (30 Apr 1939), 126. See: Appendix I: III/14.

If, in this work, there is more vigour than in my previous works, my dear 'modes of limited transposition' are still there, as well as my chordal counterpoints, my chordal pedals and my chord clusters.

For Peter Hill, the unity of Messiaen's approach is his most striking characteristic:

Perhaps Messiaen's most remarkable trait was the firmness with which he kept faith with a basic set of principles, so that the language (and to a very great degree the technique) of Messiaen's earliest music is still apparent in the music composed sixty or so years later.<sup>51</sup>

This does not, however, mean that such unity of purpose emerged entirely naturally: Messiaen carefully played down his few abortive experiments, perhaps in case they damaged the impression of unity. Thus, *Timbres-durées*, a piece of *musique-concrète* composed in 1952, was – despite the considerable effort he expended on this 20-minute work – never released by the composer and the *Deux Monodies en quarts de ton* of 1938 also seems not to have been published.

Nor was the trajectory of his wider career as a musician so unsplintered as may be implied by some accounts of it: until about 1936, with the first performance and publication of *La Nativité*, Messiaen would have seemed set on a career as an orchestral composer, with his prominent and highly successful *premières* of *Les Offrandes oubliées* and *Hyme au Saint-Sacrement* (and also the original version of *L'Ascension*): nearly an hour of music, given high profile and repeat performances (recall, too, that the first major public performance of a work by Messiaen was an *orchestral* version of *Le Banquet céleste* given, unusually, by the Conservatoire orchestra). His organ output to this time, in contrast, comprised only 3 relatively short pieces *Le Banquet céleste*, *Diptyque*, *L'Apparition de L'Eglise éternelle* amounting to about half an hour of music, plus a revision (and partial rewrite) of his orchestral work *L'Ascension*. Although these organ works were, as we have seen, performed with some regularity by Messiaen and his organ colleagues, such performances would have attracted a relatively marginal niche market compared with the great publicity and prestige attached to the orchestral performances. Piano music was even less important: only the *Préludes* and the *Fantaisie burlesque* of 1932 were written in this period. There is no particular indication of the crucial role of the piano in Messiaen's later output, nor is there a sign of the importance that the organ as a solo (and experimental) instrument would later take on.

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<sup>51</sup> Peter Hill, 'Introduction', *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (London and Boston, 1995), 1.

Similarly, it is notable how much Messiaen worked as a pianist in the earlier part of his career, usually as accompanist, but also as soloist in some demanding works (performed in demanding contexts). He received critical acclaim for his performance as accompanist at the *première* of his *Poèmes pour Mi*, and took the piano part throughout the concert, in Claire Delbos's setting of *L'Ame en bourgeon* and in additional solo works that included Milhaud's *Saudades de Brazil* and Ravel's *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (described by Marcel Marnat as 'fiendishly difficult'<sup>52</sup>). Despite this, he later claimed:

Je suis pianiste, mais je n'ai jamais fait d'études de piano très poussées et, d'ailleurs, je n'ai pas eu de prix de piano au Conservatoire. [...] Il est certain que je n'aurai jamais la virtuosité transcendante et les possibilités techniques absolument inouïes d'Yvonne Loriod. Mais je suis tout de même un peu pianiste et je déchiffre facilement.<sup>53</sup>

I'm a pianist, but I never studied piano very assiduously, nor did I win a piano prize at the conservatory [...] I'll never have the transcendent virtuosity and the unimaginable technical capacities of Yvonne Loriod. But I'm a something of a pianist all the same, and I sight read easily.<sup>54</sup>

Naturally, it is easy to imagine a change of shift in Messiaen's relationship with the piano as a performer after he began to write for Loriod. Nonetheless, performance at the piano was an important aspect of Messiaen's work as a musician in the 1930s: this is perhaps a further wayward element of Messiaen's trajectory that he has played down.

Finally, and perhaps most strikingly is Messiaen's work as a critic, music journalist and (as we shall see) aesthetic propagandist. No other element of Messiaen's early career sits so awkwardly with the apparent unity of purpose suggested by, for example, the Samuel interviews or Paul Griffiths in the early chapters of *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*.

If this supposed unity is not borne out by the evidence, then there may be a further ideological reason for Messiaen's concern with it, which we may tentatively relate to the teachings of d'Indy, and the notion of music history as a great monument: embellished and extended by each new work, but unified and contiguous.

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<sup>52</sup> Roger Vinteuil, 'La Spirale (28 avril)', *Le Ménestrel* (7 May 1937), 147-148. Marcel Marnat, sleeve notes for compact disc recording: *Ravel Piano Works: Pascal Roge* (London, 1994). [The Decca Record Company, 440 836-2].

<sup>53</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen*, 190.

<sup>54</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, 113. Translation amended.

## Postscript: 'Another Widor'

When the finale wound up with what I must admit is a million-dollar postlude-toccata, I realized what his model is, consciously or unconsciously. It fits in perfectly that he should be such a superb organist. He is another Charles-Marie Widor. France could use another Widor now.<sup>55</sup>

Messiaen hailed Dukas as his 'professeur principal', but never discussed the composition lessons with Charles-Marie Widor that the records of the Conservatoire confirm he took. To investigate Messiaen's relationship with Dukas, we may draw upon the wealth of comments that the composer made about his revered teacher. In the case of Widor, we have little evidence: indeed, the only published reference by Messiaen to a meeting between Messiaen and Widor is given in the early interview which Messiaen gave to José Bruyr for the second Volume of *L'Ecran des musiciens* published in 1933. Whilst discussing his experiences at the Conservatoire, Messiaen commented: 'à peine ai-je approché Widor.' ('I hardly went near Widor')<sup>56</sup> Otherwise, the composer remained almost completely silent about the man whom the Conservatoire records show was his first composition teacher.

John Near indicates the range of students that passed through Widor's hands during his time as professor of composition at the Conservatoire: Dupré, Nadia Boulanger, Milhaud, Honneger and Varèse all studied with Widor: if we were to judge by his students, we would by no means call him a reactionary.<sup>57</sup> Widor, however, held a profound conviction that sincerity was essential to all artistic expression, a belief that was distinctly out of place in the Paris of Les Six, but which foreshadowed the counter-movement represented by La Jeune France. Near comments:

While it is impossible to know what Widor knew of the music of Olivier Messiaen [...] several early organ works, including *L'Ascension* (1933), were published even before Widor retired from Saint-Sulpice; and *La Nativité du Seigneur* (1935) appeared in time that Widor could have been apprised of its revolutionary import. From the turn of the century, the face of French music changed so rapidly and radically that Widor saw his own period pass away right before his eyes. Whereas most of his aesthetic contemporaries lived more or less within the borders of their own aesthetic period, Widor lived far beyond that time – to witness his own stylistic superannuation.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Virgil Thomson, 'More and more from Paris', *Modern Music* 16 (Nov 1939), 229.

<sup>56</sup> José Bruyr, *L'Ecran des musiciens, seconde série* (Paris, 1933), 126.

<sup>57</sup> John Robert Near, *The Life and Works of Widor* (Doctoral diss., New England Conservatory of Music, 1972), 203.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, 282.

When Near speaks of Widor's 'stylistic superannuation', he includes Messiaen's early music as exemplary of the revolutions in music that made Widor seem old-fashioned. Yet in many respects, Messiaen's music, with its deeply-felt spirituality, could well be seen as closer to Widor's principles than the other music of the time.

In his discussion of Widor's music, Near explains a feature that bears particular comment in the context of Messiaen's relationship to Widor. Near writes:

The influence of Wagner appears quite strongly in the *Symphonie Romane*. [...] It is worth noting that several passages in the first and second movements contain almost direct quotations from *Tristan und Isolde*; and the arrival of the 'Tristan chord' in the second movement cannot have been an accident – that sonority was too famous!<sup>59</sup>

In a work clothed in sacred garb, as it were, the *Tristan und Isolde* 'Isolde' motive (1st movt. mm. 75-76) – sometimes characterised as 'full of sensuous yearning' – stands out. Other Tristanesque references strike the ear later in the symphony.

Widor evidently did not feel any aesthetic conflict between two such disparate sources as plainsong and Wagnerian opera – with all the implications that each includes – if, indeed, he was even aware of the juxtaposition he had brought between the two in parts of the *Romane*. Just how conscious he may have been of the Wagnerianisms [*sic*] is not at all certain; as he once attested 'the idea which seems to us newest always proceeds from another idea'. Might he either consciously or subconsciously have connected Easter resurrection with the music of Isolde's transfiguration? Perhaps there was some relationship in his mind.<sup>60</sup>

It is astonishing that Near does not draw a parallel with Messiaen when he notes this trait in Widor's *Symphonie Romane*, since it is well known that for Messiaen the Tristan myth is the prototype of all great human loves, and therefore closely parallels a spiritual union with God:

[Olivier Messiaen:] Un amour qui, en principe, conduit à la mort et qui, dans une certaine mesure, appelle la mort, car c'est un amour qui dépasse le corps, qui dépasse même les données de l'esprit et s'agrandit à l'échelle cosmique.

[Claude Samuel:] Cette notion de l'amour humain n'est-elle pas en contradiction avec votre foi religieuse?

[OM:] Mais non, parce qu'un très grand amour est un reflet, un pâle reflet mais néanmoins un reflet du seul véritable amour, l'amour divin [...] Pour moi, l'Amour humain représente une sorte de communion.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, 216.

<sup>60</sup> John Robert Near, 'Introduction', *Charles-Marie Widor The Symphonies for Organ: Symphonie Romane* ed. John R. Near (*Recent Researches in the Music of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* 20) (Madison, 1997), xiii.

<sup>61</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Oliver Messiaen*, 38.

[OM:] Fundamentally, it is a love that drives towards death and that, to some extent, calls for death, for it is a love that goes beyond the physical, that exceeds even the limitations of the mind, and takes on a cosmic significance.

[CS:] Is this notion of human love not in contradiction to your religious faith?

[OM:] Not at all, because a great love is a reflection, a pale reflection but a reflection nonetheless, of the one true love, love of god [...] For me, human love represents a kind of communion.

Sherlaw Johnson has pointed out the Wagnerian Tristan references of Messiaen's early cantata, *La Mort du nombre*, in which the harmonies of the 'Liebestod' are repeated almost exactly.<sup>62</sup> Messiaen's associations with the Tristan myth in his so-called 'Tristan trilogy' are also well known. A particularly striking passage in 'Les Enfants de Dieu' (part of *La Nativité*), which also embellishes the basic 'Liebestod' harmonies, has escaped comment thus far [Musical Example 4 and Musical Example 5, page 166]. Messiaen may have considered the Tristan myth, as the archetype of all 'great loves', to be closely related intellectually to the love of God. But this theoretical relation also seems to have spilled over into his music, as the Wagnerisms of 'Les Enfants de Dieu' show. In this conflation of the sacred and profane, of Wagner and Catholicism, Messiaen was following in Widor's footsteps.

Widor does not feature at all in Messiaen's extensive and wide-ranging conversations with Claude Samuel of 1967 and 1986, but Brigitte Massin's 1989 book, which is based on interviews with the composer and was the last 'authorised' study published before Messiaen's death, includes a fascinating passage that confirms the extent to which Widor embodied Messiaen's aims and values. As a statement from Messiaen, it is all the more striking for the absence of any previous references to Widor. In the knowledge of Messiaen's lessons with Widor, it almost resembles an apology for years of silence:

Charles-Marie Widor était très différent des autres, c'était d'abord un coloriste, un chercheur de timbres nouveaux. Lui, échappait au néo-classicisme en vigueur. Il n'était pas du tout fermé au progrès, il était aussi remarquablement ouvert à la jeunesse, c'était un grand artiste, un homme très intelligent. C'est peut-être celui avec lequel j'aurais pu avoir le plus d'affinités sur le plan de l'écriture. Celui qui aurait le mieux compris ce que je cherchais.<sup>63</sup>

Charles-Marie Widor was a singular character: firstly, he was a colourist and searched for new timbres. He eschewed neo-classicism vigorously. He wasn't at all closed to new ideas and was remarkably open to youth. He was a great artist, a very intelligent man. It is, perhaps, with him that I could have had most affinities as far as writing is concerned. It was he who would have understood best what I was looking for.

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<sup>62</sup> Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen*, 55.

<sup>63</sup> Brigitte Massin, *Olivier Messiaen: Une Poétique du merveilleux* (Aix-en-Provence, 1989), 62.

Messiaen's decision to conceal Widor's place in his musical education is a fascinating one, especially since, along with Tournemire, Dupre, Emmanuel and others, he was one of Messiaen's referees in his application for his first and only organ post at La Trinite.<sup>64</sup> There is no aspect of Messiaen's biography that suggests more strongly the presence of Harold Bloom's 'anxiety of influence'. There are so many respects in which Messiaen followed in Widor's footsteps – be it in his profound faith, insistence on sincerity, or, as we have seen, the interlinking of sacred and profane love – that we might expect Messiaen to proclaim his study with Widor as loudly as he did his education with Dupré, Dukas and Emmanuel. Perhaps Near's comment on Widor's aesthetic 'superannuation' holds the key: if Widor's commitment and sincerity were seen as deeply old-fashioned, Messiaen may have thought (consciously or subconsciously) that the only way he could follow in his teacher's footsteps was by discarding him. Only then could his own drive for sincerity be projected as a new aim for the future, rather than the retention of an old, 'superannuated' past.

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<sup>64</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Oliver Messiaen*, 90. Nigel Simeone, "'Chez Messiaen, tout est prière': Messiaen's appointment at the Trinité", *Musical Times* (Winter 2004), 39.



