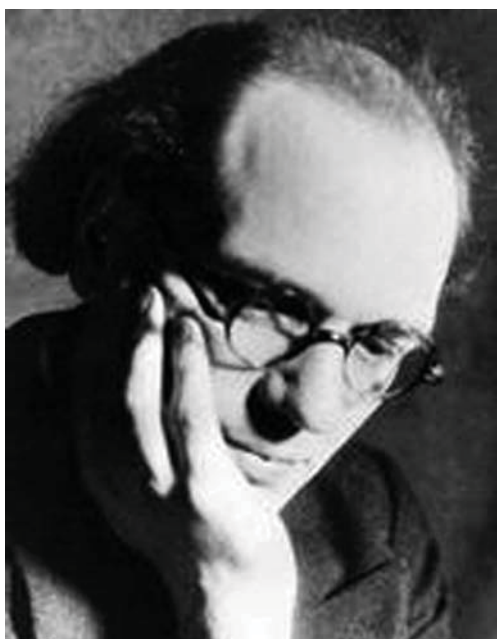


Olivier Messiaen – 100 Years Old, Dead, And Still Teaching

By Louise Rodgers

There is a common thread running through the 20th-century western musical avant-garde – the influence of French composer and pedagogue, Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992). Messiaen, best known as a prolific composer in his own right, began teaching at the Paris Conservatoire in 1941 although this appointment did not become official until the following year¹. He also taught at Darmstadt, the Schola Cantorum, and in his own home; he included among his pupils such famous yet diverse composers as: Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Iannis Xenakis, Pierre Henry and François Bernard Mâche². More recent composers have also made their mark on the world after passing through his classes, perhaps most notably the two Spectralists, Gérard Grisey and Tristan Murail.³ George Benjamin, too, was taught by Messiaen in the late 70s⁴. These artists have acknowledged publicly their debt to Messiaen; recently Mâche spoke of his gratitude towards Messiaen at the 'Messiaen 2008 Centenary Conference' which took place at Birmingham Conservatoire in June.

Boulez, who went to Messiaen's house in 1944 for classes, was initially attracted by the revolutionary quality of Messiaen's own compositions⁵ and described 'that sudden feeling



of attraction to a master of whom one knows, with an inexplicable sense of certainty, that it is he, and only he, that is going to reveal you to yourself.⁶

These then are the two qualities to be investigated in this brief overview of the importance of Messiaen in shaping 20th-century music, his compositional techniques and his teaching, beginning with what Boulez described as the revolutionary quality of Messiaen's music. Messiaen, together with Yves Baudrier, André Jolivet and Daniel-Lesur, formed a compositional alliance known as 'La Jeune France' (Young France) that rejected the nationalistic neo-classicism fashionably advocated by Jean Cocteau in his 1918 pamphlet 'Le Coq et L'arlequin' (The cock and the harlequin)⁷ and instead their manifesto sought a return to the spiritual in music; they presented their first concert on 3 June 1936.⁸ And, of course, 10 years later, there would be the malevolent influence of the Nazi regime and World War II to be overcome through the power of music.

Portraying the spiritual in music was Messiaen's personal quest. Titular organist at l'église de la Sainte-Trinité in Paris for 60 years, his stated lifelong compositional purpose was to 'illuminate the theological truths of the Catholic faith'⁹ – an unpopular objective in artistic circles in 20th-century France, however the means through which he expressed his faith were musically exciting to others. But why did Messiaen compose in his own particular way? Doctor of the Church, St Thomas Aquinas, stated that God was unchanging because he existed outwith time in an eternal present,¹⁰ whereas all temporal creatures are changed by the passage of time, an observation also made by Messiaen's Parisian contemporary, the philosopher Henri Bergson, who wrote of time: 'Real duration is that duration which gnaws on things and leaves on them the mark of its tooth.'¹¹

The portrayal of God in music, a structure that exists in time, and therefore changes, was a challenge that Messiaen explored through his compositional techniques. He embraced the 'Charm of impossibilities'¹² because, in attempting to portray God by a medium that



exists in time Messiaen was, according to his faith, attempting the impossible.

