

Understated charm

**Style and technique in the
last works of Olivier Messiaen**

by

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Volume I: text

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SUMMARY

When Olivier Messiaen completed the vast opera *Saint François d'Assise* in 1983, he was mentally and physically exhausted, believing that this monumental work would be his final compositional statement. Coaxed at first by his wife, Yvonne Loriod, he began to write a series of miniatures - a rarity in his output. Then, in the last years of his life, Messiaen composed a final large orchestral cycle, *Éclairs sur l'Au-Delà....*

This thesis examines the seven works which Messiaen completed after *Saint François* and argues that, following the crisis provoked by the opera, his music underwent a discernible change in style. In addition, the thesis uses the works in question to examine the characteristics of Messiaen's music, with a particular emphasis on an often overlooked aspect of his technique: harmony. In the process, many other questions are addressed, such as the ways in which Messiaen utilizes birdsong within a larger structure.

The thesis is in three parts. Part I begins with a brief historical survey before discussing *Saint François d'Assise* as the work which defines everything that follows. Part II examines the series of miniatures whose significance belies their (relatively) modest proportions. Not only do they provide an indication of Messiaen's artistic self-confidence, but they also contain important links with his final masterpiece, *Éclairs sur l'Au-Delà....* This sublime eleven movement work for large orchestra is the subject of Part III, and is the focus of the thesis. Each movement is analysed in turn, before the work is considered as an entity and its hidden structure and motivic cohesion is demonstrated.

To Mum and the memory of Dad.

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Introduction

The last years in the life of any artist tend to be an emotive subject. It is especially so in music, which is, perhaps, the most chimeric of the arts. Whether a composer dies aged twenty-four, thirty-five, fifty-one, fifty-seven or eighty-three, their last works are imbued with meanings which are often as much to do with the romantic notions of the listener as any intent by the creator. Discussion of these final works often assumes that the composer knew that death was at hand. Lili Boulanger died so young that her transcendent last works are also her remarkably precocious first works. However, her medical condition was such that she did know that her life was never going to be blessed with longevity. This must have affected her music. Mahler died prematurely, but was so obsessed with death throughout his creative life that any forewarning would probably have made little difference to his music. Far more tenuous are the inferences which are placed on the final works of Mozart and Beethoven, neither of whom intended them to be final.

In this company, the final works of Olivier Messiaen are extremely unusual. Having had the benefit of a substantially longer life, he had the benefit of composing what he believed would be his final compositional statement, the opera *Saint François d'Assise*. As the interview with Paul Crossley (reproduced in appendix five) testifies, Messiaen was terrified that he would leave this enormous *summa* unfinished. This is the context of the works of his final years. Messiaen did not die during or immediately after the composition of *Saint François d'Assise*. This fact, allied with the vast physical and mental effort required to complete the opera, casts an immense

shadow over the works which followed. It provoked a creative crisis. What do artists do after they have created what they believe to be their final work?

In Messiaen's case, he completed another seven works by the time of his eventual death in 1992, nine years after completing *Saint François*:

- *Livre du Saint Sacrement* for organ.
- *Petites esquisses d'oiseaux* for piano.
- *Un vitrail et des oiseaux* for piano solo and small orchestra.
- *La ville d'en-haut* for piano solo and orchestra.
- *Un sourire* for orchestra.
- *Pièce* for piano and string quartet.
- *Éclairs sur l'Au-Delà...* for very large orchestra.

These are the works which are examined in this thesis.¹ The first and last of these are substantial works, whilst the intervening five pieces are (relative) miniatures, an unusual feature in Messiaen's mature output. The principal period covered by this thesis can be described either as 'Messiaen's last decade' or 'the post-*Saint François* works'. Taking an apparently arbitrary period of a composer's life can be a dangerous basis for meaningful research. Nevertheless, it is the contention of this thesis that the period in question is both distinct and crucial to the understanding of Messiaen's music. *Éclairs sur l'Au-Delà...* is by far the most important work, and, as such, accounts for the bulk of the thesis. Everything else can be seen as leading towards this final masterpiece, which is not so much a *summa* as evidence of an Indian summer to Messiaen's creative life.

The purpose of the thesis is threefold. First of all, and in recognition that the period in question is musicological 'virgin territory', it attempts to provide a reasonably thorough background to, and analyses of, the works of Messiaen's final years. Secondly, the thesis argues that Messiaen's music underwent a discernible change of style in his final years. In other words, that his last works should be treated as a distinct period in his creativity. Thirdly, it uses the works in question to examine the characteristics of Messiaen's music in detail. The emphasis is on an often overlooked aspect of his technique: harmony. In the process, many other questions are addressed, such as the ways in which Messiaen utilizes birdsong within a larger structure.