Musical Example 4: Messiaen, 'Les Enfants de Dieu' (bb. 23-35) from *La Nativité*.



Musical Example 5: Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde* (III, 3, bb. 181-182) [Piano realisation of orchestral music].



## 8 Aesthetics and Politics

### 8.1 Messiaen and Neoclassicism

#### Sources of Messiaen's eclecticism.

Au début, la prise de contact fut difficile; tout le petit groupe passait au crible de sa critique implacable et, sans considération, il jeta tout le monde dans le plus grand désarroi en distribuant des travaux imprévus et redoutables. Que lui avait-on dit de ses nouveaux élèves? Qu'ils ne savaient pas grand-chose des formes et de la musique en général. Il tentait alors de leur proposer toutes sortes de disciplines, et ceux qui, tant bien que mal, purent réussir, parvinrent à tirer un sourire de vieux Maître distant. Dès lors, la glace était rompue; les uns après les autres, nous commençâmes à sentir cette atmosphère de sérénité que seuls certains êtres révèlent. Très vite, une réelle intimité s'était installée entre lui et nous. Le sortilège était créé.<sup>1</sup>

The beginning, the first meeting, was difficult; every member of the tiny group was examined minutely and implacably and then, without a thought, he threw everyone into complete disarray by distributing unexpected and fearsome work to be done. What had he been told about his new students? That they knew very little about form and music in general. He thus suggested all kinds of tasks, and those which succeeded, to whatever extent, were able to draw a smile from the old and distant master. In this way, the ice was broken, and one by one we began to sense the atmosphere of calm that was revealed to only a few. Very quickly, a real intimacy grew between us. The magic had begun.

These are the recollections of Messiaen's friend and contemporary, Claude Arrieu, revealing the style of Paul Dukas's composition class and the respect and devotion his students felt for their teacher. They were a close-knit group, and the students' affection was obviously reciprocated: Messiaen may not have known it, but Dukas coined a teasing nickname for his young student – 'le lapin mystique' ('the mystic rabbit').<sup>2</sup>

Messiaen proclaimed his debt to Dukas loudly and often. In the introduction to *Technique de mon langage musical*, Messiaen acknowledges him in these terms:

Dukas [...] m'a appris à développer, à orchestrer, à étudier l'histoire du langage musical dans un esprit d'humilité et d'impartialité.

Dukas taught me to develop, to orchestrate and to study the history of musical language in a spirit of humility and impartiality.

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<sup>1</sup> F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, 4<sup>o</sup> Vm Pièce 990. [Article written by Claude Arrieu after the death in 1935 of Paul Dukas, unpublished.]

<sup>2</sup> F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, N.L.a. 26 (543) [Postcard from Paul Dukas to Robert Brussel. I am in great debt to the staff of the *Département de la musique* at the Bibliothèque Nationale, who helped me to decipher this postcard: Dukas's handwriting is extremely difficult to read.]

Although certain episodes in Messiaen's early works do recall Dukas in their orchestration ('Alléluia sur la trompette, alléluia sur la cymbale' from the orchestral version of *L'Ascension* being the most obvious example) his musical influence was not long-lived: his role in the composer's development lies primarily in the last part of Messiaen's tribute. Dukas taught him to gather inspiration from across the span of music history; that is, he oriented Messiaen towards the aesthetic of eclecticism. Messiaen's 1938 article on *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* makes this clear by celebrating Dukas's own eclecticism. Of Dukas's style, he writes:

Il a derrière lui Wagner et Franck, en face de lui plusieurs amis: Albéniz, Fauré, d'Indy et surtout Debussy dont le génial *Pelléas* bouche l'horizon. Il prendra son miel chez les uns et les autres, sans oublier de demander à Beethoven les secrets de la variation amplificatrice. Il digérera, pétrira, transformera ce miel et nous mettra en présence d'un style composite dans sa source mais très personnel dans sa réalisation.<sup>3</sup>

Wagner and Franck stand behind him, and many friends in front of him: Albeniz, Fauré, d'Indy – and above all Debussy, whose work of genius *Pelléas* fills the whole horizon. He gathers his honey from one and all, without forgetting to ask Beethoven to reveal the secrets of the amplifying variation. After digesting, shaping and transforming this honey, he presents us with a style that is composite in its sources, but highly personal in its realisation.

Maurice Emmanuel is not mentioned in the preface to *Technique de mon langage musical* but from Messiaen's later statements it seems apposite to place him alongside Dukas. As a student of Bourgault-Ducoudray, who believed passionately in the rejuvenation of musical language through the adoption of exotic or ancient sources, Emmanuel was also an example to Messiaen in his searching intellectual eclecticism.<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel, like Dukas, had cast a wide net in his search for inspiration, and had embraced both the music of the remote past and the music of distant lands. As mentioned previously, his Fourth Piano Sonatina is based on Hindu modes but this is just the most famous example of Emmanuel's assimilation of 'exotic' techniques – the same principle underlies other works, including the *Trente Chansons bourguignonnes*. Messiaen's reaction to these songs is well known: they supposedly 'converted' him to modality (though the 'modality' employed by Emmanuel has little to do with Messiaen's synthetic modes, as the composer notes in *Technique de mon langage*

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<sup>3</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Ariane et Barbe-bleue', *La Revue musicale* 166 (1936), 80-1. See: Appendix I: I/1.

<sup>4</sup> He was also a link to the traditions of the Schola Cantorum, and so to the educational ideologies of Vincent d'Indy.

musical).<sup>5</sup> As with Dukas, the musical success of Emmanuel's eclecticism appealed to Messiaen.

Jean Cocteau caricatured eclecticism as the 'arlequin', and thus portrayed the adherents of that aesthetic as shallow 'dabblers', musical mayflies whose works were mere pretence. The word 'arlequin' is also a pun, referring to a meal composed of leftovers, implying that eclecticism necessarily produced second-hand, jaded music. Paul Dukas and Maurice Emmanuel provided Messiaen with evidence that it was possible to engage with a wide range of sources in a meaningful way. This is why Messiaen emphasises his teachers' intellectual achievements:

La personnalité de Dukas. Sa première face: une immense culture. Nul système esthétique ou philosophique n'avait échappé à sa lente et patiente exploration.<sup>6</sup>

The most important aspect of Dukas's personality is his tremendous knowledge. No aesthetic or philosophic theory has escaped his slow and patient investigation.

Emmanuel needed no such explicit reference to his intellectual pedigree. His doctorate at the Sorbonne, studies with Bourault-Ducoudray, and joint professorship at the Schola Cantorum and Conservatoire were proof of his calibre.

Dukas and Emmanuel thus represent the successful realisation of a particular kind of eclecticism, a searching and intellectual eclecticism, sincere and intelligent enough to negate the 'dilettantism' that is the essential criticism of Cocteau's 'arlequin'. Messiaen liked to suggest connections between his teachers' music and his own. In his article on Dukas, for example, he includes a reference to 'quelques pimentations d'origine grecque ou indoue',<sup>7</sup> which he detects in the song of the 'Filles d'Orlamonde'.<sup>8</sup> This song does have an 'exotic' quality, which lies in the use of the flattened supertonic and the sharpened leading note in the minor mode, but it is unclear how this is Greek or Hindu in origin. As we have seen, however, 'Hindu' is a code word for Messiaen that indicates those things with which he feels a musical affinity. As we shall see, Messiaen used these eminent predecessors in his own 'counter-attack' on neoclassicism.

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<sup>5</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Maurice Emmanuel: ses *Trente Chansons bourguignonnes*', *La Revue musicale* 206 (1947), 107-8.

<sup>6</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Ariane et Barbe-bleue', *La Revue musicale* 166 (1936), 79. See: Appendix I: I/1

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, 82.

<sup>8</sup> Anya Suschitsky shows that this melody is related to the viola solo of the third movement of d'Indy's Second Symphony, which was dedicated to Dukas. See: Anya Suschitsky, 'Ariane et Barbe Bleue: Dukas, the Light and

Je n'approuvais pas du tout le mouvement dirigé par Cocteau [...], porte-flambeau d'un certain renouveau musical, prétendue simplification qui partait de Gounod pour sombrer dans le 'retour à Bach'.<sup>9</sup>

I didn't approve at all of the movement led by Cocteau [...], the torchbearer of a kind of musical renewal, supposedly a simplification that took Gounod as a starting point, to drown in the 'return to Bach'.<sup>10</sup>

Messiaen never relinquished his opposition to neoclassicism, and Jean Cocteau's *Le Coq et l'arlequin* is frequently cited in the literature as the main force against which La Jeune France was formed, some eighteen years after the first publication of Cocteau's tract. *Le Coq* hits out in all directions, but it is particularly scathing of the eclecticism that is the basis of Messiaen's aesthetic. It is easy to see why *Le Coq et l'arlequin* so affected the young Messiaen, since almost everything that he held dear in music is flippantly lampooned in its pages. Cocteau attacks Messiaen's musical first loves, Debussy and Wagner:

*Pelléas*, c'est encore de la musique à écouter la figure dans les mains. Toute music à écouter dans les mains est suspecte. Wagner, c'est le type de la musique qui s'écoute dans les mains.<sup>11</sup>

*Pelléas* is another example of music to be listened to with one's head in one's hands. All music which has to be listened to through the hands is suspect. Wagner is typically music which is listened to through the hands.<sup>12</sup>

The techniques and aspirations of Impressionism are also subjected to ridicule, and Debussy's sensibilities are neatly derided by reference to his professed love of violet – also Messiaen's favourite colour.

Les musiciens impressionistes ont cru que l'orchestre de Parade était pauvre parce qu'il était sans sauce<sup>13</sup> [...] Pour la plupart des artistes, une œuvre ne saurait être belle

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the Well', *Cambridge Opera Journal* Vol. 9 No.2 (Jul 1997), 150.

<sup>9</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1999), 189.

<sup>10</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Olivier Messiaen: Musique et couleur* (Paris, 1986); Eng. edn., *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, tr. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland OR, 1994), 112. Translation amended.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Cocteau, 'Le Coq et l'arlequin', *Le Rappel à l'ordre* (Paris, 2/1926), 41. First edition published in 1918, by an imprint that Cocteau had founded himself with Blaise Cendrars. The *Rappel* version includes an appendix entitled 'Stravinsky – Stop Press'.

<sup>12</sup> Translations from: ed. Margaret Crossland, *Cocteau's World: An Anthology of Writings by Jean Cocteau* (London, 1972), 318.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Cocteau, *Le Rappel à l'ordre*, 33.

sans une intrigue de mysticisme, d'amour ou d'ennui. Le bref, le gai, le triste sans idylle sont suspects.<sup>14</sup>

Impressionist musicians thought the orchestra in *Parade* poor, because it had no sauce. [...] For the majority of artists a work cannot be beautiful without an intrigue of mysticism, love or boredom. Brevity, gaiety, and unromantic melancholy are suspect.<sup>15</sup>

L'impressioniste redoutait le plan nu, le vide, le silence. Le silence n'est pas nécessairement un trou; il faut employer le silence et non un bouche-trou de murmures.

*L'ombre noir* – Le silence noir. Pas le silence violet, succédané des ombres violettes.<sup>16</sup>

The Impressionists feared bareness, emptiness, silence. Silence is not necessarily a hole; you must use silence and not a stopgap of murmurings.

BLACK SHADOW. Black silence. Not *violet* silence, interspersed with *violet shadows*.<sup>17</sup>

Musics that are anathema to Messiaen are claimed as sources of 'fertilization', and Cocteau even takes a sideswipe at the impressionists' love of nature by attacking Messiaen's beloved birds:

Le music-hall, le cirque, les orchestres américains de nègres, tout cela féconde un artiste au même titre que la vie.<sup>18</sup>

The music-hall, the circus, and American Negro bands, all these things fertilize an artist just as life does.<sup>19</sup>

Le rossignol chante mal.<sup>20</sup>

The nightingale sings badly.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, 34.

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Crossland, *Cocteau's World: An Anthology of Writings by Jean Cocteau*, 314.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Cocteau, *Le Rappel à l'ordre*, 28.

<sup>17</sup> Margaret Crossland, *Cocteau's World: An Anthology of Writings by Jean Cocteau*, 311. Upper case and italics are Crossland's. Translation amended.

<sup>18</sup> Jean Cocteau, *Le Rappel à l'ordre*, 30.

<sup>19</sup> Margaret Crossland, *Cocteau's World: An Anthology of Writings by Jean Cocteau*, 312.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Cocteau, *Le Rappel à l'ordre*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Crossland, *Cocteau's World: An Anthology of Writings by Jean Cocteau*, 305. This comment may refer to Stravinsky's *Le Rossignol*, since Cocteau's relationship with the Russian composer was ambivalent at the time of writing *Le Coq*.

## Messiaen Counterattacks

It is frequently stated that neoclassicism was the main force against which La Jeune France was founded, but we must note the extraordinary time delay between the publication of Cocteau's text and the formation of La Jeune France. It is easy to understand why Cocteau's text remained current for Messiaen, at least, since, as we have seen, his main teachers at the Conservatoire were precisely the sorts of musicians that *Le Coq* attacked. We must also note the key role that Stravinsky played in the discourse of neoclassicism – according to Taruskin he was the first composer to whom the expression was applied (by Boris de Schlöezer).<sup>22</sup> In his highly nuanced exploration of the ideologies of neoclassicism, Taruskin traces in detail how Stravinsky used the neoclassical epithet both to reject his earlier music (which Messiaen adored) and to set himself up in opposition to the 'Tristanesque' Schönberg.<sup>23</sup> Whilst Schönberg's music was not much liked by Messiaen, Wagner's certainly was, and this rejection by Stravinsky of all that he perceived as 'Tristanesque' would probably have served to reinforce Messiaen's opposition to all things neoclassic. It is worth remembering, too, that Stravinsky's pronouncements were highly publicised (with, for example, *Chroniques de ma vie* appearing in print shortly before the first Jeune France concert).

