

A Messiaen Matrix

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Why do birds sound like birds, but Messiaen's birds always sound like Messiaen?
-Alexander Goehr

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) is generally regarded as one of the most influential composers of the twentieth century. His music redefined the avant-garde, synthesizing many compositional trends prevalent in the first half of the twentieth century and inspiring composers—such as his distinguished pupils Boulez, Stockhausen and Xenakis—to experiment in a host of new directions. Messiaen quickly developed an original and unique style which included innovations in harmony and melody (including the use of his ingenious modes with limited transposition capabilities); rhythm (including utilizing rhythms from ancient Greek and Hindu sources, and developments such as palindromic rhythms and rhythms with added values); color (Messiaen had mild synaesthesia that caused him to see colors when he heard music); and orchestration (including the use of the ondes martenot and many unusual percussion instrument). Messiaen's music is known for its devoted adherence to Catholic theological subjects and for its transcriptions of birdsong. He believed that all his music was written to glorify God and developed a sophisticated sign system with which to evangelize. Of special importance are his works for organ and piano. Messiaen was organist at La Trinité Church in Paris for over 60 years, writing many works for organ (most of which he recorded himself), including *L'Ascension* (1934) and the *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (1969). In 1961, he married his second wife, Yvonne Loriod, a piano virtuoso (and his pupil) who premiered virtually every work that Messiaen wrote that featured piano and an authority on Messiaen's music.

Messiaen called himself an “ornithologist and rhythmician.” He collected and transcribed countless birdsongs, incorporating this material into many of works from the mid-1940s on, culminating in his *Oiseaux exotiques* (1956) for solo piano, percussion, and wind ensemble and *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (1958) for solo piano. Melodically, Messiaen strove to capture the timeless quality of birdsong, exulting in the continuous present. Time was more a frame than a flow; balance, stasis, and repetition, then, count for more than progress and development. As Messiaen asserted in his *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie*: “For the musician and the rhythmician, the perception of time is the source of all music and all rhythm.” This enormous, seven-volume tome was edited by Loriod and published shortly after Messiaen's death and includes three volumes dedicated exclusively to time, rhythm, and rhythmic analysis, while the later volumes included several analyses of Messiaen's own work and a discussion of his modes and color. In Messiaen's view—or certainly in his mind's eye—harmony was color, and music was colored time.

While on his honeymoon in Japan with Loriod, Messiaen collected the materials that would become the basis of his *Sept Haïkai*. The sixth movement (of seven),

“Les oiseaux de Karuizawa” reveals an unsettled impression of the birds he heard. The pulse is constantly fragmented and obscured while various stylized bird calls battle for primacy, creating a nest of unbridled energy and just-barely controlled chaos.

In 1936, four young composers—André Jolivet, Jean-Yves Daniel-Lesur, Yves Baudrier, and Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)—wrote a manifesto rejecting the frivolous nature of contemporary Parisian music. *La Jeune France*, as the group called themselves, discarded the aesthetics of Jean Cocteau in favor of “living music, having the impetus of sincerity, generosity and artistic conscientiousness.” The choral motet *O sacrum convivium!*, written a year later, brings to life the Latin text honoring the Blessed Sacrament. This intensely private setting is filled with the wonder of the Eucharistic miracle and with the hope brought by the “pledge of future glory” given to us. While the motet both whispers its reverence and cries its hopefulness, that same sense of awe is woven into every phrase, and *mens impletur gratia*—“the mind is filled with grace.” [note written by Eric Kang ‘09.]

O sacrum convivium!
In quo Christus sumitur:
Recolitur memoria passionis ejus:
Mens impletur gratia:
Et futurae gloriae
Nobis pignus datur.
Alleluia!

O sacred banquet!
In which Christ is received,
The memory of his passion is recalled,
The mind is filled with grace,
And the pledge of future of glory
Is given to us.
Alleluia!

Olivier Messiaen was a composer who constantly reinvigorated his musical language and who never ceased to surprise. The most startling of his stylistic reinventions came in the wake of the *Turangalîla-Symphonie* (composed in 1946-48), when Messiaen embarked on several years of bold musical experimentation. To his younger contemporaries this was a signal that he returned to the avant-garde, especially as he was now making regular appearances as a teacher at the Darmstadt Summer School, the very temple of post-war modernism. The evolution of Messiaen’s experimental style into something more dramatic, more poetic, and more personal is the reason why *Oiseaux exotiques* holds such an important place in the composer’s output of the 1950s: here is a work which has all the sense of wonder and brilliant colouring found in his earlier music, but which could not have been written without the intervening years of experimentation. *Oiseaux exotiques* thus has a considerably greater significance than might be imagined, given its duration of under 15 minutes and its modest performing forces.... It is in *Oiseaux exotiques* that Messiaen first overcame the challenge of integrating birdsong in a way that is musically satisfying.... At the time, *Oiseaux exotiques* was seen not only as an important departure—a brilliantly fresh synthesis of the various components of Messiaen’s musical language—but also as a return: this was the work that restored the composer’s music to a central place in French musical life.

-Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Olivier Messiaen: Oiseaux Exotiques* (2007)

Messiaen, a figure of enormous importance in the music of the 20th century, profoundly influential as composer, pedagogue and musical thinker, was open to a huge range of

influences from various cultures; he found much of his inspiration in his religious faith and much of his actual musical material in the songs of birds. More than a few composers since music first began to be notated have modeled works in part or in whole after birdsong or alluded to that source in some way, but none has been as productively bird-conscious as Messiaen, nearly all of whose compositions over a period of some 50 years or more either cite bird calls outright or contain some form of avian symbolism. This element, in fact, only grew more emphatic as his creative life continued, until most of his works came to be constructed entirely of motifs derived from bird calls.

According to Messiaen, it was his teacher Paul Dukas who told him, “Listen to the birds; they are great masters.” He did listen, so seriously and intently that his ornithological pursuits occasionally interrupted his other work. One of his most ambitious collections of piano pieces is a *Catologue d'oiseaux* (composed 1956-58), each of whose 13 fairly elaborate numbers is based on the song of a different bird. His subsequent scores for *Chronochromie* (for large orchestra) and *Couleurs de la cité céleste* contain some exotic birdsongs from areas not represented in the *Catologue*.

Oiseaux exotiques (“Exotic Birds”), for piano and small orchestra, is one of the compositions in which the title itself as well as the content has an ornithological base. It was completed in 1956, the year the *Catologue* was begun, and it was preceded, in 1953, by a more extended work for piano and orchestra called *Reveil des oiseaux* (“Awakening of the Birds”). Both, and in fact most of Messiaen's compositions for piano from the middle of his century onward, were written for Yvonne Loriod, who was one of his pupils in the immediate postwar years and whom he married in 1961, a few years after the death of his first wife.

While *Oiseaux exotiques* is a most evocative title, and the score is said to contain citations of no fewer than 40 different birdsongs or calls, the listener would be misled in being advised to expect anything in the way of musical picture-painting or story-telling in the work. The work, in a single continuous movement, may be regarded as a sort of avian fantasy, but it is, more to the point, a sound fantasy—an exploration of timbres and rhythms which happened to be suggested to the composer by his fascination with ornithology but which is not a direct expression of that fascination. The earlier *Reveil des oiseaux* is somewhat more graphically descriptive in this sense, but *Oiseaux exotiques* would enchant the ear just as surely if it were titled simply Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra. [Note written by Richard Freed.]

Messiaen's student Gilles Tremblay recalled the excitement surrounding the premiere:

Messiaen introduced his work very quickly in the class, I was struck by the presence of the birds of several continents—Europe, Asia, America—which could never sing together in reality, and the connection between that and the combination of Greek and Indian rhythms—a kind of global universality. That was my perception, although Messiaen never mentioned such an intention. The performance itself was marvelous, above all because of the joy and the energy which emanated from the work.

Since that premiere performance *Oiseaux exotiques* has been regarded as one of Messiaen's crowning achievements. As Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone write: “*Oiseaux*

exotiques is a work which has a secure place in the concert repertoire, and which has never lost its power to dazzle, to thrill, and to enchant.”

THE TEACHER

PAUL DUKAS

A friend of Debussy at the Conservatoire and a pupil of Bizet's friend Guiraud, Paul Dukas (1865-1935) came near to winning the Prix de Rome, but when he left the Conservatoire found an early musical career as a critic and as an orchestrator. His strong critical sense led him to destroy a number of his compositions and only to allow a relatively small number of works to be published. He remained influential and respected as a teacher, with many famous students including Joaquín Rodrigo, Maurice Duruflé, Carlos Chávez... and Olivier Messiaen. By far the best known of the compositions of Dukas is the symphonic scherzo *L'apprenti sorcier*, (The Sorcerer's Apprentice), based on Goethe's poem *Der Zauberlehrling*, popularised by its inclusion in Walt Disney's *Fantasia*. Commissioned by Diaghilev and the *Ballet Russes* (although never performed by them), the sumptuous ballet *La Péri* (1912), or The Flower of Immortality was Dukas's last major work. The ballet is widely considered his most mature and skilled piece. The music's style can best be described as a mixture of Romantic tonal harmony and orchestration techniques with Impressionism, and is distinctly French. The ballet itself is preceded by a brilliant fanfare that employs only the orchestra's brass section, and which is often performed separately.