The three chapters of Part I set the scene. The first chapter provides a brief historical survey and introduces some important points of technique which are not dealt with adequately elsewhere. The second chapter gives an insight into the work which defines everything that follows, *Saint François d'Assise*. For reasons which are outlined in chapter three, *Livre du Saint Sacrement* should be regarded as a companion to the opera, and to the style which had prevailed for twenty years. As a consequence, discussion of this final organ cycle is placed within Part I.

Part II examines the series of miniatures which gradually appeared in the wake of *Saint François d'Assise*. The significance of these works belies their (relatively) modest proportions as they provide musical snapshots of the confidence of Messiaen's creativity. Furthermore, whilst on first hearing there is a tying up of loose ends from

the opera, there are also important links with Messiaen's final masterpiece, *Éclairs sur l'Au-Delà....*. This sublime eleven movement work for large orchestra is the subject of Part III, and provides the real focus for this thesis. Each movement is analysed on its own merits, and then the work is considered as an entity. Finally, the incomplete *Concert à quatre* is considered briefly, along with some final thoughts on the period as a whole, in the postscript.

It must be stressed that the principal aim of the thesis is not biographical. It does not intend to provide a thorough account of Messiaen's life and multifarious activities between 1983 and 1992. Rather, it attempts to draw upon pertinent biographical information which is felt to have direct relevance to the music under discussion. The music is the prime focus of attention and increasingly dominates the discussion throughout the thesis.

There is no systematic approach taken to analysing the works covered in this thesis. Messiaen's music resolutely refuses to be placed into any convenient boxes and analytical method would be hopelessly inadequate.² This thesis uses different approaches according to the circumstance. In some cases a particular line of enquiry dominates the discussion, in others the approach is more speculative. Concerns with tonality and tonally derived chords are a recurring theme. It should be stressed at the outset that terms such as tonal or major do not imply that the music is following the principles and techniques of Haydn, Mozart or Beethoven. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that this music is rarely atonal and that there are often clear areas

towards which the harmony leans. For the composer, this would be expressed in terms of a prevailing colour or set of colours. Certain chapters touch upon aspects of Messiaen's colour associations, but, due to the highly personal nature of this phenomenon, the thesis generally only mentions them in passing, believing it necessary only to be aware of this grey area (no pun intended).³

Whilst it is hoped that all relevant information has been included necessary to the understanding of this thesis, constrictions of space have made it necessary to assume a certain degree of knowledge.⁴ The thesis assumes that the reader has a reasonably thorough knowledge of the entirety of Messiaen's output up to, and including, *Saint François d'Assise*. In addition, it assumes that the reader is acquainted with the basic building blocks of Messiaen's music, especially those outlined in Technique de mon langage musical.⁵ Certain techniques and devices which are particularly pertinent and which have either developed significantly since Technique or about which there is potential misunderstanding are discussed in Part I, chapter one. For ease of reference, the seven *modes of limited transposition* are reproduced in appendix two.⁶

In addition to his music, this thesis assumes that the reader is reasonably well acquainted with Messiaen's writings, notably Technique and the prefaces to his works. In addition, recent years have seen the publication of the first volumes of the enormous Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie (1949-1992)⁷ which have increased, more than substantially, the amount of written material available direct

from the composer's hand. At the time of writing, the first four complete «*Tomes*» and the first volume of *Tome V* have been published.⁸ It is not assumed that the reader has necessarily read the published sections of the Traité. Messiaen's writings are, of course, enormously valuable, but they can also cause varying degrees of analytical blindness. Whilst this thesis often uses Messiaen's terminology, not least for ease of identification and reference, it sees these only as the first step, not, as some would have us believe, the end of the matter.

Knowledge is also assumed in this thesis of Messiaen's opinions as expressed in the three books containing lengthy interviews with the composer. By far the most substantial, and the best known, of these is Musique et couleur - nouveaux entretiens avec Claude Samuel⁹ which gives an indication of Messiaen's thoughts early in the period covered by this thesis. Also pertinent are some passages in the interviews from 1979 and 1983 contained in Almut Rößler's book Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen.¹⁰ Finally Antoine Goléa's early set of conversations, Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen¹¹ contains some searching questioning, although the early date means that there is little which is directly relevant to this thesis.