The Jeune France manifesto (formulated, according to Messiaen, by Baudrier<sup>24</sup> but signed by all four members of the group) provides a good starting point for an investigation of Messiaen's counterattack on neoclassicism. The manifesto is not quite a point-by-point repudiation of *Le Coq*, as has been suggested in some quarters – it is too short and imprecise to be that – but it is instructive nonetheless to see how the language employed relates to that used by Cocteau. It begins thus:

Les conditions de la vie devenant de plus en plus dures, mécaniques et impersonnelles, la musique se doit d'apporter sans répit, à ceux qui l'aiment, sa violence spirituelle et ses réactions généreuses.<sup>25</sup>

As the conditions of life become more and more impersonal, mechanical and hard, music must relentlessly bring its spiritual violence and its generous reactions to those who love it.

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Taruskin, 'Back to Whom? Neoclassicism as Ideology', *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music*, Vol. 16 No. 3 (Spring, 1993), 290.

<sup>23</sup> See particularly: *ibid.*, 289-293.

<sup>24</sup> See for example: Almut Rößler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen* (Duisberg, 1986), 105.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in: Serge Gut, *Le Groupe Jeune France* (Paris, 1977), 16.

This seems related to the following passage from *Le Coq et l'arlequin*:

Les machines et le bâties américaines ressemblent à l'art grec, en ce sens que l'utilité leur confère une sécheresse et une grandeur dépouillées de superflu. Mais ce n'est pas de l'art. Le rôle de l'art consiste à saisir le sens de l'époque et à puiser dans le spectacle de cette sécheresse pratique un antidote contre la beauté de l'inutile qui encourage le superflu.<sup>26</sup>

Machinery and American buildings resemble Greek art in so far as their utility endows them with an aridity and a grandeur devoid of any superfluity.

But they are not art. The function of art consists in seizing the spirit of the age and extracting from the contemplation of this practical aridity an antidote to the beauty of the Useless, which encourages superfluity.<sup>27</sup>

La Jeune France rejects both of the main ideas in the extract from Cocteau. Firstly, the notion that music should be related to 'the spirit of the age' is firmly dismissed; secondly, the particular cases of machinery and 'American buildings' that Cocteau cites are alluded to and rejected in Baudrier's characterisation of life becoming 'hard, mechanical and impersonal'. Furthermore, Cocteau's opposition to 'superfluity' (a key theme in *Le Coq*) is carefully countered by Baudrier's 'generous reactions', repeated twice in the course of the short manifesto. It is, indeed, difficult to understand exactly what is intended by La Jeune France's 'generous reactions' without knowledge of *Le Coq*.

Messiaen also responded personally to *Le Coq*. His untitled manifesto, which he had printed around the time of the *première* of *La Nativité* (and which therefore pre-dates the Jeune France manifesto), shows his desire publicly to counter the ethos of Cocteau's manifesto. It begins simply 'L'Emotion, la sincérité de l'œuvre musicale' ('The emotion, the sincerity of the musical work').<sup>28</sup> Sincerity and emotion in music are, of course, the targets of Cocteau's caricature of 'music to be listened to through the hands': in a short statement, Messiaen asserts his opposition to Cocteau.

His essay on Paul Dukas's *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* also provides clear examples of direct refutation of Cocteau's essay; it celebrates Dukas's eclecticism and, when read closely, may be seen as a clandestine counterstrike on Cocteau.<sup>29</sup> As we have seen, Messiaen draws

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<sup>26</sup> Jean Cocteau, *Le Rappel à l'ordre*, 30.

<sup>27</sup> Margaret Crossland, *Cocteau's World: An Anthology of Writings by Jean Cocteau*, 312.

<sup>28</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *L'Emotion, la sincérité de l'œuvre musicale [...]* ([privately printed in Paris], c.1935).

<sup>29</sup> Dukas may not have been unhappy at being portrayed in such a way. Indeed, Roger Nichols quotes a letter of 13 November 1927 in which Dukas writes: 'If there is ambition [in the musical world], it's along the lines of M. Citroën rather than *père* Franck! I shall very gently try to deindustrialize music. For the moment, I think that's the most urgent job before me.' [Paul Dukas, *Correspondance*, ed. Georges Favre (Paris, 1971), 162. Quoted in:

attention to Dukas's close connections with Debussy and Wagner (the main targets of Cocteau's lampooning) and clearly endorses his eclectic approach. Messiaen's description of the resulting style is telling:

Il digérera, pétrira, transformera ce miel et nous mettra en présence d'un style composite dans sa source mais très personnel dans sa réalisation. Style vigoureux, riche, clair d'une forme impeccable et savante.<sup>30</sup>

After digesting, kneading and transforming this honey, he presents us with a style that is composite in its sources, but highly personal in its realisation. It is vigorous style, rich and clear, of impeccable knowledge and form.

Dukas may draw on a range of sources, but he works with these sources, writes Messiaen, to create a style that is at once composite and personal. Canonised in his own special edition of *La Revue musicale* and so beyond reproach, Dukas becomes the perfect rejoinder to Cocteau's dictum: 'Ne faites pas de l'art d'après l'art' ('Do not derive art from art').<sup>31</sup> Later, in *Technique de mon langage musical*, Messiaen explains the same procedure, in the same terms, in his own compositional procedures. In 'Regard sur d'autres styles', he writes 'A notre tour, regardons les œuvres de nos contemporains et tâchons d'en tirer notre miel' ('We, in our turn, look to the works of our contemporaries and try to gather our honey from them').<sup>32</sup> In the context of *Technique*, Messiaen is able to portray himself as proof that Cocteau is wrong.

Debussy and Wagner are Cocteau's most important targets, but Beethoven is also attacked:

Beethoven est fastidieux lorsqu'il développe, Bach pas, parce que Beethoven fait du développement de forme, et Bach du développement d'idée. La plupart des gens croient le contraire.

Beethoven dit: 'Ce porte-plume a une plume neuve – il y a une plume neuve à ce porte-plume – neuve est la plume de ce porte-plume' ou 'Marquise, vos beaux yeux...'

Bach dit: 'Ce porte-plume a une plume neuve pour que je la trempe dans l'encre et que j'écrive, etc...' ou 'Marquise, vos beaux yeux me font mourir d'amour, et cet amour, etc...'

Beethoven is irksome in his developments, but not Bach, because Beethoven develops the form and Bach the idea. Most people think the opposite.

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Roger Nichols, *The Harlequin Years: Music in Paris, 1917-1929* (London, 2002), 184.]

<sup>30</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Ariane et Barbe-Bleue de Paul Dukas', *La Revue musicale* 166 (1936), 81. See: Appendix I: I/1.

<sup>31</sup> Jean Cocteau, *Le Rappel à l'ordre*, 40.

<sup>32</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical* (Paris, 1999), 72.



Beethoven says: 'This penholder contains a new pen; there is a new pen in this penholder; the pen in this penholder is new' – or 'Marquise, vos beaux yeux...'

Bach says: 'This penholder contains a new pen in order that I may dip it in the ink and write'. *etc.*, or 'Marquise, vos beaux yeux me font mourir d'amour, et cet amour...'<sup>33</sup>

As we have seen, Messiaen carefully emphasises Dukas's intellectual achievements, countering Cocteau's dilettante 'arlequin', and takes care to mention his teacher's skill in what he terms 'the secrets' of Beethovenian development. The characterisation of Beethoven's techniques as 'secrets' implies that only a select group may know them. Messiaen undermines Cocteau's criticisms of Beethoven by implying that he simply did not understand the secrets: in effect, he turns the tables on Cocteau in his caricature of the dilettante eclectic by suggesting that the 'arlequin' Dukas understood Beethoven better than Cocteau.

For Cocteau, eclecticism brings in its wake 'superfluity':

Dans le créateur, il y a nécessairement un homme et une femme, et la femme est presque toujours insupportable. [...]

Assez de hamacs, de guirlandes, de gondoles! Je veux qu'on me batisse une musique où j'habite comme dans une maison. [...]

Ecouter avec toute sa peau, c'est la façon des biches craintives; je préfère écouter de toute mes oreilles.<sup>34</sup>

The creative artist must always be partly man and partly woman, and the woman part is almost always unbearable. [...]

Enough of hammocks, garlands and gondolas; I want someone to build me music I can live in, like a house. [...]

To listen with all her skin is what a timid hind does; I prefer to listen with all my ears.<sup>35</sup>

Cocteau employs strongly gendered language: he aligns 'hammocks', 'garlands' and 'gondolas' and sensuous enjoyment of music with the feminine. If the 'woman part' of the creative artist is 'unbearable' then Cocteau's preferred music is clearly masculine. Messiaen balances Cocteau's gendered rhetoric by explicitly imbuing the eclectic aesthetic with masculine qualities. The result of Dukas's melting pot, Messiaen asserts, is a style that is rich but at the same time 'vigorous', countering the softness of hammocks and garlands, and the gentle sway of the gondola. Messiaen describes Dukas's style as 'clear', where Cocteau asks

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<sup>33</sup> Margaret Crossland, *Cocteau's World: An Anthology of Writings by Jean Cocteau*, 306.

<sup>34</sup> Jean Cocteau, *Le Rappel à l'ordre*, 22; *ibid.*, 28; *ibid.*, 39.

<sup>35</sup> Margaret Crossland, *Cocteau's World: An Anthology of Writings by Jean Cocteau*, 307; *ibid.*, 311; *ibid.*, 317.

for music that is 'simple'. We might also find counterbalances to Cocteau's criticisms of impressionism in Messiaen's preface to *La Nativité*: 'Emotion and sincerity above all else. But conveyed to the listener by means which are clear and true'.

As well as countering Cocteau's rhetorical constructions, Messiaen obstinately uses his terminology of abuse to praise other musicians. In his review of Georges Migot's *Premier Livre d'orgue*, Messiaen describes Migot's counterpoint as 'weaving garlands around silence'.<sup>36</sup> The image of 'garlands' is likewise used in positive references to Charles Tournemire<sup>37</sup> and Ivan Vyschnegradsky.<sup>38</sup>

These counterbalances to Cocteau's manifesto are only part of the story: Messiaen also mounted his own sustained attack on neoclassicism through his journalism. The 'truth' of sincere expression and the implied 'falsity' of music that lacks a spiritual dimension are important motifs:

On a beaucoup parlé, ces temps derniers, du 'retour à l'humain'. C'est 'retour au divin' qu'il faudrait dire. L'homme n'est ni ange, ni bête, encore moins machine: il est homme, chair et conscience, corps et âme. [...]

Dans L'Evangile de saint Jean, ce qui est spirituel est dit 'vrai'. 'Vraie Lumière', 'vraie Vigne', 'vrai Pain du ciel'. Il y a donc une certaine fausseté dans l'oubli du spirituel. Surtout en musique. Car, la musique – quoi qu'on en dise – reste le plus immatériel des arts.<sup>39</sup>

There is much talk these days about a 'return to the human'. One should really speak of a 'return to the divine'. Man is neither angel nor beast, far less machine. He is man: flesh and conscience, body and spirit. [...]

In the gospel according to Saint John, that which is spiritual is called 'true'. The 'true Light', the 'true Vine', the 'true Bread of heaven'. There is therefore a certain falsity when spirituality is forgotten. Above all in music. For music, as they say, remains the most immaterial of the arts.

In other places, neoclassicism and the call of *Le Coq* are characterised as a brief fashion, no longer taken seriously by the young generation:

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<sup>36</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Le *Premier Livre d'orgue* de Georges Migot', *La Revue musicale* 182 (1938), 228. See: Appendix I: I/2.

<sup>37</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Billet Parisien: *L'Orgue mystique* de Tournemire', *La Sylinx* (May 1938), 26. See: Appendix I: II/12.

<sup>38</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Chronique de Paris [March 1937]', *La Sirène* (Mar 1937), 14. See: Appendix I: II/1. We must also note Messiaen's parody of those who 'churn out' *premières*, discussed in 5.2, which speaks of melodies 'reheated to perfection'. This is a reference to Cocteau's clever pun on 'arlequin' ('meal composed of leftovers').

On nous parlait avec enthousiasme, hier, de musique d'usines, de sports, de locomotives ou d'avions, de dissonances capables d'extérioriser, sinon de poétiser, cette esthétique du bruitisme. Puis le vent tourna: simplifions! et, alors, autre question: 'Qui vais-je bien imiter pour être original?'

Parallèlement, mais souterrainement pourrait-on dire, à ces sursauts, quelque chose a germé, quelque chose qui peut restituer à la musique ses richesses perdues. Les jeunes – les très jeunes – pensent à l'émotion d'abord, à une émotion inspirée par l'Amour.<sup>40</sup>

Yesterday, they spoke enthusiastically to us of the music of factories, of sports, of locomotives or aeroplanes, of dissonances capable of expressing, if not poeticising, this aesthetic of noise. Then the wind changed: simplify! And, then, another question arose: 'Who should I imitate to be original?'

At the same time as these shocks, something germinated, one might say subterraneously, something that could return to music the riches that it has lost. The young composers – the very young ones – think firstly of emotion, of emotion inspired by Love.

