

Faith, Color and Nature – Messiaen’s Alternative to Serialism

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Blackbirds. Sunsets. Stained glass windows. The images these words inspire seem better matched to an Impressionist painting than to twentieth-century music. During an era in which Schoenberg was furthering the death of tonality, and John Cage was experimenting with chance sounds as a form of musical expression, Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992), a French composer, teacher and organist, stood apart from his contemporaries. His declared purpose as a composer was to manifest what his Christianity had revealed to him. “The first idea I wanted to express,” he said, “...is the existence of the truths of the Catholic faith”¹. Though Messiaen helped foster a style known as total serialism, he eventually rejected it in favor of his own alternative: musical imagery as a source of tonality. Messiaen’s later style (work after 1950), an extraordinary reaction to the limited meaning he found in serialism, was based primarily on his faith, his connection to nature, and his unusual ability to “see” colors when he heard music.

From the beginning of his career, Messiaen thought that meaning was vital for music to be truly “musical”, but the reign of classical tonality had ended, and composers were trying new things that pushed music to its conceptual limits. Harmonies and rhythms became increasingly complex, and new instruments developed as a result of the 20th-century drive to discover new sounds. Serialism was especially the order of the day, through the overwhelming influence of Schoenberg, Webern, and other members of the 2nd Viennese School. Serialism is a style which avoids any particular chord as being central, and most often orders the pitches of the 12-note equal-tempered chromatic scale into a row or series which is

¹ Samuel, Claude. *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color. Conversations with Claude Samuel*. Translated by E. Thomas Glasow. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1986, 20.

then used to create permutations of the original set². Theoretically, the end result of serialism is not beautiful harmony, but a kind of unification *without* using tonal harmony. In his early years, Messiaen dabbled in serialism and was undoubtedly innovative in his compositions. He invented several new percussion instruments, such as the geophone, a sort of drum filled with sand³. He also formulated his own kinds of complex rhythms, including “modes of limited transposition,” or modes in which a pattern of intervals is repeated through the octave⁴, but he believed that only tonal harmony could allow music to be meaningful.

Messiaen started teaching harmony at the Paris Conservatoire in 1941, and for a while it seemed as though he was going to join his pupils on their path towards *total* serialism, which orders not only pitch, but also rhythm, dynamics, instrumentation, and all other aspects of a composition. He wrote a short piano work called *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*, which only incorporated thirty-six notes and allotted a particular duration and a particular dynamic level to each of them. This piece left a huge impact on two of his closest pupils, Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, who went on to devote themselves almost exclusively to total serialism. Messiaen, however, could not justify the note-by-note procedures of *Mode de*

valeurs et d'intensités with his desire to compose illustrative music⁵. He opposed the modernist view that music must be logical and interesting instead of beautiful. He said, “A piece of music must be interesting, it must be beautiful to hear, and it must touch the

² Griffiths, Paul. ‘Serialism.’ *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Second Ed. New York, W. W. Norton & Co., 2001.

³ Crossley, Paul. Program notes for Messiaen: *Des canyons aux étoiles*; *Couleurs de la cité céleste*; *Oiseaux exotiques*. New York: CBS Masterworks, 1988.

⁴ Griffiths, Paul: ‘Messiaen, Olivier’, *Grove Music Online* (Accessed 20 February 2006), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

listener”⁶. He said of *Mode de valeurs*, “Perhaps this piece was prophetic and historically important, but musically it’s next to nothing”⁷. It was this skeptical attitude towards serialism that would cause Messiaen to eventually turn to alternative sources of tonality.

Messiaen’s largest orchestral work, the *Turangalila-symphonia* (1948), was somewhat of a turning point between his early career and his later innovations. This piece was epic, with its “rapturous love music, exultant dances, scintillating colouring and extraordinary images”⁸. Messiaen began to apply 12-note methods to rhythmic values in the *Turangalia*, but those elements of serialism were the only sections his student Boulez approved of (since Boulez was a firm advocate of serialism), and it became evident that Messiaen was not interested in pursuing serialism much further. Serialism certainly affected Messiaen’s style, but after the *Turangalia*, he focused more on his sources of inspiration rather than upon his experiments with formal structure.