Not surprisingly, the literature on the period of Messiaen's life covered by this thesis is relatively modest. Paul Griffiths' biography¹² stops just before the period in question, as does that by Roger Nichols.¹³ Robert Sherlaw Johnson adds a few brief paragraphs of limited value about *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, *Petites esquisses d'oiseaux* and *Un vitrail et des oiseaux* in the revised version of his book about the

composer.¹⁴ By far the most substantial, and the most valuable, contributions are to be found in The Messiaen Companion edited by Peter Hill:¹⁵

- Peter Hill: Interview with Yvonne Loriod
- Paul Griffiths: Eclairs sur l'au-delà [sic] - the Last Works
- Peter Hill: Piano Music II
- Gillian Weir: Organ Music II
- Paul Griffiths: Saint François d'Assise

The interview with Yvonne Loriod contains invaluable information regarding Messiaen's state of mind during the period covered by this thesis. The sixteen page chapter by Paul Griffiths on the late works is the largest single contribution to the understanding of the period prior to this thesis.¹⁶ In addition, the essays by Peter Hill and Gillian Weir on late piano music and late organ music respectively contain insights regarding Messiaen's last works for these instruments; *Petites esquisses d'oiseaux* (piano) and *Livre du Saint Sacrement* (organ). For the reasons outlined in Part I, chapter two, the essay by Paul Griffiths on *Saint François d'Assise* provides an essential background to the works which follow.

Finally, four relatively recent publications of a more general nature also warrant a mention. Olivier Messiaen homme de foi - Regard sur son œuvre d'orgue,¹⁷ the book accompanying the festival of Messiaen's organ music at Sainte Trinité contains some illuminating insights and reminiscences. The same can be said of Portrait(s) d'Olivier Messiaen¹⁸ edited by Catherine Massip¹⁹ as part of the excellent exhibition at the Bibliothèque nationale in 1996. Several of the contributions in

Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love, edited by Siglind Bruhn,²⁰ are valuable explorations of the general principles lying behind the composer's music. Lastly, Nigel Simeone's Olivier Messiaen: A Bibliographical Catalogue²¹ provides the first coherent catalogue of the composer's works, along with a great deal of other invaluable information regarding dates of publication, performances and much else besides.

In addition to these existing sources, George Benjamin, Paul Crossley, Professor Alexander Goehr and Kent Nagano were kind enough to grant me interviews for the research. In addition, I spoke less formally with Jean Leduc, Gillian Weir and Jennifer Bate. The full texts of the interviews with George Benjamin and Paul Crossley are reproduced in appendices four and five respectively.

It is assumed that anyone studying the music of Messiaen has a working knowledge of French. Due to the potential for mistakes and misunderstandings in translations, all quotations are made in the original French, where that is available. Similarly, all references to birds use the name given in the score, which will usually be in French but is sometimes in the language of the area in which it was notated.²² References to Messiaen's widow, the pianist Yvonne Loriod, tend to vary depending upon which version of her name is used in source documents.²³

Messiaen attached immense importance to timbre and colour, to the extent that, by this point in his career, the orchestration had a status equal to pitch, harmony and rhythm. Indeed, he even suggested that any musical quotation from *Saint*

François should be of the full score so that it can be appreciated fully.²⁴ For this reason, reduction of the score is often resisted, or is only partial so that the instrumental groupings at least are retained. In cases where it makes sense for the music to be discussed primarily in reduction, such as where there is chorale writing or a tutti melody, an example is given of the full score at the outset so that the timbral disposition of the music can be registered before concentrating on other factors. As a consequence, many musical examples are relatively large and, in some cases, necessitate several pages for each page of text. For this reason, all musical examples, together with some of the larger figures and tables, have been placed in a separate volume.²⁵ An important point which should be stressed before embarking on any analysis of Messiaen's music is that the composer uses enharmonics freely. The only criteria for whether a note is written as B \flat or A \sharp is clarity and the ease of reading by the performer.²⁶ Occasionally it has been desirable to refer to notes at a specific register using letters. For this, the thesis follows the designations outlined at the end of the Glossary, in which F refers to the F natural an octave and a fifth below middle C, e' refers to E natural a third above middle C, and d#" to the D sharp an augmented ninth above middle C.

Finally, it should be reiterated that this thesis is intended as a beginning to the subject of Messiaen's final years. It intends to open the debate regarding the late works of a composer about whom discussion tends to end halfway through his career. For that reason, the reader is urged to listen to the works being discussed. The greatest success would be to generate further research, debate and interest in these works and those which immediately preceded them.