Messiaen wrote two articles on rhythm – 'Réflexions sur le rythme' for *La Sirène*,<sup>41</sup> and 'Le rythme chez Strawinsky' for *La Revue musicale* – that bemoan the dearth of inventive rhythmic innovation in most of the new music he heard. In each case the absence of rhythmic research is seen as part of a wider trend of decadence and insincerity that Messiaen systematically associates with neoclassicism. In 'Le Rythme chez Igor Strawinsky', Messiaen writes:

Chose curieuse, s'ils ont subi sa puissante influence dans le double domaine de la polytonalité et des somptuosités orchestrales, ses contemporains immédiats ont peu utilisé ses rythmes. Ils les ont admirés, mais d'une admiration paresseuse, béate, et sans fruits.<sup>42</sup>

It is strange that, whilst Stravinsky has exerted a powerful influence over his immediate contemporaries in the dual domains of polytonality and sumptuous orchestration, they have rarely used his rhythms. They admire them, but it is a lazy admiration, complacent and fruitless.

In 'Réflexions sur le Rythme', Ravel's failure to build on Debussy's rhythmic innovations is seen as mark of artistic shortcomings:

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<sup>39</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'De la Musique sacrée', *Carrefour* (Jun-Jul 1939) [double issue], 75. See: Appendix I: V/3.

<sup>40</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'La Transmutation des enthousiasmes', *La Page musicale* (16 Apr 1936), 1. See: Appendix I: IV/1. Also quoted in: Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen*, 51.

<sup>41</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Billet Parisien: Réflexions sur le rythme', *La Sirène* (May 1937), 14. See: Appendix I: II/3.

<sup>42</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Le Rythme chez Igor Strawinsky', *La Revue musicale* 191 (1939), 91. See: Appendix I: I/3.

Debussy, par quelques touches impalpables, a su construire dans la souplesse un échafaudage inébranlable de rythmes savamment dosés et poétiquement respirés. Ravel, son merveilleux continuateur dans le domaine 'timbre et accords', a oublié les rythmes exquis de son devancier. L'émotion qui était liée à ces rythmes a disparu aussi.<sup>43</sup>

Debussy, by certain impalpable touches, knew how to achieve through suppleness an unshakeable structure of skilfully proportioned and poetically respiring rhythms. Ravel, his marvellous disciple in the domain of 'timbre and chords', has completely forgotten the exquisite rhythms of his predecessor. The emotion that was contained in these rhythms has also disappeared.

Messiaen's various aspirations were closely entangled, and issues in musical language seem to have been inseparable from the wider concerns of his aesthetic outlook. Rhythm becomes a musical symbol of the difference between neoclassicism and Messiaen's idealised spirituality. It is clear that he saw rhythmic blandness as the most obvious indication of the artistic paucity of neoclassicism, and its rejuvenation as the key to a new age of musical expression:

Les jeunes – les très jeunes – pensent à l'émotion d'abord, à une émotion inspirée par l'Amour. La femme, la nature, la religion sont sources d'amour.

La Foi chrétienne a suscité les cathédrales, c'est elle qui inspirera musicalement des chefs-d'œuvre d'amour.

Mais là intervient le vocabulaire. Plus de rythmes monotones par leur carrure même; nous voulons librement respirer! Laissons les polytonalités vagues (et faciles) et retrouvons la somptueuse 'modalité', génératrice d'atmosphères chaudes et vibrantes en accord avec des rythmes souples et sinueux n'enchaînant pas, dans la 'métrique', une pensée d'essor libre.<sup>44</sup>

The young composers – the very young ones – think firstly of emotion, of emotion inspired by Love. Woman, Nature and Religion are sources of Love.

Cathedrals are the result of the Christian faith, and it is this faith that will inspire musical masterpieces of love.

But here we must consider vocabulary. No more rhythms made monotonous by their squareness. We want to breathe freely! Let us leave to one side vague (and simple) polytonalities, and rediscover sumptuous modality, which generates a warm and vibrant atmosphere in keeping with supple and sinuous rhythms and free-flowing imagination, unhindered by 'meter'.

In 1937, Messiaen wrote an article on religious music for the front page of *La Page musicale*, which concluded with the exhortation to other young composers that was discussed in chapter 3:

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<sup>43</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Billet Parisien: Réflexions sur le rythme', 14.

<sup>44</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'La Transmutation des enthousiasmes', 1.

Jeunes compositeurs, si vous avez la foi, marchez de l'avant; et donnez-nous des œuvres religieuses vivantes et agissantes dont l'on puisse dire ce que L'Ecriture dit des étoiles: 'Elle brillent joyeusement pour celui qui les a créées!'<sup>45</sup>

Young composers: if you believe, step out in front and write us religious works that live and inspire, and which will bring us to say of them what the Scripture says of the stars: 'With cheerfulness they shewed light unto him that made them'.

Messiaen was not afraid to attack the status quo with all the force available to him, and in a heartfelt article, also for the front page of *La Page musicale*, he argued his convictions with unprecedented forcefulness. Here, he reveals not only a hitherto unsuspected skill in journalistic rhetoric but also a readiness to polemicize the argument.

'Contre La Paresse'

Ce siècle enfiévré, ce siècle affolé n'est qu'un siècle de paresseux.

Paresseux, les compositeurs qui ne produisent plus, paresseux les compositeurs qui produisent trop sans prendre le temps de méditer, de mûrir leurs conceptions hâtives.

Paresseux, les artisans du sous-Fauré, du sous-Ravel. Paresseux, les maniaques du faux Couperin, les fabricants de rigaudons et de pavanés. Paresseux, les odieux contrapuntistes du retour à Bach qui nous offrent, sans remords, des lignes sèches et mornes, empoisonnées par un semblant d'atonalisme.

Paresseux, les vils flatteurs de l'habitude et du laisser-aller qui méprisent tout élan rythmique, tout repos rythmique, toute variété, toute respiration rythmique, toute alternance dans l'art si difficile du nombre musical, pour nous servir sur le plateau illusoire du mouvement perpétuel de vagues trois temps, des quatre temps plus vagues encore, indignes du plus vulgaire des bals publics, de la moins entrainée des marches militaires.

Et que dire des habitués auditeurs de nos salles de concert? Leur haine du changement est vraiment inouïe! Bon nombre d'entre eux n'admettent pas encore des noms déjà classés, comme Strawinsky, Alban Berg, Bartók, Darius Milhaud, par exemple. S'ils entendaient du plain-chant pur, d'authentiques râgas indous, peut-être siffleraient-ils? Leur cerveau obscurci n'enregistre que certaines combinaisons sonores, à l'exclusion de toutes les autres.

Contre une telle catégorie de paresseux – la génie nécessaire, le grand libérateur attendu de la musique à venir – quels tonnerres, quel trésors de grêlons furieux ou de douce neige enverra-t-il?<sup>46</sup>

'Against Laziness.'

This feverish century, this crazy century is nothing but a century of laziness.

Lazy: those composers who produce nothing any more. Lazy: those composers who produce too much without ever taking the time to think, to let their hurried work ripen. Lazy: those artisans of sub-Fauré and sub-Ravel. Lazy: the fake Couperin

<sup>45</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Musique religieuse', *La Page musicale* (5 Feb 1937), 1. See: Appendix I: IV/4A.

<sup>46</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Contre La Paresse', *La Page musicale* (17 Mar 1939), 1. See: Appendix I: IV/5A. Also quoted in Alain Périer, *Messiaen* (Paris, 1979), 48-49.

maniacs, writers of rigadoons and pavans. Lazy: the odious contrapuntalists of the 'return to Bach' who offer us, without remorse, dry and doleful lines poisoned by a semblance of atonality.

Lazy: the vile flatterers of habit and *laissez-faire* who scorn all rhythmic undulation, all variety, all respiration, all alternation in the subtle art of musical meter, serving us instead on the illusory platter of perpetual motion, vague three-in-a-bars and vaguer four-in-a-bars, native to the most vulgar of public dances and the most limping of military marches.

And what can we say about our regular concertgoers? Their hatred of change is truly amazing! A good number of them still do not accept musicians who are already 'acknowledged', like Stravinsky, Alban Berg, Bartók and Darius Milhaud for example. If they heard a pure plainchant, or an authentic Hindu raga, would they hiss? Their little brains can only understand certain combinations of sounds, to the exclusion of all others.

What thunder, what treasure-troves of hailstones or of sweet snow will be brought to bear on this kind of laziness by the genius we await, the great anticipated liberator of the music of the future?

Though the rhetoric is rather heavy, this article shows Messiaen's personal commitment to the ideals of La Jeune France – in a rapturous, almost ecstatic, prose style.<sup>47</sup> We might also note the (perhaps unintentional) reference to Wagner in Messiaen's final phrase ('the music of the future'). This startling polemic did not pass without comment – the following issue of *La Page musicale* contained an angry response to Messiaen's article.<sup>48</sup>

It is well known that such preoccupations – the rejection of neoclassicism and a 'return to the spiritual' – were the central aim of La Jeune France, but Messiaen's journalism undermines the received image of Messiaen's involvement with that group. The image of the bystander – briefly, unexpectedly and half-heartedly caught up in a crusade – is laid to rest, while the epithet given to Messiaen in 1937 by *La Revue musicale* ('un militant') becomes easier to understand. Messiaen's journalism shows him as a committed campaigner against *Le Coq* and its shadow.

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<sup>47</sup> I am grateful to Mark Carroll for pointing out to me the aural qualities of the text when heard aloud.

<sup>48</sup> Paul de Stoecklin, 'Contre la Paresse', *La Page musicale* (31 Mar 1939), 1. See: Appendix I: IV/5B.

## 8.2 Political Discourse

I have a horror of politics. I've never been engaged in them, and I've a horror of being engaged by them. I'm a composer because I love music, and a Christian because I believe; but in this attitude there's no 'engagement' at all.<sup>49</sup>

Towards the end of his original conversation with Claude Samuel in 1967, Messiaen made the statement above, explaining how he eschewed 'engagement' of any kind – and in particular the 'political' engagement to which Samuel alluded in his question.

The previous section traced a line of aesthetic discourse, confirming Messiaen's strong anti-neoclassical stance and showing how he responded publicly to Jean Cocteau's polemic *Le Coq et l'arlequin*. In previous chapters, I have shown how Messiaen promoted his friends' music in his journalism and supported his colleagues in performances. I have also shown the importance of musical groupings to Messiaen in his early career, taking in not only La Jeune France, but also La Spirale, the group of 'Four' (Messiaen, Arrieu, Barraine and probably Cartan) as well as his enthusiasm for Jacques Porte's proposed group Les Jeunes Musiciens français. I have also shown how Messiaen crafted a different style for each of the journals that he wrote for, and demonstrated that he was willing to invoke powerful rhetoric in support of his beliefs.

If one theme unites these strands, it is the notion of partisanship. In each case, Messiaen has been shown to be partisan in some sense, whether it is through critical support for his friends and colleagues, in repelling an aesthetic trend of which he disapproved, or in forming collegial groupings (which, by their very nature, exclude those not invited to be members). Engagement in each of these activities requires a certain kind of interaction that could be described as broadly political – not in the sense of the politics of nations, but more in the kinds of engagement that are a necessary part of such activities, especially the use of arguments that are inflected by rhetorical, economic or practical considerations.

These strands, and others that I have identified in this thesis, reveal a politically-aware Messiaen, at least in the sense that he understood the value of a kind of pragmatic expediency. The examples I have drawn from his early career clearly problematise the quotation above, revealing another facet of the mythology of the 'musician apart', that of Messiaen's supposed lack of 'engagement' with wider ideological issues. Messiaen's self-portrayal in the quotation

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<sup>49</sup> Claude Samuel, *Entretiens avec Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1967); Eng. edn. tr. Felix Aprahamian *Conversations*

above is misleading inasmuch as it suggests a guileless innocence that is at odds with the sorts of activities that I have traced here.

In this chapter, I propose to examine Messiaen's interaction with questions of wider ideology. As a case study, I initially look briefly at the use of nationalism as a rhetorical construction. I then turn to the small but significant points of contact between Messiaen and the ideological convulsions that seized France during the 1930s.

## Maintaining Frenchness

In *Le Coq*, Cocteau places great emphasis on the importance of maintaining a strong sense of 'Frenchness' in new music: appealing to nationalism is one of his large arsenal of rhetorical techniques. He paints the proponents of the eclectic aesthetic as traitors in a war against an invading force of German, Russian and 'exotic' influences that threaten to overwhelm music that was 'truly French':

Quand je dis 'le piège russe', 'l'influence russe', je ne veux pas dire par là que je dédaigne la musique russe. La musique russe est admirable parce qu'elle est la musique russe. La musique française russe ou la musique française allemande est forcément bâtarde, même si elle s'inspire d'un Moussorgsky, d'un Strawinsky, d'un Wagner, d'un Schoenberg.<sup>50</sup>

When I speak of the 'Russian trap' or 'Russian influence', I do not mean by that that I despise Russian music. Russian music is admirable because it is Russian music. Russian-French music or German-French music is necessarily illegitimate [bastard], even if it is inspired by a Moussorgsky, a Stravinsky, a Wagner, or a Schoenberg.<sup>51</sup>

Cocteau then expounds the virtues of the music he seeks:

Je demande une musique française de France<sup>52</sup> [...] En musique la ligne c'est la mélodie. Le retour au dessin entraînera nécessairement un retour à la mélodie.<sup>53</sup>

The music I want must be French, of France. [...] In music, line is melody. The return to design will necessarily involve a return to melody.<sup>54</sup>

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with Olivier Messiaen (London, 1976), 102.

<sup>50</sup> Jean Cocteau, *Le Rappel à l'ordre*, 26.

<sup>51</sup> Margaret Crossland, *Cocteau's World: An Anthology of Writings by Jean Cocteau*, 310. Translation amended.

<sup>52</sup> Jean Cocteau, *Le Rappel à l'ordre*, 26.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, 27.

<sup>54</sup> Margaret Crossland, *Cocteau's World: An Anthology of Writings by Jean Cocteau*, 309.