It comes as somewhat of a paradox, then, when pianist Peter Hill, who recorded the complete piano works of Messiaen, wrote, “The key (to the pacing of spaces and timing of moments) is in realizing that the relationship between Messiaen’s music and the inspiration from nature finds its most complete expression in the very structure of the music, not merely in its details”⁹. How can a composer cause his listeners to apprehend the subtle nuances of natural sounds as logical, metrical units of music? Birdsong, for example, does not fit the

⁵ Griffiths, Paul: ‘Messiaen, Olivier’, *Grove Music Online* (Accessed 20 February 2006), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

⁶ Samuel, Claude. *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color. Conversations with Claude Samuel*. Translated by E. Thomas Glasow. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1986, 47.

⁷ Samuel, Claude. *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color. Conversations with Claude Samuel*. Translated by E. Thomas Glasow. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1986, 47.

⁸ Griffiths, Paul: ‘Messiaen, Olivier’, *Grove Music Online* (Accessed 20 February 2006), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

⁹ Hill, Peter. ‘For the Birds. Peter Hill, Who Recently Finished Recording the Complete Piano Music of Messiaen, Talks about Performing the French Master’s Music’. *The Musical Times*, Vol. 135, No. 1819. (Sept., 1994), 555.

scale structures of Western or Eastern music, and as the composer Trevor Hold pointed out, Messiaen may have stressed “authenticity” of sound, but no musical instrument can perfectly match the timbre or pitch of a bird¹⁰. Still, Messiaen was able to formulate his own kinds of structure to attain satisfactory “authenticity,” as well as audience accessibility. Birdsong was his source of tonality, and he derived harmony from color chords. He frequently used additive rhythm—where semiquavers may be added or subtracted—and he sometimes left barlines out of his music completely, which caused the music to lack an identifiable downbeat. In spite of this departure from Western norms, Messiaen could relieve the listener from sections of complex rhythms by using calm cyclic repetition of themes and a slow, simple pulse¹¹, characteristics which the composer clearly derived from the rhythms of nature, whether they were repetitious birdcalls or flowing ocean waves. Though he did not write tonal music in its traditional or structural sense, Messiaen’s hearkening back to nature was a powerful alternative to the skeletal emptiness of serialism.

Messiaen based his new style largely on his personal obsession with color. He had a neurological condition known as synaesthesia, which mixes the senses in such a way that one may hear colors, taste tactile sensations, or see sounds¹². In a conversation with the journalist and music critic Claude Samuel, he described this phenomenon in his own words:

I am...affected by a sort of synaesthesia, more in my mind than in my body, that allows me, when I hear music and also when I read it, to see inwardly, in my mind’s eye, colors that move with the music; and I vividly sense these colors, and sometimes I’ve precisely indicated their correspondence in my scores. Obviously one should be able to prove this relationship scientifically, but I cannot¹³.

¹⁰ Hold, Trevor. ‘Messiaen’s Birds.’ *Music & Letters*, Vol. 52, No. 2. (Apr., 1971), 115.

¹¹ Braid, David. ‘Olivier Messiaen.’ *Music in the 20th Century*, Vol. 2. Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe Reference, 1998.

¹² McBurney, Gerard. ‘Colour and Music’, *The Oxford Companion of Music*. Ed. Alison Latham. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

¹³ Samuel, Claude. *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color. Conversations with Claude Samuel*. Translated by E. Thomas Glasow. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1986, 40.

For Messiaen, colors represented certain chords and modes rather than individual keys or pitches. As he described it, “One cannot talk of an exact correspondence between a key and a color; that would be a rather naïve way of expressing oneself because...colors are complex and are linked to equally complex chords and sonorities”¹⁴. Messiaen was unlike his predecessor, the composer Scriabin, who associated colors with single tones or keys. Rhythm, timbre, and harmony, specifically chords, were what produced the response for Messiaen, but he also saw colors when reading a score,¹⁵ and was also able to evoke them consciously through compositional choices¹⁶. Messiaen’s color associations were absolutely fixed—and he constructed his own kind of tonality through “color chords,” or well-defined colors that he linked with particular modes. He saw the octatonic scale as turning through “certain violets, certain blues, and violet-purple”, while the scale tone “corresponds to an orange with red and green pigments, to specks of gold, and also to a milky white with iridescent, opaline reflections”¹⁷.