Notes

- 1 In addition to these, Messiaen left an incomplete work, *Concert à quatre*, which, for reasons outlined in the postscript, is considered only briefly by this thesis.
- 2 For instance, pitch class analysis runs into problems at the first hurdle. Due to the need to have the smallest intervals at the bottom, a pitch class approach to one of the basic building blocks of Messiaen's music, mode 3, would give t0 as C, C#, D, E, F, F#, G#, A, Bb (set-class 9-12 in Allen Forte's listings). However, Messiaen constructs mode 3 from a series of minor thirds (or a diminished seventh chord), split into smaller steps of a tone followed by a semitone, producing C, D, D#, E, F#, G, G#, A#, B. Furthermore, the initial version of the mode is labelled transposition one. This confusion occurs even before we take into account the fact that register is often important to Messiaen or that he often uses all twelve pitches freely but with clear preferences to some over others or that he often distorts features once they are established.
- 3 More insight is promised with *Tome VII* of Messiaen's Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie, which is due for publication in about two years.
- 4 A glossary is provided to explain terms specific to this thesis, and as a reference for the shortened versions of the names of works and books.
- 5 Olivier Messiaen: Technique de mon langage musical, (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1944; English translation: John Satterfield, Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1957). Henceforth referred to throughout this thesis as Technique. All references are from the text volume unless volume 2 (which contains the musical example) is specified.
- 6 Any reference to the modes within the text identifies the mode in arabic numerals and, where relevant, the transposition in superscript Roman numerals. For example, the second transposition of the mode three would be written as mode 3ⁱⁱ.
- 7 Olivier Messiaen: Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie (1949-1992) - Tome I (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1994); Tome II (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1995); Tome III (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1996); Tome IV (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1997); Tome V, 1^{er} Volume - Chants d'Oiseaux d'Europe (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1999). Henceforth referred to throughout this thesis as Traité, with Roman numerals to indicate the specific Tome.
- 8 Frustratingly, the «*Tome*» on Messiaen's harmony, and, thus, the one which promises to hold most information of specific relevance to this thesis, *Tome VII*, is not due for publication for another two years. However, whilst this would have provided some answers, there has been a certain freedom analyzing the music without too many preconditions.
- 9 Olivier Messiaen: Musique et couleur - nouveaux entretiens avec Claude Samuel (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1986). English translation E. Thomas Glasgow (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus, 1994). Henceforth referred to throughout this thesis as 'Messiaen: Musique et couleur.' Claude Samuel also published, of course, an earlier set of interviews. However, much of what Messiaen says in Musique et Couleur (1986) is simply a repetition of the earlier book Entretiens avec Olivier Messiaen (1967), English translation by Felix Aprahamian (Paris: Belfond, 1967; London, 1976). There is nothing lost from the earlier book which is of particular relevance to this thesis. To add further to the confusion, Samuel has recently re-published the interviews, interspersed with his own reflections on Messiaen as Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen: Dialogues et Commentaires, (Actes Sud, 1999).
- 10 April 23, 1979 and December 16, 1983. Almut Rößler: Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen, English translation by Barbara Dagg and Nancy Poland (Duisberg: Gilles and Francke, 1986). Henceforth referred to throughout this thesis as 'Rößler: Contributions'.
- 11 Antoine Goléa: Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen (Paris: Julliard, 1960).
- 12 Paul Griffiths: Olivier Messiaen and the music of time (London/Boston: Faber and Faber, 1985).
- 13 Roger Nichols: Messiaen (second edition) (London: Oxford University Press, 1986).
- 14 Robert Sherlaw Johnson: Messiaen (second edition) (London: Dent, 1989). See pages 187-189.
- 15 London: Faber and Faber 1995. For ease of reference, the five chapters listed shall be referred to throughout this thesis as 'Hill: Interview with Yvonne Loriod'; 'Griffiths: Last Works'; 'Hill: Piano Music II'; 'Weir: Organ Music II'; 'Griffiths: Saint François' together with the relevant page number from The Messiaen Companion.

Notes (continued)

- 16 The next longest contribution to the subject is a speculative, and rather premature, article in Tempo - Christopher Dingle: 'Charm and Simplicity: Messiaen's final works' in Tempo, no.192 (April 1995), pp.2-7.
- 17 Paris: Trinité Média Communications, 1995.
- 18 Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1996.
- 19 The book states «*sous la direction de Catherine Massip*».
- 20 New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1998.
- 21 Tutzing: Verlegt bei Hans Schneider, 1998.
- 22 English in the case of certain American and Australian birds.
- 23 The variants are Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen, Yvonne Messiaen-Loriod and Yvonne Messiaen.
- 24 Roger Nichols: Messiaen, p.85.
- 25 Examples are numbered consecutively through each of the three parts of the thesis. Figures and tables are given separate numbers. There is an index to the larger figures and tables at the beginning of Volume II.
- 26 This point can easily be confirmed by examining the full score of , for instance, *Chorale de la lumière de gloire*, the last movement of *La Transfiguration*.