By referring to melody in the context of ‘Frenchness’, Cocteau neatly paraphrases nearly two hundred years of French musical debate. In the clichés of everyday criticism since the Enlightenment, rich and complex (‘thick’) harmony was perceived as typically German.<sup>55</sup> This is a construction that has been taken up repeatedly by French critics and employed against many opponents, among them Gluck, Haydn, Beethoven, Wagner and Strauss. Cocteau’s juxtaposition of ‘French [music], of France’, with a ‘return to design’ and ‘melody’ resurrects this perceived dichotomy, and allows him to use it against his immediate French predecessors, specifically Debussy and the Impressionists, stripping them of their status as ‘national’ heroes.

When Cocteau unites ‘the return to design’ with a ‘return to melody’, he is not only hitting out at the Impressionists. He is also placing melody at the very centre of music, establishing it as what remains when all else is stripped away. Consequently, he is also referring to one of the basic metaphors of the debate: that the simplicity of melody gives it a special status of prelapsarian purity. This notion can be found throughout the history of the melody-harmony debate. In a different context, Stendhal gives the following analogy:

The charm of simple melody may be compared with the sweetness of some luscious fruit, which all children adore. Harmony, on the other hand, is the musical equivalent of those sharp, stimulating, highly-seasoned dishes which the jaded palate of middle-age craves to satisfy his blasé sensibility.<sup>56</sup>

The long history of discourse on harmony therefore provides Cocteau with a multivalent weapon. Firstly, it provides him with a traditional image of ‘Frenchness’ with which he can attack not only the music of other cultures but also the (‘arlequin’) French ‘greats’ of the immediate past. Secondly, it effects a group of interrelated associations that might then be applied to all musics that fall on the ‘wrong side’ of the dichotomy. All music that does not follow Cocteau’s manifesto cannot be ‘truly’ French, the argument runs, and is bound therefore to be ‘Germanic’, decadent and worn out.

In 5.2, I examined Messiaen’s role in the formation of La Jeune France and argued that he was probably responsible for the group’s title and, therefore, for their most obvious appeal to nationalism. For La Jeune France, it was possible to counter some aspects of neoclassicism and *Le Coq* simply by setting up alternatives. The ‘Frenchness’ of the new group, however,

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<sup>55</sup> See, e.g.: Jean Mongrédien, *Musique en France, des lumières au romantisme* (Paris, 1986); Eng. edn. tr. Sylvain Fréaux, *French Music from the Enlightenment to Romanticism 1789-1830* (Portland OR, 1996), 315-341.

<sup>56</sup> Henri Beyle Stendhal, *Life of Rossini*, New and rev. ed. tr. and ann. Richard N. Coe (London, 1970), 121.

had to be asserted more explicitly because it could be criticised by opponents – aesthetic and political – as a return to Romanticism, which was perceived as overwhelmingly ‘Germanic’.

Jane Fulcher’s work on this period traces the shift in the ways in which music was used to political ends in the period between 1936 and 1938. From 1936, the anti-Fascist conglomeration known as the Front Populaire promoted through its *Fédération Musical Populaire* a style that was to be representative of the French democratic Republic. According to Fulcher, this was based on some of the features of the well-established neoclassical style, forcing Messiaen and La Jeune France into a position of aesthetic opposition (and, therefore, apparent political opposition) by virtue of their deeply-held antipathy to that style. The rhetoric of nationalism was employed once again, but here the opposition was twofold: the music of the Front Populaire was to be ‘French, of France’, as Cocteau had desired, but also anti-Fascist. The *Fédération Musical Populaire* expressly favoured music that was to be based on ‘traditional’ French qualities. Fulcher explains:

This implied that melody and rhythm should be the predominant elements, and that complicated ‘architecture’ or overly complex harmonies were to be shunned.<sup>57</sup>

In the light of Messiaen’s campaign against neoclassicism, and the aesthetic positioning of the Front Populaire, I propose that Messiaen realised that an explicit label of ‘Frenchness’ was necessary if they were to take issue with an aesthetic – neoclassicism – that was perceived as ‘typically French’ and officially sanctioned as such. The name ‘La Jeune France’ might then be seen as an extra gesture of nationalist intent that was essential to counter the combined force of Cocteau’s alignment of the romantic with the ‘Germanic’, and the nominal adoption of neoclassicism as the ‘anti-Fascist’ aesthetic of music.

The name of the group also reclaimed for La Jeune France the ‘Frenchness’ that Cocteau had invoked nearly twenty years earlier, with all the rhetorical potency that brought with it. Though the precise connection is difficult to pin down,<sup>58</sup> the reference to Berlioz in

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<sup>57</sup> Jane Fulcher, ‘Musical Style, Meaning, and Politics in France on the Eve of the Second World War’, *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 13 No. 4 (Fall 1995), 431. Footnote to: Pascale Ory, ‘Le Front Populaire et la création artistique’, *Bulletin de la société d’histoire moderne* 8 (1974), 9.

<sup>58</sup> The connection between the name ‘Jeune France’ and Hector Berlioz has not been fully explained – the phrase does not appear in any of his works, nor in his *Mémoire*. Monir Tayeb and Michel Austin [<http://www.hberlioz.com/events/news.htm> (accessed 11 Oct 2005)] suggest that the name was derived from the title of Berlioz’s song *Le Jeune pâtre Breton*, but this seems rather unlikely – it is a unpretentious love song. The manifesto also specifically says that the name itself – La Jeune France – had been used by Berlioz. It may be that Messiaen (or Baudrier) had incorporated Berlioz into the literary grouping La Jeune France, which existed in the 1830s, and was associated with Victor Hugo’s younger contemporaries. This is not unreasonable, since Berlioz had close links with its members.

the manifesto was a cunning way of reclaiming Romanticism for the French. Serge Gut explains the implications of the Berlioz reference:

Rappelons que le néo-classicisme était à la fois dirigé contre Wagner et contre Debussy, tout en se voulant français et nationaliste. Désormais – donc avec la Jeune France – l'anathème jeté contre Wagner est levé, sans qu'il soit réellement réhabilité. En revanche, Debussy est remis à l'honneur.<sup>59</sup>

Recall that neoclassicism was directed simultaneously against Wagner and against Debussy, whilst aiming to be French and nationalist. Henceforth – that is, with La Jeune France – the curse on Wagner is lifted, without him being explicitly rehabilitated. In return, Debussy is returned to a place of honour.

Berlioz offered an alternative pedigree for La Jeune France's quasi-Romantic values – a perceived German Romantic heritage (constructed by, amongst others, Cocteau) is supplanted by a safer French alternative. Fulcher draws attention to the place of honour that Berlioz takes in the first issue of *L'Art musical populaire*, the journal of the Fédération Musical Populaire, and thereby confirms that Berlioz was a politically-acceptable role model.

The name and manifesto of La Jeune France are, therefore, not simply a striking piece of marketing and an outline of an aesthetic programme: they dabble in a range of politically inflected debates – some ancient, some contemporary.

### **The Political Appropriation of Messiaen and La Jeune France**

Apart from a brief discussion in Fulcher's study of pre-war Paris, the extent of Messiaen's role in the political dramas of the time – whether actively sought or appropriated by others – has received little attention. The reasons for this neglect are twofold: firstly, Messiaen eschewed any political comment in later life, preferring to portray himself instead as a disinterested (and, indeed, uninterested) artist, exactly as the quotation at the head of this chapter suggests. Secondly, the relative lack of reception work on the composer has meant that Messiaen's representation in the diverse press of the time has not yet been examined in detail. His champions and denigrators of the post-war period and the 'cas Messiaen' are better known, and many fascinating early reviews are republished in Nigel Simeone's catalogue, but a systematic study of Messiaen reception in the 1930s remains to be undertaken. As Messiaen

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<sup>59</sup> Serge Gut, *Le Groupe Jeune France*, 21.

emerged as a composer of distinction in the politically-charged context of the mid-1930s, it has been argued that he and his music were subject to appropriation.

Above, I drew on Jane Fulcher's suggestion that neoclassicism was adopted as the normative 'anti-fascist' music of 1936 to suggest that the wider political context can help us to understand the way that the members of La Jeune France chose to portray themselves. But Fulcher goes much further, suggesting a politicisation of aesthetic trends that had implications beyond the promotion of an individual group, and more far-reaching than polemical arguments between different aesthetic factions. By proclaiming neoclassical music 'anti-fascist', the Front Populaire, according to Fulcher, not only set up a cultural banner to rally the nation: they also, whether wittingly or unwittingly, created a duality whereby all music that is not neoclassical (and especially music that is *emphatically* not neoclassical) becomes implicated as fascist music.

By the end of 1938, the far right had become the ascendant political force, promoting what Fulcher terms the 'aesthetic of Vichy'. She explains:

The honorific terms that were dominant in the previous two years, revealingly, are increasingly rare – in particular 'individual, free, audacious, accessible, lifelike, and heroic'. In their place we instead encounter 'elevated, inspired, idealistic, noble, subjective, intuitive, lyrical, spiritual,' and phrases such as 'rooted in collectivity or race.'<sup>60</sup>

Notwithstanding the nationalist allusions in its title and manifesto, La Jeune France as a whole held no political allegiances (and French nationalism could be indicative of elements of both the left and right). However, this political indeterminacy would not necessarily have exempted the group as a whole from the political games of the day. Fulcher suggests that their musical style – symphonic, serious, and spiritual – made them ripe for adoption by the far right. In 1938, then, having previously found themselves in opposition to the prevailing aesthetic, the members of La Jeune France found themselves supported by the Fascist press. Fulcher explains:

Despite their ambiguous or intermediary ideology, within this politicized context interpretation was based upon their musical style: hence the support for "Jeune France" [*sic*] was most consistent in both the pro-fascist and conservative press.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Jane Fulcher, 'Musical Style, Meaning, and Politics in France on the Eve of the Second World War', 425.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, 451.

Messiaen was certainly widely praised in the pro-fascist press, with favourable articles appearing in the openly Fascist newspapers *Je suis partout* and *Gringoire*.<sup>62</sup> Fulcher also cites three particular prominent and influential critics who wrote for the far right press at this time, and who were supportive of Messiaen – Cœuroy, Vuillermoz and Landormy – but she does not explore their associations with the composer. Messiaen corresponded with André Cœuroy around the time of the first Jeune France concert in 1936, and, in particular, thanked him for a positive review in *Gringoire*,<sup>63</sup> whilst Emile Vuillermoz had been a long-standing supporter, as a review of *Les Offrandes oubliées* for *Excelsior* in 1931 indicates.<sup>64</sup>

Fulcher's assertion that the composers and the music of La Jeune France were more consistently supported in the Right-wing press is lent some support by further articles that she does not cite. A rather luke-warm review of the first Jeune France concert that appeared in the Left-leaning *Marianne* in June 1936 stands out in this regard:

Sous le titre de 'Jeune France' quatre de nos benjamins de la musique, MM. Messiaen, Lesur, Baudrier, Jolivet, se sont groupé pour nous faire entendre quelques-unes de leurs compositions.

L'effort de ces jeunes musiciens, qui se déclarent découragés devant l'indifférence de l'art officiel à l'égard de leur affirmer que le résultat de ce premier concert a été pleinement convaincant. Malheureusement, les œuvres proposées ne nous ont pas toujours paru très persuasives. Le triptyque mystique de M. Messiaen, malgré certains défauts de construction, est certainement l'ouvrage le plus intéressant de l'ensemble. La Suite de M. Lesur ne manque pas d'agrément, et le Raz de Sein de M. Baudrier a de l'élan et de la conviction, mais la substance musicale et instrumentale de ces partitions est souvent bien faible. Quant à la Danse de M. Jolivet, elle est aussi éloignée que possible de lyrisme profondément émouvant d'Alban Berg dont l'auteur se prétend le disciple.<sup>65</sup>

Four of our musical benjamins, MM. Messiaen, Lesur, Baudrier and Jolivet have grouped themselves under the title 'Jeune France' in order to have us hear some of their compositions.

The effort of these young musicians, who declare themselves discouraged in the face of the indifference of official art with respect to them, assured that the outcome of this concert was fully convincing. Unfortunately, the works presented did not always seem very persuasive to us. Despite certain faults in construction, the mystical triptych of M. Messiaen is certainly the most interesting of the group. There was no lack of approval for M. Lesur's Suite, and M. Baudrier's *Raz de Sein* has élan and conviction, but the musical and instrumental substance of these scores is often

<sup>62</sup> Pierre Leclau, [review of *Prismes*], *Je suis partout* (3 Feb 1939). Quoted in Jane Fulcher, 'Musical Style, Meaning, and Politics in France on the Eve of the Second World War', 450.

<sup>63</sup> F-Pn, *Département de la musique*, N.L.a 15 (206-211). [Letters to Cœuroy from Messiaen.]

<sup>64</sup> Emile Vuillermoz, [Review of *Les Offrandes oubliées*], *Excelsior* (23 Feb 1931), 3.

<sup>65</sup> [unsigned], [review of first Jeune France concert], *Marianne* (10 Jun 1936).

very weak. As for the *Danse* by M. Jolivet, it is as far removed as is possible from the profoundly moving lyricism of Alban Berg, of whom the author claims to be a disciple.