It is reasonable to assume that Messiaen, as a lifelong church organist and respected music lecturer at both the Paris Conservatoire and the Schola Cantorum, had an extensive knowledge of religious music; however this may not have aided him in his quest to portray God, because religious music, particularly church music, has been shaped by the acoustics of spaces in which it is performed¹³ and also by the timetables of religious communities. Therefore, Christian music has always been confined by time and space, and Messiaen sought to portray him as authentically as possible by escaping these confines and setting God in eternity. 'For Messiaen, music, although it exists in time, has the power to bring the listener into contact with eternity.'¹⁴ Therefore, in his efforts to overcome time, Messiaen used, among other devices, non-retrogradable rhythms, that is rhythms that have mirror or bilateral symmetry; these rhythmic figures portray eternity because, philosophically, there is no sense of the direction in which musical time is flowing. Messiaen believed eternity to be an eternal present and, therefore, without past or future.¹⁵ It is not simply that the rhythm was the same backwards as forwards, but rather that the concept of backwards and forwards has ceased to exist. The building blocks of most of these rhythms were Hindu, and he wrote a detailed explanation of them in his first treatise, published in 1944. Examples of this can readily be found in his frequently performed work, 'Quatuor pour la fin du temps' (Quartet for the end of time) first performed in 1941 at Stalag VIII A in Silesia where Messiaen was held captive.¹⁶ Messiaen usually prefaced his scores with explanations of compositional techniques featured in the work, therefore the preface of 'Quatuor pour la fin du temps' contains the following explanation of non-retrogradable rhythms:¹⁷



Music is not just horizontal, that is to say temporal, it is also vertical because it contains chords that provide harmonic rhythm. Messiaen, in spite of having an exhaustive knowledge of traditional harmony, did not use the linear, cadential chord progressions that western composers utilised to impart a sense of movement through time, but rather what he termed modes of limited transposition.¹⁸ Messiaen, as shall be discussed, described his modes as colours and not arithmetical structures because they had neither tonic nor final.¹⁹ The two devices of non-retrogradable rhythms and modes of limited transposition are his best-known methods of suspending time. Another vital ingredient of Messiaen's compositions was more personal, his synaesthesia. When Messiaen heard or read music he saw internalised colours in his mind's eye, and these complexes of colours moved, swirled and vibrated to inspire 'ebloissement' or 'dazzlement' ... a musical analogue, if you will, to the colouristic effects produced by medieval stained glass windows.²⁰

Messiaen compared the musical phenomenon of natural resonance with the visual one of simultaneous contrast,²¹ that is complementary colours opposite each other on the colour wheel vibrating visually to produce other colours, in the same way that vibrating piano strings produce harmonics. This enabled him to paint with music and two of Messiaen's stated compositional influences are painters, Charles Blanc-Gatti and Robert Delaunay.²² Messiaen particularly admired the way the colours of the five paintings of Blanc-Gatti that he owned interacted like sounds; and was impressed by Delaunay's use of simultaneous contrast, so much so that he declared the artist's work was 'very close to what I see when I hear music'.²³ Delaunay, in common with Messiaen, used art to express his view of the universe. Delaunay perceived the way colours moved in relation to each other as comparable to the systolic and diastolic pulse of the heart, a continuous motion, like



physical movement, and therefore 'representative of a philosophical universality in which the eye experiences the vital movement of the universe as a simultaneous action of separation and reunion.'²⁴

Returning to Messiaen's pupils, the musical exploration of resonance and colour was vital to the members of the Spectralist movement begun in the 1970s, two of whom were Messiaen's pupils, Gérard Grisey and Tristan Murail²⁵. Spectralism is concerned with breaking melody into harmonic fundamentals – the components of resonance – whereas, interestingly, George Benjamin, a Messiaen student from 1976-1978 who admired the work of the Spectralists²⁶ is more concerned with unifying sounds: 'Messiaen... encouraged in him a belief that convincing musical form must share the same inherent structure as the material with which the composer is currently working ... each pitch ... is linked in some way to its immediate neighbours within a well-circumscribed sonic field.'²⁷ Perhaps between them these two approaches to resonance nurtured by the same Master are the two components to the 'simultaneous action of separation and reunion' referred to above.