Part I

Setting the scene

Chapter one

Développement par élimination et réintégration

The career of any great artist can be divided into broad creative periods defined by discernible traits. Olivier Messiaen is no exception. This is despite the fact that it is now part of the common currency when discussing his music to remark upon the constancy with which Messiaen stuck to his idiosyncratic musical language. It is true that some of the same techniques and spirit which he used in the first of his works to be published, the *Préludes*, can still be heard in his final masterpiece *Éclairs sur l'Au-Delà....* Indeed, this is a perception which Messiaen himself encouraged,¹ so that the received wisdom is of the composer as a steady accumulator of techniques for a continually expanding style. On one level, this is a reasonably accurate interpretation in retrospect of Messiaen's life. However, within this constancy, it is possible to detect places where the composer markedly changes direction. There are, in the words of Peter Hill, 'a series of maturities, his achievements coming in waves, given impetus by periods of self-renewal, undertaken either in response to circumstance or as conscious experiment'.² As we shall see, each of these watersheds was accompanied by a personal or artistic crisis.

For the reasons outlined above, Hill nevertheless goes on to remark that separating Messiaen's life into sections is 'in his case, especially artificial'.³ Taking the broad sweep of Messiaen's life and career as a completed entity, this is true, but if Messiaen had died at an earlier age, our understanding of him as a composer would

have differed radically. If he had died in 1949, he would have been described as a composer of mostly religious works combining exotic rhythmic techniques with luxurious and utterly idiosyncratic modal harmonies. However, if his obituary had been written in 1962, Messiaen's name would not necessarily have been synonymous with religious works. He would have been recognized as a very devout man, who had been organist at Sainte-Trinité for over thirty years, but who had not composed an explicitly religious work for the concert hall since the end of the war. A man who had spent the past decade and a half as a father figure to the avant garde, and whose recent music formed part of the foundations for the brave new world being built by the younger generation of composers.

Three periods of crisis can be identified in Messiaen's life before the era covered by this thesis, each of which had a discernible impact on his music for years afterwards. On each occasion, it can be seen that Messiaen felt the need to reassess the content of his musical language and to make choices about what types of material to include or retain and which, if necessary, to reject.

As with all artists, Messiaen's first crisis inevitably occurred right at the start of his career with the dual needs of self-definition and survival. After he left the Paris Conservatoire, Messiaen was faced both with the artistic problem of what kind of composer he should be and the personal necessity of earning money. It almost goes without saying that the solutions to these two problems are not always compatible. The young Messiaen can be seen producing the kinds of works that composers are supposed to write. The *Thème et variations* and *Fantaisie burlesque* of 1932 and the

unpublished *Fantaisie* for violin and piano of 1933 certainly fall into this category as do, of course, the works written for the *Prix de Rome* competition. To these, arguably, could be added the unpublished Mass-setting of 1933, the *Trois mélodies*, the tribute to Dupré and Dukas of the *Diptyque* and even the *Préludes*. Messiaen can be seen gradually defining himself not only in terms of the idiosyncracies of the modes, rhythms and other accretions to his language, but also in terms of what he was rejecting. The short abstract superficialities of a work like the *Fantaisie burlesque* are rejected in favour of works which have a firm subject matter, Messiaen's faith. Equally important is that the young Messiaen is keen to avoid just being an organ-composer in the manner of Tournemire or Dupré.

The most dramatic and widely acknowledged crisis of Messiaen's career started in 1949. Against a background of the personal tragedy of his first wife's illness, Messiaen faced a major artistic crisis instigated by the uncompromising radicalism of his students and the fervent climate of post-war Europe. It is characterized as being a period of experimentation with technique and, whilst the development of the composer's thoughts as regards quasi-serial methods can be traced from one work to the next, the change in Messiaen's music was more a stylistic decision than a matter of technique. Messiaen had been developing the various quasi-serial and permutational procedures found in the works from 1949-1952 since, at least, *Vingt regards*. The artistic change is not towards progressive techniques, these were already part of Messiaen's compositional toolkit, but away from relatively traditional methods, particularly associations with tonality. In *Turangalila*, Messiaen had explored the heady limits of his modal approach to composition, with its