There is clearly some evidence for the notion that the far-right press championed Messiaen's music between 1936 and 1939 – though the relationship between champions and championed is not so easy to trace. Whilst Messiaen was on cordial terms with Cœuroy and Vuillermoz, they are certainly not within the professional circle that surrounded Messiaen through *La Jeune France* and *La Spirale*. Nor is there any evidence that Messiaen approved of the editorial policies of these papers. Fulcher goes further than noting this trend in criticism, however, and claims that such support in the Right-wing press was 'later to benefit Messiaen, named to the Conservatoire in 1941'.<sup>66</sup> There is scant evidence for this assertion: indeed, all the other details surrounding the appointment suggest a very different story. Messiaen was offered the post by the Conservatoire's then new director, Claude Delvincourt, who was, in fact, known for his intransigence in the face of the German occupying force.<sup>67</sup> We might, in fact, suspect that Messiaen's pre-war popularity in the far-right press might have acted against him in Delvincourt's eyes. Yvonne Loriod later reported that she suspected Marcel Dupré's influence had helped secure Messiaen's nomination to the Conservatoire.<sup>68</sup> Dupré had considerable influence at the wartime Conservatoire, having assumed administrative responsibility when the former director, Henri Rabaud, had fled in the face of the advancing German troops.<sup>69</sup> When he ceded the post to Claude Delvincourt, he was doubtless in a strong position to promote Messiaen's career (as he had done previously with Messiaen's appointment to *La Trinité*).

Based on reception and the press, Fulcher's study portrays an important part of the picture, examining how music criticism was traded as political currency. But it is only one aspect of a very complex context, and the divide between appropriation, belief and their results, is not clearly traced. Fulcher's assertion that support of Messiaen in the pro-fascist press in pre-war Paris assisted him in gaining work during the occupation straddles this divide uncomfortably: more detailed information would be required to make a full assessment of how the perception of Messiaen by those in authority affected his career.

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<sup>66</sup> Jane Fulcher, 'Musical Style, Meaning, and Politics in France on the Eve of the Second World War', 451.

<sup>67</sup> Jean Boivin, *La Classe de Messiaen* (Mesnil-sur-L'Estrée, 1995), 41.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, 32.

<sup>69</sup> Michael Murray, *Marcel Dupré: The Work of a Master Organist* (Boston MA, 1985), 180.

More generally, there is a danger that trends in music criticism by a third party become substituted for a wider examination of the interface between politics and music as they concern Messiaen. A fuller account of Messiaen's engagement or otherwise in the debates of his time would take account of the complexities of personal and musical relationships, any statements of ideology made by Messiaen, or people supported by him, and his reaction to unfolding events.

Fulcher's exposition provides many starting points for a sense of the complexity of Messiaen's relationship to the debates of his time. She mentions, for example, the role played by the communist composer Charles Kœchlin as president of the *Fédération Musicale Populaire*; Kœchlin, as we have seen, was a close colleague of Messiaen at the *Schola Cantorum*.<sup>70</sup> She notes that André Jolivet (Messiaen's close friend and *Jeune France* colleague) joined the *Fédération*, and that Roger Désormière (the conductor at the first *Jeune France* concert, whom Messiaen described as 'A great, a very great conductor, the best in the world for the interpretation of modern works!'<sup>71</sup>) wrote for the *Fédération's* journal *L'Art musical populaire*.<sup>72</sup> If we are to place importance on which critics champion which musicians, we might dissect Messiaen's own reviews, noting, perhaps, his enthusiastic endorsement of Guy Lambert – since Lambert was later, according to some biographies, a member of the *résistance*.<sup>73</sup>

Clearly a full picture would be highly complex – perhaps impossible to resolve coherently in terms of competing political ideologies, personal relationships and musical preferences. However, there are some points of contact between Messiaen and the political context of his time that are significant enough to merit more detailed consideration. Here, I propose to examine two case studies that may suggest facets of an ideology on Messiaen's part, and while they cannot be said to coalesce into a fully-fledged 'political' position, they offer further evidence to undermine the self-portrayal given in the quotation that headed this chapter, and disturb the formulation proposed by Fulcher.

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<sup>70</sup> Jane Fulcher, 'Musical Style, Meaning, and Politics in France on the Eve of the Second World War', 429.

<sup>71</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Billet Parisien: Un Spectacle Darius Milhaud', *La Sylphide* (Mar 1938), 26.

<sup>72</sup> Jane Fulcher, 'Musical Style, Meaning, and Politics in France on the Eve of the Second World War', 430.

<sup>73</sup> See, e.g.: <http://www.musimem.com/lambert.htm> (accessed 13 Oct 2005).

## Messiaen's Appraisal of Ravel, the 'Hero of the Right'

Fulcher is more convincing in her account of the appropriation of Maurice Ravel and his music that accompanied the composer's death. The circumstances – Ravel died during a undertakers' strike – were such that they offered the (pro-Fascist) critics of the ailing Front Populaire government an opportunity to attack. Fulcher traces how the Right used Ravel's death to criticise the government on various fronts:

*Je suis partout* attacked immediately through its critic, Lucien Rebatet, a self-proclaimed Fascist, violent anti-semitic, and soon to be notorious collaborator. In an article of 7 January 1938, he makes Maurice Ravel into a symbol of the great French artist mistreated by the callow Popular Front. He capitalises, moreover, on the lugubrious irony of the French mortician's strike on the day after the composer's death, and thus the travail of his family in finding a coffin. Rebatet proceeds to impugn the Minister of Education, 'Le Juif,' Jean Zay, suggesting his impudence as a Jew in speaking of 'our' moral and artistic tradition; he then observes that while radio stations all over the world immediately paid homage to Ravel, it took the state eight days to respond, and with a mediocre program.<sup>74</sup>

She then discusses how Ravel and his music became coinage traded in a furious political debate, with the Right depicting him as a "Magician in music" or as a composer whose music possessed a depth and a "heart" unperceived by the Republican government.<sup>75</sup> Fulcher cites an article by Vuillermoz and Landormy where Ravel is portrayed as one who is able to 'express the most "secret" movements of the heart'.<sup>76</sup>

In a small way, Messiaen entered this maelstrom with an article of his own on Ravel. It was written for the Belgian journal *La Sylrinx* in February 1938 and illustrates his ambivalent attraction-repulsion relationship with Ravel. The article was trailed in curious terms in the previous month's essay:

Dans un prochaine article, je vous parlerai en détail de son œuvre, de son style, de ses rapports avec Debussy, de ce qu'il apporte de prestigieux, de féérique au langage musical.

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<sup>74</sup> Jane Fulcher, 'Musical Style, Meaning, and Politics in France on the Eve of the Second World War', 444.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, 444.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, 444n49.



In my next article, I will speak to you in detail about his works, his style and his associations with Debussy, and what he has brought to musical language in terms of prestige [prestigieux] and the magical.

Messiaen's description of Ravel as a 'magician' was a common and positively-intended image, but the word 'prestigieux' has a curious undertone: as well as meaning 'prestige', it also relates to the archaic 'prestigitateur' (conjurer), a rather equivocal association, though perhaps not an entirely pejorative one, nor one with which Ravel himself would have taken issue (in *Memories of a Lazy Child* he writes 'an artist cannot be sincere. Falsehood, taken as the power of *illusion*, is the only superiority of man over animals'.<sup>77</sup>)

For Messiaen, Ravel, like Stravinsky, presented a difficult dichotomy. Messiaen considered *Gaspard de la nuit* a masterpiece, placing it among the last of the 'good' piano music,<sup>78</sup> but felt that Ravel's late music was spoilt by the influence of neoclassicism and jazz.<sup>79</sup> On one hand, Ravel could plainly be seen in some respects as a successor to Debussy, who had been Messiaen's idol from childhood and was, for Messiaen, beyond reproach. On the other hand, Ravel had drawn inspiration from jazz, and for Messiaen jazz was not only musically but also morally reprehensible. In conversation with Samuel, Messiaen explains:

Je suis désolé de le dire, mais je pense que le jazz est un 'voleur' dont les 'innovations' sont, en réalité, des emprunts à des musiques symphoniques précédentes.<sup>80</sup>

I'm sorry to say it, but I think jazz is a 'robber' whose 'innovations' are, in reality, borrowings from earlier symphonic music.

In the 1999 edition of Samuel's book, Samuel explains that the text of Messiaen's original verdict on jazz was lengthy and rather vitriolic, and was edited out by the composer to avoid controversy – clearly, even in 1986, jazz remained a subject that severely exercised the

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<sup>77</sup> Quoted in: Carlo Caballero, *Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics* (Cambridge, 2001), 33. My italics. Recall, too, Lockspeiser's 'Technique of Illusion' with respect to Debussy – the expression is the title of chapter 2 of: Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind* (London, 2/1978), Vol. 2, 33. Nichols comments: 'The idea of 'illusion', inherited from works such as Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, runs through much of French music before the First World War: the illusion that the whole can be more than the sum of its parts, that some of those parts are not meant to be heard so much as felt or 'intuited', that the essence of music is a magic and a mystery that should not be subjected to analysis' [Roger Nichols, *The Harlequin Years: Music in Paris, 1917-1929* (London, 2002), 20.]

<sup>78</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen*, 191-192.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, 331. A notable (and odd) exception to this is Messiaen's love of Ravel's *Tombeau de Couperin*.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, 331.

composer. Samuel explains that Messiaen's strict moral code placed jazz irrevocably amongst other taboos: 'the permissive society, sexual liberty, drugs and night clubs'.<sup>81</sup>

Messiaen had expressed some unease at Ravel's later music in his interview with José Bruyr in 1933,<sup>82</sup> but his *Syrinx* article allows him to expand more freely on the subject. Between the trailing of his article in the January 1938 edition and completing the final version for the February edition, Messiaen's approach has metamorphosed into a full-blown comparison between the relative merits of Ravel and Debussy. The title was 'De La Procession Debussy - Ravel' and Messiaen begins thus:

Longtemps la mode a uni ces deux noms, puis la mode encore les a désunis. A vrai dire, la mode se trompe souvent; mais pour une fois, elle a eu raison dans ses contradictions mêmes.<sup>83</sup>

It was long fashionable to associate these two names, then fashionable to dissociate them. To tell the truth, fashion is often mistaken, but for once, even in its contradictions, it is right.

This opening sentence indicates Messiaen's unease. Since Debussy is beyond reproach for Messiaen, the suggestion that it is both right and wrong to associate Ravel and Debussy can only militate against Ravel. Messiaen then goes on to expound the technical similarities that he sees between the two composers (bringing his own preoccupations to the fore as usual):

Debussy usait de la 9<sup>e</sup> avec 6<sup>e</sup> ajoutée: Ravel se l'est appropriée. Debussy tirait certains effets de la gamme par tons, des syncopes restant en l'air, des notes ajoutées aux accords, des inflexions mélodiques chutant sur la quarte descendante: Ravel a repris, trituré, extériorisé tout cela. Jusqu'à la gamme chinoise à cinq sons que Debussy adorait et dont Ravel a fait 'sa chose' en l'accommodant à la sauce Fauré sur pédale Albéniz (voyez *Daphnis* et *Ma Mère l'oye*.) Le fameux accord-Ravel qui est presque sa marque de fabrique: la 9<sup>e</sup> avec 3<sup>e</sup> mineure, se trouvait déjà dans la scène des cheveux de *Pelléas*. A la première page de *Pelléas* vous rencontrerez encore [...] un accord de La majeur superposé à une 5<sup>e</sup>: si bémol, fa; cet accord dans Debussy est une simple broderie; Ravel va s'en repaître jusqu'à la vulgarité dans *La Valse*.<sup>84</sup>

Debussy used chords of the ninth with the added sixth: Ravel then appropriated these. Debussy drew certain effects from the whole-tone scale, from syncopations that peter

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<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, 92.

<sup>82</sup> José Bruyr, *Ecran des musiciens, seconde série* (Paris, 1933), 127.

<sup>83</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Billet Parisien: De La Procession Debussy-Ravel', *La Syrinx* (Feb 1938), 25. See:

Appendix I: II/10.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, 25. Note Messiaen's reference to the 'great rhythm of love and death': this is a reasonable translation of Messiaen's Sanskrit-based neologism *Turangalila*.

out in mid air, from added notes, from melodic inflections that fall through a perfect fourth: Ravel reused, ground up and exteriorised all this, right up to the Chinese pentatonic scale which Debussy loved and which Ravel made 'his own' by incorporating a Fauré 'sauce' over an Albéniz pedal (see, for example *Daphnis and Ma Mère l'oye*). The famous Ravel chord, which is almost his trademark – the ninth with a minor third – was present back in the 'hair' scene in *Pelléas*. On the first page of *Pelléas* [...] there is an A major chord superimposed on a fifth: B-flat, F. For Debussy, this chord is simply an embellishment; Ravel indulged himself with it in *La Valse* until it sounded quite commonplace.

In this supposedly technical discussion, the language used betrays Messiaen's ambivalence towards Ravel at every turn. The 'Fauré sauce' seems particularly unflattering (the expression is not an uncommon one and, as we have seen, is used by Cocteau in *Le Coq*), and Messiaen repeatedly emphasises his view of Debussy and Ravel as, respectively, original and copy, artist and artisan. His final analysis of the relationship between Ravel and Debussy makes the implication of his first sentence explicit: Debussy outshines Ravel, despite all his talent. The conclusion of this article, written just after Ravel's death, metamorphoses into a tribute to Debussy:

Seulement, il y a *Pelléas*. Là, nous tombons sur un mur, une séparation dure, inexorable. Les deux hommes se tournent le dos. *Pelléas* c'est la vérité sous le symbole, c'est l'expression inouïe du subconscient, c'est le déchiffrement sans hésitation de ce manuscrit exquisément ténébreux qu'est l'âme humaine. Debussy – pétrisseur d'impalpables – possédait ce grand rythme de l'amour et de la fatalité qu'on ne trouve que chez ces prophètes résumant des époques antérieures et postérieures à leurs créations. Le magicien Ravel n'a pas suivi cette voie. A lui la féerie des timbres, les reflets changeants du piano et de l'orchestre! A lui les voluptés des arbres et du jour, la frénésie tournoyante de la danse, à lui l'humour, la légende, les mélodies bien découpées et le prisme des harmonies couleur de vent, de lumière et d'oiseaux. 'Je suis heureuse, mais je suis triste', cela c'est Mélisande. 'Ce n'est pas ma faute... ce n'est pas ma faute!' et cela c'est Golaud. De tels accents ne se trouvent qu'une fois. Et malgré tout le génie de Ravel – je dis le génie – Debussy a su prendre la meilleure part – celle du cœur; elle ne lui sera pas ôtée.