It is quite usual for musicologists to discuss Spectralism as an evolution of Serialism because Serialism separated the component parts of melody into unrelated pitch, rhythm and timbre, and Messiaen was considered a serialist pioneer, as will be discussed; however, when Messiaen was speaking of his magnum opus, the five-hour opera, 'St François d'Assise' composed towards the end of his career and a summary of all his compositional techniques²⁸ he stated that 12-tone was coloured black according to his synaesthesia, because of its lack of resonance (the individual notes do not relate to each other), and so he used it to portray the physical suffering involved in St Francis receiving the stigmata in Act Seven. Messiaen, speaking of his pioneering integral serialist piece in 1986: 'I

was very annoyed over the absolutely excessive importance given to a short work of mine ... "Mode de valeurs et d'intensités" because it supposedly gave rise to the serial explosion in the area of attacks, durations, intensities, timbres – in short, of all its musical parameters. Perhaps this piece was prophetic and historically important, but musically, it's next to nothing.'²⁹ Music that did not resonate was anathema to Messiaen, so much so that he sought to distance himself from his own serialist work, but nevertheless his serialist experiments inspired other composers seeking new modes of musical expression.³⁰



Daniel was thrown in the lions den. But God protected him.
Daniel 6

Boulez's quotation concerning Messiaen's teaching ability contains the key to Messiaen's gift to nurture his diverse fledgling avant-garde pupils, the realisation that they had found someone who would help reveal their true selves to themselves, because although Messiaen shared his considerable technical and aesthetic expertise with others – not least by being an indefatigable treatise writer³¹ – in a teaching situation he was more interested in bringing out the uniqueness of each individual pupil rather than imposing

external ideas. Messiaen himself likened the process of teaching someone else to compose to attempting to become them for a short while and this included leaving his own musical preferences aside³². It is worth emphasising that Messiaen did not encourage imitation of his own compositional techniques among his pupils, so much so that Boulez in particular was at times a scathing public critic of Messiaen's compositional output and 'on at least one occasion Boulez felt the need to buy Messiaen a present, an African xylophone, in order to atone for any hurt caused'.³³

Another famous pupil, Xenakis, went to see Messiaen at the suggestion of his teacher of that time, the famous neo-classicist Nadia Boulanger, because '... she saw that the rules of traditional harmony were like fetters for me ...'³⁴ This was a serious issue in the development of the



emerging young avant-garde attempting to distance themselves from the horrors of World War II and the cultures that they believed had contributed to it,³⁵ for example Xenakis was berated by Arthur Honegger in his composition class at the Ecole Normale for using consecutive double octaves – a sin in traditional harmony – in his work; Honegger became increasingly angry with Xenakis' explanation that he simply liked them so Xenakis did not return.³⁶ There was a '... frantic post-war quest for a new musical language ...'³⁷ and Messiaen's first treatise published in 1944 in Paris by Leduc, 'Technique de mon langage musical' (Technique of my musical language) excited much attention among those composers seeking to discover new musical language of their own.

In 1952 Stockhausen arrived in Paris to study with Milhaud and Messiaen; he soon became impatient with Milhaud, and instead attended aesthetics

and analysis classes with Messiaen twice weekly for one year.³⁸ During this year, according to Stockhausen, Messiaen did not so much teach him new musical facts as reawaken his interest in what he already knew, causing him to evaluate and appreciate it afresh. Messiaen took influences from everywhere, eg. from bird song, from Gregorian chant, from Hindu rhythms – then transformed and incorporated them into his own compositions. This awakened a curiosity and an awareness of external influences within Stockhausen, and with his own growing self-awareness that Messiaen had encouraged, he acknowledged but then rejected influences external to himself. This was the opposite of Messiaen's own compositional methods however: 'He never tried to convince me. That made him a good teacher. He did not give instruction in composition, but showed how he understood the music of others and how he worked himself.'³⁹ Messiaen, in his turn, recalled of Stockhausen: '... I knew for certain that I was dealing with a real genius who had to be guided towards his true path.'⁴⁰



However, as Stockhausen has already hinted, Messiaen's contribution to innovation in the 20th-century was not limited to pedagogy.