‘omnipresent harmony’.⁴ He returned now to first principles, stripping his music of its more opulent components and concentrating instead on what Boulez has described as the ‘more anarchic intervals’.⁵ In other words, not only is there a rejection of associations with tonality, but also of consonance. In the works from this period, Messiaen can be seen exploring music at its most basic, though not simple, levels, notably pitch and duration. The quasi-serial piano piece *Mode de valeurs et d’intensités* acts as the technical totem for this period, but it is the systematic permutational procedures developed in *Cantéyodjayâ*, *Ile de feu II* and *Livre d’orgue* from embryonic passages in, amongst others, *Turangalila III*, which have most significance for future works. It took Messiaen three years to find a way forward which involved neither abstraction nor serialism. His response was, of course, to turn to nature and, in particular, birdsong. It was a solution which created a whole new set of problems to solve, a plethora of challenges which Messiaen delighted in tackling for the remainder of his career.

The personal and artistic crisis which surfaced in 1949 could be described as artistically negative, in that it resulted in the rejection of certain aspects of Messiaen’s musical language. The artistic consequences of the next crisis, which was spiritual in nature, were far more constructive. On 4 December 1963, the Second Vatican Council⁶ released its first climactic documents and initiated the most radical changes in the Roman Catholic Church since the Council of Trent (1545-1563). The ramifications of Vatican II were greatly to affect every Roman Catholic throughout the world. It reassessed the Church’s thinking on many aspects of the faith, from the precise meaning of concepts such as transubstantiation to the use of language in the

liturgy, with the latter resulting in the introduction of the vernacular into services. As a strong believer with unquestioning faith in many of the central, and not so central, tenets of Roman Catholicism, this questioning of the unquestionable would have been extremely difficult for Messiaen. Furthermore, although a radical artist, he tended to be deeply conservative regarding many aspects of his faith.

Just eighteen months after the publication of the first crucial documents from Vatican II, Messiaen began work on the vast oratorio *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur, Jésus-Christ*. This work creates a liturgy for the concert hall in which can be discerned many allusions to pre-Vatican II thought and practice. As such, it stands as a discreet statement of concern about what might be lost to the Church. It is Messiaen's reaction to (not against) the challenge of Vatican II.⁷

The musical consequence of this unexpected spiritual crisis was that Messiaen began a process of monumental consolidation. *La Transfiguration* is the first of the composer's monumental acts of homage which draw upon the entirety of his, by now capacious, compositional toolkit. The entirety of (Messiaen's) creation is marshalled in praising the glory of God, with the divergent styles found in his music before and after 1949 being brought together into an omnifarious whole. Begun in 1965, the oratorio marked the start of a series of huge religious canvasses culminating in the completion of *Saint François d'Assise* in 1983. Despite complexities of detail, the expansive gestures of *La Transfiguration* possess a powerful simplicity. Messiaen's prime concern both in the oratorio and in the gigantic works which followed was not to flaunt clever new procedures but to convey a profound spiritual message. In such a

global concept, innovatory techniques merely take their place alongside the plethora of existing materials.

The monumental style of *La Transfiguration* also lies at the heart of *Des canyons aux étoiles...* and, as has been mentioned already, culminates in the colossal proportions of *Saint François d'Assise*, prompting Paul Griffiths to group these works under the collective title of '*Trois grandes Liturgies de la Présence Divine*'.⁸ For ease of reference, this thesis will henceforth refer to these three works collectively as the *monumental trinity* works. It should be noted that in addition to these gigantic pieces, two other works date from this period. Messiaen composed what was at that point his longest organ work in the wake of the oratorio, *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* and he preceded *Des canyons* with his longest single movement piano work, *La fauvette des jardins*. As we shall see in chapter three of Part I, the opera was soon followed by *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, which has the distinction not only of being Messiaen's largest work for organ, but also one of the longest pieces in the repertoire for that instrument.

The crisis of 1949 is widely recognized by Messiaen scholars. For instance, it is reflected in the structure of the *Messiaen Companion*. Whilst the identification of the link between Vatican II and *La Transfiguration* is not yet accepted as widely, it cannot be disputed that there was a marked shift in the direction of Messiaen's music during the middle of the 1960s. This thesis contends that, after the completion of *Saint François*, Messiaen faced a fourth crisis which also resulted in a discernible, if less dramatic, stylistic shift.