*Pelléas* alone stands out. There, we come up against a brick wall, a clear and immovable distinction. There, Debussy and Ravel turn their backs on each other. *Pelléas* is the truth behind the symbol, an extraordinary expression of the subconscious and an unhesitant reading of the exquisitely mysterious manuscript that is the human spirit. Debussy – sculptor of the ineffable – possesses the great rhythm of love and of death that one only finds in prophets who sum up the eras that precede or follow their creations. Ravel, the magician, did not follow this path. For him, the magical timbres, the changing reflections of piano and orchestra! For him, the pleasures of trees and daylight, the frenzy of the dance. For him, humour, legend, well-formed melodies and the prism of coloured harmonies of wind, light and birdsong. 'Je suis heureuse, mais je suis triste', says Mélisande. 'Ce n'est pas ma faute... ce n'est

pas ma faute!’ says Golaud. These strains are unique, and despite all Ravel’s genius – I say genius – Debussy knew how to express the greatest sentiments – those of the heart. That can never be taken from him.

Messiaen’s article on Ravel reveals his equivocal attitude to the composer with great vividness, but the reason for making these ambivalent feelings explicit in this curious article is not clear. By way of comparison, Messiaen’s criticisms of Stravinsky, published the following year, are given in a straightforward manner that contrasts strongly with the language of this article on Ravel.<sup>85</sup>

The chronology tells us that Messiaen is holding to his own beliefs amongst a furious trading of political points. Whilst we might assume that Messiaen was opposed on aesthetic grounds to the Front Populaire’s promotion of neoclassicism as the normative anti-Fascist music, he clearly did not share the supposedly pro-fascist view of Ravel suggested by Fulcher. Whilst praising aspects of Ravel’s music, Messiaen is unequivocal in his conclusion that his music was shallow in comparison with Debussy’s, a conclusion in direct contradiction to the far-right’s representation of Ravel. ‘Despite all Ravel’s genius [...]’, writes Messiaen, ‘Debussy knew how to express the greatest sentiments – those of the heart. That can never be taken from him.’<sup>86</sup>

Messiaen’s advertisement in the previous issue of the journal confirms that he was fully aware of the debate. Indeed, in this previous article, he explicitly mentions that he had heard Vuillermoz’s ‘portrait of Ravel’ at the memorial concert. Intriguingly, he seems here to suggest that this account of the composer met with his approval:

M. Emile Vuillermoz nous avait tracé avec finesse un portrait de Maurice Ravel. Il y joignit un tableau de la procession Debussy-Ravel, qu’on peut résumer en quelques mots: les deux musiciens se ressemblent tout en étant très différents; Debussy est plus pathétique, Ravel plus féérique; Debussy est la lumière intérieure, Ravel le chatoiement extérieur.

M. Emile Vuillermoz gave a very fine portrait of Maurice Ravel and an account of the relationship between Debussy and Ravel, which can be summed up in just a few words: the two musicians closely resembled each other whilst remaining quite different; Debussy was more moving, Ravel more magical; Debussy was the inner light, Ravel the shining exterior.

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<sup>85</sup> Olivier Messiaen, ‘Le Rythme chez Igor Strawinsky’, *La Revue musicale* 191 (May 1939), 91-92.

<sup>86</sup> Olivier Messiaen, ‘Billet Parisien: De La Procession Debussy-Ravel’, *La Sylrinx* (Feb 1938), 26. See: Appendix I: II/10.

When, in the article that appears the following month, Messiaen uses some of the same language employed by Vuillermoz, commenting on Ravel's 'magic', his wider discussion leaves the reader in no doubt that the approval that accompanies these terms in Vuillermoz's hands has been replaced by a sense of vulgarity and cheap showmanship.

Messiaen's decision to plough his own furrow through the Ravel debate places him in a position of opposition with respect to those whom Fulcher singles out as his Fascist champions. The reasons for this choice could be many: he might have been taking a politically-aware (that is to say anti-Fascist) position by playing down the originality of Ravel. In the light of the Bruyr interview of 1933 in which Messiaen voices his ambivalence towards Ravel, however, it is more likely that the furore surrounding that composer's death, and perhaps Vuillermoz's eulogy specifically, had provoked him to express his long-held ambivalence on aesthetic grounds alone (an ambivalence that remained until the end of Messiaen's life).<sup>87</sup> One of these options posits Messiaen as an unlikely political animal, the other as a principled aesthete; but both show him interacting with the political-charged elements of the musical discourses of the day.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, 195.

<sup>88</sup> They also show him in public disagreement with those whom Fulcher would claim 'assisted' Messiaen in his Conservatoire professorship.

## Anti-Semitism and Darius Milhaud

Other aspects of Messiaen's journalism also suggest an agenda that is at odds with Fulcher's so-called 'aesthetic of Vichy'. His consistent support throughout this period for Darius Milhaud is particularly striking in this regard. Milhaud (who was Jewish) is mentioned many times in Messiaen's journalism of the 1930s.<sup>89</sup> If the timing of the Ravel article suggests a connection with exterior events, so too does Messiaen's article for the very next issue of *La Syrinx* in March 1938, devoted to the discussion of a recent 'Spectacle Darius Milhaud', and the *première* of Milhaud's overt plea for religious tolerance, *Esther de Carpentras*.<sup>90</sup>

Milhaud's opera was written some thirteen years earlier in 1925, and deals with a public celebration in Carpentras of the story of Esther, who won deliverance for the Jews from Assuérus. The Jewish community leaders meet to seek the permission of the Catholic Cardinal to hold their street festival, and he consents, secretly planning to force the conversion of the Jews when they are gathered together. The performance goes ahead, and the Cardinal arrives to announce that they are to convert to Christianity or face banishment. The young girl playing Esther is moved to recite her speech to Assuérus for the Cardinal, and he relents, allowing them to remain in grace within the city.

Messiaen's review of *Esther* explains the allegorical plot in some detail, and notes that it 'engaged both Jews and Christians'.<sup>91</sup> His account of the story reveals content with the opera's message, as his concluding sentence reveals: 'Each returns to their home, faithful to their beliefs, under the beautiful sun of the Midi.'<sup>92</sup> Messiaen seems to have been free to write on any issue in his journalism for *La Sirène* (*La Syrinx*), so when he focussed on a particular topic it would presumably have been one that he considered important; there was no necessity for him to concentrate on Milhaud's allegory if he did not wish to aid its propagation.

Barbara Kelly provides a fascinating account of the reception of this first performance of *Esther* in her study of Milhaud, noting that, like Messiaen, 'a number of reviewers reflected

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<sup>89</sup> See, e.g.: 'Chronique de Paris [March 1937]', *La Sirène* (Mar 1937), 14-15; 'Chronique de Paris [April 1937]', *La Sirène* (Apr 1937), 22; 'Billet Parisien [June 1937]', *La Sirène* (Jun 1937), 14; 'Billet Parisien: Les Fêtes de la lumière', *La Sirène* (Jul 1937), 18-19; 'Billet Parisien: Un Spectacle Darius Milhaud', *La Syrinx* (Mar 1938), 25-26; 'Contre La Paresse', *La Page musicale* (17 Mar 1939), 1.

<sup>90</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Billet Parisien: Un Spectacle Darius Milhaud', *La Syrinx* (Mar 1938), 25-26. See: Appendix I: II/11.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*, 25.

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*, 26.

the theme of tolerance'.<sup>93</sup> She then goes on to cite three reviews that were not sympathetic to the themes of the opera and, in particular, discusses André Cœuroy's response:

He makes it clear that as a Gentile he is uncomfortable with the topic and with all the Jewish composers at the performance, whom he cites. He also comments that the Opera-comique 'counts as a new synagogue' thanks to 'the great Rabbi of the place', Daniel Lazarus, who acted as secretary.<sup>94</sup>

Kelly goes on to quote another critic, Dominique Sordet of *Action Française*, who describes the music of *Esther* in terms that rehearse classic tropes of anti-Semitism:

[C'est] affreuse; elle est bossue, elle louche, elle boîte. Elle est grossière, souillon, peu ragoûtante. C'est un chaos de notes qui défilent au hasard...

[It is] frightful; it is hunchbacked, it squints, it limps. It is vulgar, sluttish and unsavoury. It is a chaos of notes, unravelling haphazardly...<sup>95</sup>

Messiaen's account could not be more different. In addition to expressing content at the opera's message, Messiaen is enthusiastic about the music itself:

Milhaud a composé sur ce sujet un peu mince une musique bruyante, bouffonne, carnavalesque, d'une exubérante gaieté. La mélodie, d'allure très populaire, y reçoit des chocs sous-cutanés, provoqués par des 'majeurs-mineurs', des 'ostinatos' de basses polytonales, et une orchestration comique, puissante et joyeusement déboutonnée. Le génie, non point rabelaisien mais provençal, dans tout ce que ce mot contient de lumière et de bonne humeur, voilà ce que M. Milhaud a su mettre en maints endroits de sa partition. Au point de vue théâtre, le premier acte est admirablement troussé. Le *Noël comtadin* en mode surmajeur, où chaque dissonance a une intention humoristique, est un petit chef-d'œuvre. Le portrait du Cardinal par son valet Vaucluse, sur un rythme de polka, est également une trouvaille. Mentionnons aussi la grâce mélodique de l'ouverture, le truculent entr'acte, l'air si personnel de l'astrologue, et la piquante entrée d'Esther sur un mouvement de maxixe. Les acteurs, les costumes, les décors, tout est parfait.<sup>96</sup>

Milhaud has composed around this rather simple story a noisy, clownish, carnival music, of exuberant gaiety. The melodies have a popular feel, but receive surreptitious 'shocks' through the use of 'major-minors', polytonal bass ostinati, and comical, powerful and joyously unfettered orchestration. Milhaud's work is shot through with genius, not Rabelaisian genius but provençal in the sense that it is full of light and good humour. From the theatrical point of view, the first act is admirably formed. The

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<sup>93</sup> Barbara L Kelly, *Tradition and Style in the Works of Darius Milhaud 1912-1939* (Aldershot, 2003), 100.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, 101.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, 101.

<sup>96</sup> Olivier Messiaen, 'Billet Parisien: Un Spectacle Darius Milhaud', 26.

*Noël comtadin* in the lydian mode, where every dissonance is humorous in intention, is a minor masterpiece. The portrait of the Cardinal by his servant Vacluse, in polka rhythm, is likewise a discovery. I must also mention the melodic charm of the overture, the truculent entr'acte, the very personal melody of the astrologer and the spicy entry of Esther, in the style of a *maxixe*.<sup>97</sup> All is perfect – the actors, the costumes and the sets.

Messiaen's unfettered enthusiasm for the opera and its message may or may not have been intended as a piece of political 'engagement'. In the highly-charged context, however, and among the sorts of reviews Kelly quotes, it becomes part of the discourse of the time – and suggests that Fulcher's positioning of Messiaen may need revision. Above all, it inadvertently positions Messiaen within the currents of his time in a way that once again undermines the notion of the 'musician apart': Messiaen may have eschewed political comment, and had a horror of 'engagement', but he was a man of his time.

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<sup>97</sup> The *maxixe* (now usually spelt *matchiche*) is a Brazilian dance, popular in France in the early years of the twentieth century.



## 9 Conclusion

If this thesis seems almost a revisionist account of Messiaen's early career, this was not at all the original intention. Yet, at almost every stage, new evidence or consideration of a wider context strongly suggested that some of the established ideas about Messiaen and his early career, which I caricatured by reference to Grove's 'musician apart', required revisting.

Messiaen's biography is replete with themes from the stories of the great artists of the past, and most Messiaen scholars have propagated the images suggested later by the composer without subjecting them to critical scrutiny. Messiaen perceived many relationships between his own music and that of his predecessors and contemporaries, and played an active part within an important network of colleagues. The strong theoretical and didactic tradition passed on by Dupré and the inspiring eclecticism of Dukas and Emmanuel were important influences on Messiaen that remained when their other teachings had been sublimated into a distinctive personal style. Messiaen's attitudes to history were firmly grounded in the older generation of the *fin-de-siècle*, whilst some of his journalism suggests a degree of engagement in the political-aesthetic debates of the pre-war period far greater than has hitherto been known. In particular, Messiaen engaged whole-heartedly with the vibrant musical life of his nation's capital, and took a principled and public position with respect to the political aspect of La Jeune France.

Throughout, I have sought to undermine the various impressions of isolation or apartness that are summed up by the Grove's 'musician apart'. And yet, despite all the examples I have given that belie the notion of a 'musician apart', I have not sought to produce a revisionist account of Messiaen's early career – that is, I have not attempted to provide a new coherent narrative to replace the cluster of narrative themes, grouped around the 'musician apart', that have been the usual route to understanding Messiaen. Instead, I have avoided a new overarching 'story', to focus instead, in themed essays, on what details and themes I have been able to uncover. The result is, I think, a 'history' that is rather more consistent with the historical evidence than those that rely on one of the strands of the 'musician apart', but rather less coherent or, perhaps, convincing as 'history' in Dahlhaus's sense of 'continuity'.