Scientists find it difficult to empirically prove that synaesthesia exists, but the condition is very real to those who possess it. Messiaen said it was not imagination, but “an inward reality”¹⁸. Prior to Messiaen, some well-known synaesthetic composers, such as Scriabin, Rimsky-Korsakov and Jan Sibelius, used it as a part of the composition process¹⁹. Unfortunately, their manifestations of synaesthesia were never clear-cut or identical to each other’s. With little consistency in first-hand reports of synaesthesia, performers and listeners

¹⁴ Samuel, Claude. *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color. Conversations with Claude Samuel*. Translated by E. Thomas Glasow. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1986, 42-43.

¹⁵ Bernard, Jonathan W: ‘Colour’, *The Messiaen Companion*. Edited by Peter Hill. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1994, 205.

¹⁶ Bernard, Jonathan W: ‘Colour’, *The Messiaen Companion*. Edited by Peter Hill. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1994, 205.

¹⁷ McBurney, Gerard. ‘Colour and Music’, *The Oxford Companion of Music*. Ed. Alison Latham. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

¹⁸ Berman, Greta. ‘Synesthesia and the Arts’. *Leonardo*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (1999), 18.

often find it difficult to understand how colors tie into a piece of music. Messiaen seemed resigned to the fact that most people could not see colors as he so clearly envisioned them, yet he set down careful instructions, sometimes directly on the score, which designated specific colors to specific passages, as though these colors were as objectively real as other aspects of his music.

From an early age, Messiaen was fascinated by color and he drew his inspiration from many different stimuli. He loved the impressionist paintings of Monet and the religious frescos of Fra Angelico and Giotto²⁰. His inherent connection between art and music may have partly been a result of the nineteenth-century Wagnerian ideal of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Total Work of Art), which attempted to unify all art forms. Thus, like other twentieth-century minds, Messiaen tended to link composers with artists, such as Debussy and Monet or Webern and Klee²¹. His style, however, could not be matched with one artist in particular, for his interests were too diverse to be put in a box. In his frequent travels, he took note of numerous things, including stained glass windows, sunsets, mountains, canyons, flowers, and the plumage of exotic birds. Sometimes he was inspired by something as random as a cocktail²². Musically, he enjoyed studying the forms of non-European cultures, especially Indian and Japanese, and the combination of these influences with his color associations created a completely individual sound.

Another vital element of Messiaen's style was his fascination with bird song. He spent hours notating different birdcalls by ear, first using the songs of birds native to France, but later, travelling the world and recording many different species. He modified his orchestra by

¹⁹ Berman, Greta. 'Synesthesia and the Arts'. *Leonardo*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (1999), 19.

²⁰ Samuel, Claude. *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color. Conversations with Claude Samuel*. Translated by E. Thomas Glasow. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1986, 44-45.

²¹ Samuel, Claude. *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color. Conversations with Claude Samuel*.

considerably reducing the number of string players and relying heavily on solo piano and percussion to produce the sounds he wished to imitate. The purpose of birdsong in his music was symbolic (he described birds as “our little servants of immaterial joy²³”), but Messiaen was meticulous in his transcriptions. He said in a conversation with Claude Samuel, “I tried to copy exactly the song of a bird typical to a region...I am personally proud of the accuracy of my work”²⁴. This habit of immersing himself in nature and wrapping his music around the essence of God’s creation became essential to the style Messiaen was creating.

Bird song was more than a personal passion for Messiaen; it was a way for him to move forward. He said, “In the face of so many opposed schools, of outmoded styles, of contradictory languages, there is no human music capable of restoring confidence to the despairing one. It is at this point that the voices of Nature intervene”²⁵. Messiaen put bird song directly into his scores, sometimes devoting an entire piece to one species, such as *La fauvette des jardins* (The Garden Warbler), and he tended to use the piano as his primary instrument for depicting the bird’s song. Example 1²⁶ shows several of Messiaen’s bird motifs from his 1953 piece *Réveil des oiseaux* (Dawn Chorus), which transformed the songs of thirty-eight species into an exotic programmatic work. The piece employed solo piano, glockenspiel, celesta, vibraphone, and several other percussion instruments, and “follows the animated march of the hours of the night, then the hours of the day, from midnight to

Translated by E. Thomas Glasow. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1986, 46.

²² Hill, Peter and Simeone, Nigel. *Messiaen*. New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 2005, 287.

²³ Johnson, Robert Sherlaw: ‘Birdsong’, *The Messiaen Companion*. Edited by Peter Hill. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1994, 257.