Developments in individual techniques and methods are, of course, important in distinguishing between different periods of Messiaen's career. However, before considering a few key elements of his musical language in detail, it is worth reiterating a couple of the pertinent stylistic characteristics of the periods outlined above, the macroscopic compositional choices which do not depend on specific devices.

Messiaen is known as a composer of joyful music, and this is one of the prevalent characteristics of his music up to, and including, the Tristan triptych, and of the *monumental trinity* works. There is a very public emotionalism in these works which is largely absent from the works of the 1950s. This middle period of his creative life can be described as introspective. *Catalogue d'oiseaux* characterizes this mood, and underlines that, compositionally, it was a choice. The penultimate piece, *Le traquet rieur*, ends with an exuberant flourish in glistening A major. If it had been composed during another period, this would have been the conclusion to *Catalogue d'oiseaux*. Instead, this enormous cycle ends with the desolation of *Le courlis cendré*. Whereas in earlier (and later) works Messiaen delivers his message with certitude of earlier (and later) works, the mood here is more reflective and introverted.

Of even greater relevance to this thesis is the fact that the vast proportions of the *monumental trinity* works are not an accident but an integral part of Messiaen's intentions in these works. The aim is to overwhelm the listener with the glory and magnificence of God. The listener should be dazzled by the music, and given some idea of the terrifying awe which the composer describes in relation to *Terribilis est*

locus iste from *La Transfiguration*, *Cedar Breaks et le don de crainte* from *Des canyons* and *Les Stigmates* from the opera. There are moments of tenderness, but the lasting impression from these works is the overwhelming power of both the music and the forces which deliver it. As we shall see, the approach taken in *Eclairs* is markedly different.

Whilst the phases of Messiaen's career can be defined and discussed in terms of the prevalence or absence of certain techniques and subjects, an important factor is the status of chords associated with diatonic harmony. Much of Messiaen's harmony is deliberately ambiguous, with chords often having several functions. However, discussion of Messiaen's music for the most part either declines to talk about harmony or denies any links with tonality for all but the simplest triads. Messiaen's terms for describing chords are used as an end in themselves, without any attempt being made to ascertain the purpose of the chord or to place it in its context. It is the equivalent of analysing Mozart's music by saying 'a root position major triad is followed by a first inversion major triad and a minor triad'. Messiaen has provided the descriptive framework for analysing his music, but, thus far, most analyses do little more than regurgitate the descriptive information provided by the composer.⁹ In fact, many chords have clear links with tonality¹⁰ even though the composer may use very different terminology. The following brief examination of pertinent items in Messiaen's compositional toolkit concentrates on harmony rather than rhythm.¹¹

In addition to major and augmented triads, with and without added notes, three chord-types or collections of chord-types dominate the discussion of Messiaen's harmony in this thesis; *accords à renversements transposés*, *accords à résonance contractée* and a chord derived from mode 3. In addition, there is a fourth collection of chords for which, although they are of lesser significance, it would be useful to explain their background; the *accords tournants*.

Before discussing any specifics of harmony, however, it would be useful briefly to consider Messiaen's compositional process. It is well known that Messiaen was almost pathologically secretive regarding work in progress and, as yet, very little has been seen of the 'thousands of notebooks' filled with sketches for works.¹² Nevertheless, Yvonne Loriod's comments to Peter Hill are revealing:

He [Messiaen] worked at the piano and also at the table. All the harmonies were devised at the piano, but the rhythms were worked out at the table. He had his desk and the piano side by side.¹³

The first observation to be made is that, as might have been guessed, there is a clear division of method between the fields of pitch and duration. The second observation, and the one which is most pertinent to discussions regarding Messiaen's harmony in this thesis, is that the piano was the preferred compositional tool for harmonic work. This is hardly surprising given the composer's pedigree as an improviser. It is deeply significant, nonetheless, when discussing the harmony because, in reduction, the vast majority of Messiaen's chords, however complex, sit very comfortably under two

hands. As we shall see, many of the chords can be divided, either into a triadic element and a resonant element, or into two triadic elements. This is reinforced by Messiaen's descriptions of the colours associated with the chords, in which he will often state that there are two strata of colour.¹⁴ The implications of this bipartite method of constructing harmony will be a recurrent feature of this thesis. In particular, the discussion of harmony will frequently refer to, for instance, the triadic element of a chord or to the underlying part of a chord.¹⁵