I will conclude by touching on two different but related issues concerning the work that I have done to disturb the ‘musician apart’. The first of these relates to the revision of ideas; the second to a basic problem of music history.

In *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History*, Stephen Jay Gould recounts a story that he claims has astonishing implications for the understanding of evolution.<sup>1</sup> He describes the discovery in 1909 of a quarry – the Burgess Shale – that contained fossils of creatures found nowhere else, immaculately preserved. The fossils, which dated from the very earliest age of life on earth, were collected as oddities by an eminent paleontologist of the day, C. D. Walcott and classified under the categories that were then thought to embrace all life on the planet. Only in the 1960s, when new technology allowed three palaeontologists, led by Harry Whittington, to investigate the internal structure of the fossils, was it discovered that the categories applied to the fossils earlier in the century were inadequate. In fact, many of the fossils represented forms of life that were entirely new to paleontology, which had been ‘shoe-horned’ (to use Gould’s evocative phrase) into the pre-existing categories by Walcott. In short, Walcott had interpreted the evidence in terms of his (deficient) model.

For Gould, the discovery that the received model was insufficient to explain an apparently extraordinary diversity of life in its earliest phase turns the iconography of evolution on its head. As laypeople, we might imagine a model of evolution in which, crudely, things start out simple and become increasingly complex and variegated. The idea that the past was apparently more diverse than the present has, Gould claims, profound implications for our concepts of evolution and progress. The title of his book – *Wonderful Life* – refers to his argument that the reinterpretation of the fossils of the Burgess Shale provokes a new paradigm of (natural) history: human life is not the marvellous but inevitable end-product of the ‘march of progress’, but rather an inconceivably unlikely outcome of the mass extinction that followed the ancient diversity revealed in the Burgess Shale. Gould argues that the Burgess Shale shows humanity to be the extremely improbable winner of an antediluvian lottery. Rather than undermining the position of mankind, however, this discovery underlines for Gould the ‘wonder of life’.

As this research proceeded, I began to feel that, in their assessment of Messiaen, some scholars had, to a greater or lesser extent, fallen foul of the same problem as the

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (London, 1989).

early interpreters of the Burgess Shale. Firstly, they had not considered (or had access to) the detailed evidence that would demonstrate that the ‘model’ was insufficient to explain the complexities of Messiaen’s situation. Secondly, and crucially, they had interpreted what little was known in terms of the preconceived model, just as Walcott had done with the fossils of the Burgess Shale. Thus, without knowledge of Messiaen’s many other collaborations in the 1930s, Griffiths can characterise Messiaen’s involvement in La Jeune France as an aberration, ‘of interest only in as much as it helps one understand the background against which music so extraordinary appeared’.<sup>2</sup> I felt, in short, that I was uncovering a new Messiaen, more ‘accurate’ than the one I had seen in previous work on the composer.

And yet, with increased evidence and a growing sense of the context, I realised that elements of the ‘old’ Messiaen were still there, and the confidence that I initially felt faltered. Inconsistencies reared up and began to lead to the creeping suspicion that I was falling into the same methodological traps as those of whom I was being so confidently critical. At around the same time, I came across Richard Dawkins’s review of Gould’s *Wonderful Life*.<sup>3</sup> Dawkins and Gould had been intellectual adversaries for some time, but Dawkins’s review convincingly and roundly condemned Gould’s conclusions in *Wonderful Life*, claiming that Gould had set up a straw man in his portrayal of history, and that he had fallen foul of the same essential problem as Walcott, not by ‘shoe-horning’ the fauna of the Burgess Shale into inappropriate modern categories, as Walcott had done, but by relying on *post facto* categories at all in constructing his argument.

At root, the tussle between Gould and Dawkins is the same that Treitler touches upon in the quotation given in the introduction – Gould has revised his history, showing quite convincingly that the old narrative was incorrect according to the evidence, and presented us with a new, liberating, account of the story of life. Dawkins trumps Gould’s revisions by pointing out that they are still based on the modern paradigms that forced Walcott into his earlier errors. Like Treitler, Dawkins is wary of revisions that amend the ‘surface detail’ whilst reinforcing an ‘orthodoxy that threatens to constrain freedom’ (to use Treitler’s words).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (London and Boston, 1985), 73.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Dawkins, [Review of *Wonderful Life*], *Sunday Telegraph* (25 Feb 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Leo Treitler, ‘The Historiography of Music: Issues of Past and Present’, *Rethinking Music*, eds. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (London, 1999), 356.

I restructured the thesis in thematically-linked essays that eschew an overarching narrative, beyond a repeated return to the notion of the ‘musician apart’, which I conceived as an umbrella term for the sorts of themes that I wished to unseat. The result is more consistent with the historical evidence, but leaves broader historical ‘placings’ to one side.

Nonetheless, the question of historical ‘placing’ or, rather, the question of how we might see Messiaen in a much wider music-historical context cannot be ignored altogether – and there is clearly a formidable challenge in making such an assessment, as may be seen from a survey of how writers of general music histories over the last half century – many of them distinguished music historians – have dealt with Messiaen. These placings reveal clearly the problem that I believe Messiaen highlights for music historians.

That longstanding barometer of the way music history is taught in undergraduate music courses in English-speaking universities – Grout’s *A History of Western Music* – shows the difficulty with clarity. After a fairly shakey start in the first edition of 1960 (in which Messiaen is uncomfortably sandwiched between Poulenc and Stravinsky in a section on, of all things, neoclassicism<sup>5</sup>), the placing offered in the 1996 edition – in a section entitled ‘After Webern’ – is more appropriate, but a wider conclusion eludes the authors, whose final verdict suggests frustration on their part: ‘Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) was an influential, unique and unclassifiable figure’.<sup>6</sup>

Some attempt a rather forced synthesis: Joseph Machlis in his *Introduction to Contemporary Music* of 1961 refers to Messiaen alongside Orff and Walton as the ‘New Romantics’.<sup>7</sup> Others, such as Arnold Whittall and William W. Austin, make explicit the difficulty in assimilating Messiaen into a larger historical narrative by consigning him to sections that honestly acknowledge the challenge he presents. Whittall, in *Music since the First World War* (1977), considers Messiaen in a chapter entitled ‘Three Individualists’, where he is considered alongside Tippett and Carter.<sup>8</sup> Austin is even more frank, entitling the chapter in which he deals with Messiaen ‘Varèse, Orff, Messiaen and Many Others’.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> D. J. Grout, *A History of Western Music* (New York and London, 1/1960), 630.

<sup>6</sup> D. J. Grout and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music* (New York and London, 5/1996), 745.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Machlis, *Introduction to Contemporary Music* (New York, 1961), 314.

<sup>8</sup> Arnold Whittall, *Music since the First World War* (London, 1977), 212.

<sup>9</sup> William W. Austin, *Music in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1966), 371.

Elsewhere and, in my view, equally problematically, Messiaen is seen only in terms of what Gerald Abraham (in the *Concise Oxford History of Music*) calls his ‘grand synthesis’: the serialisation of durations and attacks of the brief *Quatre Etudes de rythme* of 1950.<sup>10</sup> Joan Peyser (in *20<sup>th</sup> Century Music – The Sense Behind the Sound* of 1970) and R. P. Morgan (in *20<sup>th</sup> Century Music* of 1991) seem deliberately to ignore Messiaen and his work, except as a convenient bridge between Webern and Boulez.<sup>11</sup>

Abraham, Peyser and Morgan are not alone: many general histories place great importance on the *Etudes*, apparently incorporating Messiaen into their historical surveys only as a mechanism for linking Webern to Boulez in the expansion of serialism. From the way he is portrayed in some music histories, we might be forgiven for imagining that Messiaen existed only to allow total serialism to happen – and that the rest of his output is largely historically irrelevant. This preoccupation with a small element of Messiaen’s output was obvious to the composer himself, as is made clear by some of his comments to Claude Samuel:

J’ai été très contrarié de l’importance absolument démesurée que l’on a accordée à une petite œuvre, qui n’a que trios pages et qui s’appelle *Mode de valeurs et d’intensités*, sous le prétexte qu’elle aurait été à l’origine de l’éclatement sériel dans le domaine des attaques, des durées, des intensités, des timbres, bref, de tous les paramètres musicaux. Cette musique a peut-être été prophétique, historiquement importante, mais, musicalement, c’est trios fois rien.<sup>12</sup>

I was very annoyed over the absolutely excessive importance given to a short work of mine, only three pages long, *Mode de valeurs et d’intensités*, because it supposedly gave rise to the serial explosion in the area of attacks, duration, intensities, timbres – in short, of all its musical parameters. Perhaps this piece was prophetic and historically important, but musically it’s next to nothing.<sup>13</sup>

The difficulty that music historians have had assimilating Messiaen into their narratives might possibly reflect a special status the marks out Messiaen as a figure who is simply not amenable to such assimilation – this could be another of the various manifestations of the ‘musician apart’.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Gerald Abraham, *The Concise Oxford History of Music* (London, 1979), 847.

<sup>11</sup> Joan Peyser, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Music – The Sense Behind the Sound* (New York, 1970), 173. R. P. Morgan, *Twentieth-century Music* (New York and London, 1991), 333-345.

<sup>12</sup> Claude Samuel, *Permanences d’Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1999), 72-3.

<sup>13</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Olivier Messiaen: Musique et couleur* (Paris, 1986); Eng. edn., *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, tr. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland OR, 1994), 47.

<sup>14</sup> I am reminded of an evocative expression used by Scots dry stone dykers for a stone that simply cannot be fitted into a wall: a ‘horse’s heid’. During construction, such ‘horses’ heids’ are simply put to one side

If Messiaen *is* difficult to incorporate into a broader historical narrative or, indeed, if it is difficult to craft a coherent account of him, then I would like to suggest that this is not because he has a special status that makes him, as an individual, different from other historical figures. Rather, it is because the peculiarities of his life and work point up certain fundamental problems in writing music history and lay bare the essentially artificial quality of historical narratives.

Kevin Korsyn has offered a critique of these narratives, which he calls ‘privileged contexts’, and suggests that they arise out of a fear of incoherence that pervades historical writing:

Discontinuity, according to Hans Kellner, is one of the defining anxieties for the historian; through narrative, historians conceal the intrinsic discontinuity of their subject matter: ‘Narrative exists to make continuous what is discontinuous; it covers gaps in time, in action, in documentation, even when it points to them.’ [FN to Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison, 1989), 55.] In music history, scholars foster narrative continuity through the use of what I call ‘privileged contexts’. These contexts constitute various ways of framing compositions to create historical narratives; they are privileged because historians rely on a limited number of contexts, preferring certain types of frames to others, so that the series of context becomes stereotyped and predictable, limiting the questions that we ask about music. The composer’s *œuvre* and the stylistic period are two of the most obvious contexts that allow historians to organise their narratives, creating discursive unities that reproduce the structure of the autonomous work on a higher level. Another type of contextualisation involves comparisons among different arts within the same stylistic period, on the assumption that the products of a given period share a common essence, once again inviting the historian to privilege continuity over discontinuity. The attribution of influence is another framing device that historians favour; by using the arrow of influence to connect one composer to another, historians underwrite ‘the homogeneity and continuity’ of tradition. [FN to Louis A. Renza, ‘Influence’, in eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago, 1990), 186.] The history of genres provides another sort of contextualisation; the genre gives the historian’s narrative a protagonist, acting as a ‘suprapersonal entity’ that persists through time, serving the needs of a continuous history. [FN to David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore, 1992), 3.]<sup>15</sup>

The historian’s problem in fitting Messiaen into one of the familiar frames that Korsyn lists is precisely that: a problem *for the historian*. I believe that the themes that have been propagated in most Messiaen scholarship, in general histories and the popular

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to be buried in a deep hole when the wall is finished.

<sup>15</sup> Kevin Korsyn, ‘Beyond Privileged Contexts: Intertextuality, Influence, and Dialogue’, *Rethinking*

press – are a reflection of the difficulty of presenting Messiaen coherently (or, perhaps, completely) within the sorts of contexts discussed above. The knot of related themes that I have drawn together under the ‘musician apart’ have not arisen inevitably from the historical evidence, but are, at least partly, a distortion that results from a more or less forced attempt at narrative consistency.

To all of these slippery theoretical considerations must be added Messiaen’s own manipulation of the data surrounding his life. As we have seen, inconsistencies abound, and (as Rebecca Rischin’s account shows) there is a playfulness in the way he spins his own colourful and often inconsistent narratives. However, it is clear that Messiaen is not unique in this regard – and perhaps this is a problem that is particularly acute in the cases of living composers. While they are available for consultation they are in a position – as ‘expert’ witnesses – to exert enormous control over their own stories.

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Much more could be said on recontextualising Messiaen. I have, however, focussed on his early career, since it was during that period that his beliefs were formed, his career forged and his fame secured. Messiaen engaged on many levels with the world around him and the image of uniqueness that he chose to project later in life is inappropriate and inapplicable to the early part of his career. The evidence suggests that this image has been retrospectively applied to his early career by Messiaen himself and those who have written about him: no such impression is supported by the historical details.

Likewise, Messiaen is misrepresented if he is portrayed as a curious anachronism, a mediaeval man in a modern age. This is not just poor history: it also inadvertently plays down his personal achievement. Messiaen’s transcendental music sits very comfortably with the image of the composer as a ‘mystic’ and ‘phenomenon’; the received image may be seen as an easy shortcut to a certain shallow understanding of the music. Paradoxically, ‘grounding’ Messiaen by dismantling the mythology that surrounds him only reminds us that such extraordinary music was the work of a living human – with human qualities and human frailties. Messiaen was a twentieth-century musician, and not a mediaeval saint; he was not a ‘musician apart’.

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