THE STUDENTS

KARLHEINZ STOCKHAUSEN

Described by Ivan Hewitt as “one of the great visionaries of 20th-century music,” Karlheinz Stockhausen (22 August 1928 - 5 December 2007) was an influential but controversial German composer—both a rationalist and a mystic—who pursued his uncompromising avant-garde aesthetic through six decades. Works from all periods in his life are most characteristically presented as whole worlds of sound, developed according to original criteria with little regard for tradition. The sudden forging of his creativity came at the Darmstadt summer course of 1951, when he encountered Messiaen's speculative 12-note construction *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*. Messiaen's experiments in extending arithmetical forms of organization beyond pitch, to embrace rhythm, timbre and dynamics, confirmed Stockhausen in his belief that this was the way forward. But over the next few years he was to take the serial ideas into wholly new areas. (In the early 1970s, for example, Stockhausen declared that “serial thinking is something that's come into our consciousness and will be there forever; it's relativity and nothing else . . . it's a spiritual and democratic attitude toward the world.”) By 1953, Stockhausen was no longer a student Darmstadt, but a teacher, establishing his authority among the leaders of the avant-garde. As John Atwell writes: “Stockhausen is a conceptual composer - his texts and his musical designs reflect occidental and oriental musical concepts, as well as eastern and western spiritual truths. Every composition is a complete rethinking of the term ‘music,’ incorporating European and non-European tradition, the latest musical technology, and a wide range of musical cultures.” However, to his own students he often remarked: “Don't give me ideas, give me sounds,” belying a frequent criticism: that he was the prisoner of rigid, “mathematical” systems of

composing. On the contrary, he was always finding ways of letting spontaneity in. In all his pieces there occurs a little bit of devilment that does not actually belong in the construction of the whole thing. "It shows that I can always allow myself to escape from my own house, from my own system . . ." This combination of vast mythical ambition with a strict rationalist form is absolutely typical of Stockhausen and can be heard in his *Refrain*, a somewhat meditative work with rarefied, ringing chords of bell-like sonorities, and occasional tutti vocalizations by the three instrumentalists.

IANNIS XENAKIS

Iannis Xenakis (May 29, 1922 - February 4, 2001) is one of the leaders of modernism in music, a hugely influential composer, particularly in the later 1950s and 1960s, when he was experimenting with compositional techniques that soon entered the basic vocabulary of the twentieth-century avant garde. Born not in Greece but in Romania of Greek parents, Xenakis's initial training, in Athens, was as a civil engineer. In 1947, after three years spent fighting in the Greek resistance against the Nazi occupation, during which time he was very badly injured (losing the sight of an eye), he escaped a death sentence and illegally fled to Paris where his diploma of engineering landed him work with the famous French architect Le Corbusier. In an interview Xenakis spoke of Le Corbusier's influence on his creative thought:

It was the first time I had ever met a man with such spiritual force, such a constant questioning of things normally taken for granted. I knew a good deal about the ancient architecture and that had been enough for me; he, on the other hand, opened my eyes to a new kind of architecture I had never thought of. This was a most important revelation because quite suddenly, instead of boring myself with mere calculations, I discovered points of common interest with music, which remained, in spite of all, my sole aim. Up to then my architectural and engineering work had been done to gain a crust, but thanks to Le Corbusier I had now found a fresh interest in architecture.

Xenakis was first active as an architect, collaborating with Le Corbusier on a number of projects, not least the Philips Pavilion, designed by Xenakis, at the 1958 Brussels World Fair. Evidently, Le Corbusier and the influence of architectural work gave Xenakis impetus to apply a visual approach to music by applying the technical facilities inherent in architectural design to the same plateau as music design, and it was at the suggestion of Le Corbusier, Xenakis attended composition classes with Olivier Messiaen in 1952. When Xenakis approached Messiaen after an analysis class, asking Messiaen whether he should wipe his slate clean and begin studying harmony and counterpoint again (as his former teachers Honegger and Milhaud had stubbornly asserted), Messiaen surprised him; as Messiaen would later recount:

I did something horrible which I should do with no other student, for I think one should study harmony and counterpoint. But this was a man so much out of the ordinary that I said... No, you are almost thirty, you have the good fortune of being Greek, of being an architect and having studied special mathematics. Take advantage of these things. Do them in your music.

The resulting style, based on procedures derived from mathematics, architectural principles and game theory, catapulted Xenakis to the front ranks of the avant-garde,

although there was never any suggestion that he was a member of a clique or group. He never, for example, embraced total serialism, and he also avoided more traditional devices of harmony and counterpoint; instead, he developed other ways of organizing the dense masses of sound that are characteristic of his first compositions. These stochastic, or random, procedures were based on mathematical principles and were later entrusted to computers for their realization. But for all the formal control in their composition, Xenakis's scores retain an elemental energy—a life-force that gives the music an impact of visceral effectiveness—that belies the complexity of their origins and which reflects the composer's fascination with ritualism, most often that of ancient Greece.

Xenakis's output is generally very difficult to classify, especially as he does not use instrumental combinations consistently. Much of his music is for varying mixed chamber ensembles, and requires different instrumentation (or voices) for each piece; for example, his *Plektó* (1993) is written for the unique sextet of flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano, and percussion. Greek for “braids,” *Plektó* is a dense contrapuntal weaving that contrasts sections of blunt savagery and snarling rhythmic layering with a gentle lyricism and almost folk-like simplicity.