²⁴ Johnson, Robert Sherlaw: ‘Birdsong’, *The Messiaen Companion*. Edited by Peter Hill. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1994, 252.

²⁵ Troup, Malcolm. ‘Orchestral Music of the 1950s and 1960s.’ *The Messiaen Companion*. Edited by Peter Hill. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1994, 395.

²⁶ Borrowed from Griffiths, Paul. *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 1985, 173.

Ex. 1 Réveil des oiseaux

(a) Little Owl

Un peu vif $\text{♩} = 116$
 Vn. *f*

(b) Blackbird

Un peu vif $\text{♩} = 116$
 Pf. *f*

(c) Robin

Un peu vif $\text{♩} = 116$
 Pf. + 8ve above *p*

(d) Mistle Thrush

Un peu vif $\text{♩} = 116$
 Vn. *mf*

(e) Whitethroat

Presque très vif $\text{♩} = 96$
 Pf. *pp*

(f) Dunnock

Un peu vif $\text{♩} = 116$
 Glock. *mf*

(g) Song Thrush

Très modéré $\text{♩} = 84$
 Tpt., Obs., Cls., Str. *f*

(h) Wren

Un peu vif $\text{♩} = 116$
 Xylo. *pp*

(i) Garden Warbler

Un peu vif $\text{♩} = 116$
 Fl. *p*

noon...²⁷” Messiaen said, “There is nothing but bird songs in this work. All were heard in the forests and are perfectly authentic”²⁸. Though there was little for the listening audience to hang on to as far as traditional forms (although the dominance of the piano makes the piece feel like a concerto), the work was a monumental achievement in terms of originality.

Messiaen experimented exclusively with birdsong in several other works, including *Oiseaux exotiques* (Exotic Birds, 1956), which fuses his transcriptions of birdcalls with his studies of Hindu and Greek metrics, and *Catalogues d’oiseaux* (Catalogs of Birds, 1956-1958), which has an even greater number of transcribed bird songs than *Réveil*. In adapting the songs to musical instruments, Messiaen had to adjust them to a human time scale and 12-note temperament. The end result was music of great variety, which sounds both like Messiaen,

²⁷ Hold, Trevor. ‘Messiaen’s Birds.’ *Music & Letters*, Vol. 52, No. 2. (Apr., 1971), 117.

²⁸ Hold, Trevor. ‘Messiaen’s Birds.’ *Music & Letters*, Vol. 52, No. 2. (Apr., 1971), 116.

and like the birds he was immortalizing. Though critics have said that he succeeded in “caging his birds rather than letting them sing freely”,²⁹ Messiaen was actually trying to convey more than the literal bird songs in his music. He wanted to capture the colors of plumage, as well the awe he felt for birds as being creatures “free in flight and at one with God”³⁰.

In some of his later works, particularly *Couleurs de la cité céleste* (Colors of the Celestial City, 1963) and *Des canyons aux étoiles* (From the Canyons to the Stars, 1974), Messiaen clearly began to write his music with color associations in mind, sometimes indicating specific colors directly on the score. As author Malcolm Troup described, the former of these works offered “the first fruits of Messiaen’s *style couleur* on the alter of the Almighty”³¹, for now Messiaen’s faith, love of birdsong, and color associations were being openly combined and declared in his music.

Couleurs de la cité céleste is a meditation of the transcendental that combines Gregorian chant, Greek and Hindu rhythms, permutations of note values, birdsong, and Apocalyptic symbolism (represented by trombones and xylophones). Color and religious motives are at its core. Messiaen said in his preface to the work, “All these accumulated materials are placed at the service of colour and the combinations of sounds that represent it. The sound-colours in their turn are a symbol of the Celestial City and of Him who dwells there”³². The work is based upon quotations from the Book of Revelation, which refer to a rainbow about the throne of God, seven angels and seven trumpets, and the brightly-colored

²⁹ Hold, Trevor. ‘Messiaen’s Birds.’ *Music & Letters*, Vol. 52, No. 2. (Apr., 1971), 122.

³⁰ Griffiths, Paul: ‘Messiaen, Olivier’, *Grove Music Online* (Accessed 20 February 2006), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

³¹ Troup, Malcolm. ‘Orchestral Music of the 1950s and 1960s.’ *The Messiaen Companion*. Edited by Peter Hill. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1994, 429.