Despite Messiaen's stated intention to direct students along their own path rather than to encourage them to follow him on his, the Spectralists and the Serialists are considered to have taken inspiration directly from Messiaen's compositions.^{41 42} 'When I hear music, I see in my mind complexes of colours corresponding to complexes of sounds, so it's understandable that colour interests me as well as sound.'⁴³ For Messiaen there was a direct link between

aural harmonic resonance and the visual phenomena in painting of simultaneous contrast. The Spectralists too were concerned with harmonic colour in music: 'The exploration of resonance, giving primacy to harmony, is characteristic of spectralism, which emerged in France during

the 1970s in the music of Gérard Grisey and Tristan Murail, both pupils of Messiaen who went on to enter the brave new world of electro-acoustic experimentation'.⁴⁴

Messiaen has been widely, if controversially, credited with the discovery of integral serialism in his composition 'Modes de valeur et d'intensités' at Darmstadt in 1949 and Paris 1950.⁴⁵ Controversially because there is another point of view, 'regarding "Mode de valeur et d'intensités" as the first piece of "total" serial music is erroneous on two counts',⁴⁶ the first the author argues, is that the piece is modal, the second that it 'is predated by Milton Babbitt's "Three Compositions for Piano" (1947-48)'.⁴⁷ Leaving aside debate on 'Mode de valeur et d'intensités' place in the development of serialism, it is an irrefutable fact that Boulez wrote to John Cage in December 1951: 'You know that Messiaen is developing wonderfully. I spoke to you about his "Modes de valeurs et d'intensités"'.⁴⁸ Indeed, although 'Mode de valeur et d'intensités' was not the first serial piece, it



provoked dialogue between the emerging avant-garde because of its clarity: 'The independence of the three divisions, their sense of proceeding quite regardless of the others, invites us to hear this music not in terms of a classical harmony, in which all elements consolidate the forming of the whole, but as a true polyphony, in which contrasting elements coexist and intertwine. Serial composers chose to go even further down this path, by differentiating individual sound events continuously through the piece: this is the real purpose of parametral thinking. But the idea, and more importantly the effect, is laid crystal clear in Messiaen's piece.'⁴⁹ Belgium composer Karel Goeyvaerts informed Stockhausen of the composition, and their exchange of ideas concerning the piece laid important foundations in early serialism.⁵⁰ Boulez also was inspired by the work and chose 'the series of this work as that of his "Structures" for two pianos'..⁵¹

Messiaen through his experimental compositional techniques such as modes of limited transposition and integral serialism provoked a lively exchange of ideas among the young avant-garde seeking new paths after the Second World War. In addition, his acceptance of the diversity of inspiration among his composition pupils, and ability to lay aside his own preferences and empathise with their desire to utilise new techniques and produce unfamiliar sounds enabled him to assist them to explore their own unique musical identities which in turn, shaped the avant-garde music of the 20th-century.

Endnotes

- 1 Boivin, 1998.
- 2 Dingle, 2007..
- 3 Whittall, 2007
- 4 Benjamin, 1995.
- 5 Boulez, 1995.
- 6 Boulez, 1995, p166.
- 7 Broad, 2007.
- 8 Tschamkerten 2007.
- 9 Samuel, 1994, p20.
- 10 Aquinas, 1961.
- 11 Bergson, 1996, p46.
- 12 Fabbi, 1998, p55.
- 13 De Alvaré, 2004.
- 14 Sherlaw-Johnson, 1998, p121.
- 15 Darbyshire, 1998.
- 16 Rischin, 2003.
- 17 Messiaen, undated.
- 18 Messiaen, 1966.
- 19 Samuel, 1994.
- 20 Benitez, 2002, p5.
- 21 Samuel, 1994.
- 22 Benitez, 2002.
- 23 Benitez, 2002, p1.
- 24 Benitez, 2002, p2.
- 25 Whittall, 2007.

- 26 Whittall, 2007.
- 27 Lack, 2001, p10.
- 28 Samuel, 1994.
- 29 Samuel, 1994, p47.
- 30 Grant, 2001.
- 31 Dingle, 2007.
- 32 Whittall, 2007.
- 33 Dingle, 2007, p133.
- 34 Varga, 1996, p27.
- 35 Grant, 2001.
- 36 Varga, 1996.
- 37 Boivin, 2007, p138.
- 38 Kurtz, 1998.
- 39 Kurtz, 1992, p46.
- 40 Kurtz, 1992, p49.
- 41 Whittall, 2007.
- 42 Nattiez, 1993.
- 43 Samuel, 1994, p62.
- 44 Whittall, 2007, p246.
- 45 Nattiez, 1993.
- 46 Grant, 2001, p61.
- 47 Grant, 2001, p62.
- 48 Nattiez, 1993, p126
- 49 Grant 2001, p63
- 50 Grant 2001,
- 51 Nattiez, 1993, p12.

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