³² Crossley, Paul. Program notes for *Messiaen: Des canyons aux étoiles; Couleurs de la cite celeste; Oiseaux exotiques*. New York: CBS Masterworks, 1988.

stones of the Holy City. The dramatic textures and raw sounds throughout this piece create a feeling of primitive straightforwardness, which shows Messiaen's desire to lay out his vivid apprehensions of the invisible world with complete sincerity.

Messiaen stated that he had never gone so far with his sound-color relationships as he had in *Des canyons aux étoiles*³³. When he accepted the commission for *Des Canyons* from an American patron, Alice Tully, to compose a large chamber work in honor of the American Bicentennial, he turned to his library of geography books for inspiration, and discovered the canyons of Utah, particularly Bryce Canyon³⁴. He traveled to Utah in 1972 to experience it himself, and spent eight days drinking in the scenery, transcribing birdcalls, and taking notes about colors and shapes. "Red-violet, a red-orange, rose, dark red carmine, scarlet red, all possible varieties of red, an extraordinary beauty"³⁵. He was greatly inspired by what he saw there, and his work with colors in *Des canyons aux étoiles* reflects the unforgettable impact left by his journey to the Utah canyons. His imagination took off:

Having left the canyons to climb to the stars, I had only to keep going in the same direction to raise myself up to God. So my work is at once geological, ornithological, astronomical, and theological. Despite the importance of color and birds, it's above all a religious work of praise and contemplation.³⁶

The twelve-movement work takes the listener on a journey of the soul that ascends "from the canyons of the Earth, to the stars in the physical sky and beyond to a vision of Heaven"³⁷. The work is pure and entrancing, with no concern for evil or sin. Birdsong is mixed throughout;

³³ Samuel, Claude. *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color. Conversations with Claude Samuel*. Translated by E. Thomas Glasow. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1986, 138-140.

³⁴ Steinitz, Richard. 'Des canyons aux étoiles.' *The Messiaen Companion*. Edited by Peter Hill. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1994, 461.

³⁵ Hill, Peter and Simeone, Nigel. *Messiaen*. New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 2005, 225-226.

³⁶ Samuel, Claude. *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color. Conversations with Claude Samuel*. Translated by E. Thomas Glasow. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1986, 163.

³⁷ Crossley, Paul. Program notes for *Messiaen: Des canyons aux étoiles; Couleurs de la cite celeste; Oiseaux exotiques*. New York: CBS Masterworks, 1988.

while flawed humans remain absent. Most of all, the work contains an extraordinary variety of musical subtleties, which Messiaen indicates by various color notes throughout the piece.

Trevor Hold has asserted that listeners do not need to understand Messiaen's Catholicism or fixation with birdsong to truly appreciate his music.

These things can sometimes be helpful in 'placing' a work, but...they are quite irrelevant. The music says what it has to say in its own terms. In a way these trappings are more important to the composer than they are to us, in the same way that serial permutations and manipulations are to other composers³⁸.

Are Messiaen's musical elements mere fetishes? Should the listener agree with Hold when he bluntly remarks, "This is Messiaen's pigeon, not ours"³⁹? Hold goes on to describe the similarities between human music and birdsong, but his list of differences is much longer, and he is clearly skeptical of Messiaen's conviction that his music is an authentic imitation. Perhaps in *that* respect, Hold's argument is justified, but to ignore the composer's passion for mingling the tangibility of nature with the mystery of the transcendental is to miss out on a larger picture.

Structure, color, and authenticity of natural sound were highly important to Messiaen, but the purpose of emphasizing these elements was to point to the depth of spirituality that pervaded his composition and filled it with meaning. He wanted his transcriptions of birdsong, and his sound-color relationships, to be communicated articulately to his listeners to inspire a sense of awe of the Creator. He took sights, sounds, tastes and smells from the tangible world and transformed them, spinning them into a web with the intangible, spiritual world as he envisioned it. Messiaen's musical themes display a unique marriage of faith and sensuality—a much-needed reprieve from the confusion of twentieth-century music.

³⁸ Hold, Trevor. 'Messiaen's Birds.' *Music & Letters*, Vol. 52, No. 2. (Apr., 1971), 114.

³⁹ Hold, Trevor. 'Messiaen's Birds.' *Music & Letters*, Vol. 52, No. 2. (Apr., 1971), 114.