Let us turn now to the specific chord-types outlined earlier, starting with the *accords à renversements transposés*. An increasingly pervasive influence throughout Messiaen's career, the *accords à renversements transposés* started their long life as the *accord sur dominante*, a harmony which, as Messiaen points out in *Technique*,¹⁶ consists of all the notes of the major scale (**example I:1**). The reason for the name is clear. The chord in example I:1 contains all the notes of the C major scale, but it is built on the 'dominant' note, G natural. However, Messiaen later expressed regret at the epithet he had bestowed upon the chord, feeling that it was misleading.¹⁷ The inappropriateness of the composer's terminology becomes clear almost immediately in *Technique*.¹⁸ First he adds an appoggiatura to the upper two notes (**example I:2**). Then Messiaen proposes a sequence in which the inversions of the *accord sur dominante*, together with the double appoggiatura, are transposed so that they share the same bass note (**example I:3**).¹⁹

According to the composer, the effect of this procedure is multicoloured, like stained-glass²⁰ and it is used to form the first eight chords of the glinting piano

isorhythm in *Liturgie de cristal* from the *Quatuor* (example I:4). However, the technique can be found in embryonic form in earlier works such as *Tombeau de Paul Dukas* (example I:5). In *Technique*, Messiaen also transposes the inversions of the *accord du résonance*.²¹ However, when later in his career he uses the term *accords à renversements transposés sur la même note de basse*, he is referring only to a sequence of chords derived from the *accord sur dominante* similar to that found in example I:3. In other words, he has labelled a specific series of chords in terms of a procedure which is also applied to other chords. The reasons for this may be the increasing prevalence of the sequence derived from the *accord sur dominante*, and Messiaen's awareness of the inadequacies of his previous label.

It should be stressed, however, that the *accords à renversements transposés sur la même note de basse* are not identical to the sequence in example I:3 as Messiaen only uses inversions of the *accord sur dominante* with the double appoggiatura.²² Furthermore, there are numerous instances in early works, such as the *Quatuor*, of the composer utilizing the *accord sur dominante*, both with and without the double appoggiatura, as an individual harmony. In other words, the *accords à renversements transposés sur la même note de basse* are not identical to, but derived from the *accord sur dominante* (example I:6).

Two passages from *Traité* illustrate this point. In the analysis in *Tome III* of *Syllabes* from *Harawi*, Messiaen explains that the fifth measure is based upon the *accord sur dominante* (example I:7) and that «différents renversements de l'accord disposés sur une note de basse commune, chaque accord étant appoggiaturé» (example I:8).²³ However, in the discussion of the *Final* from *Turangalila-*

symphonie in *Tome II*, Messiaen gives an example of six woodwind chords (example I:9) and explains that the two chords in bar 3, marked C, are «à renversements transposés sur la même note de basse».²⁴ Example I:8 contains inversions of the *accord sur dominante* both with and without appoggiaturas. Example I:9 only uses inversions of the *accord sur dominante* with appoggiaturas, hence the classification of «renversements transposés sur la même note de basse».

Messiaen often refers to them, less clumsily, as *accords à renversements transposés* and, in works up to and including *Saint François* he uses them in groups of two, three or four chords. Two prominent sequences are found in the representation of the moonlit lake in *La fauvette des jardins* (example I:10) and the chorale which concludes *Les Stigmates* in *Saint François* (example I:11). Sequences of *accords à renversements transposés* effectively instigate a short pedal note, so it is hardly surprising that in each of the examples above, they add to the sense of harmonic tension or expectancy.

One consequence of the protracted evolution of the *accords à renversements transposés* is that they can be interpreted harmonically in several different ways. The first chord in example I:3 could be viewed as being in F sharp major, remembering its derivation from the *accord sur dominante*. As part of the collection on the same bass note, it could be said that the second chord is also attached to F sharp major. Viewed as the first inversion of the *accord sur dominante*, though, its allegiance switches to E major. Messiaen's description of the *renversements transposés* chords in *Tome III* of *Traité* is illuminating.²⁵ The composer says that the genesis of the *renversements*

transposés chords is a dominant ninth with the tonic, in this case F sharp, in place of the third (example I:12). This chord has just five pitches, omitting the upper two pitches from the chords in example I:3. However, these two pitches magically appear, without explanation, in Messiaen's next set of examples (example I:13). In other words, Messiaen is avoiding an explicit link with the *accord sur dominante*. Furthermore, he is suggesting that the upper two notes are not the key²⁶ to the harmony.²⁷ This is reinforced when he suggests that the four chords²⁸ respectively sound «...comme une dominante... comme un accord de 6^{te} ...²⁹ comme une quarte et sixte...³⁰ [and] un accord parfait». ³¹ This suggests that it is perfectly legitimate to refer to the four chords in example I:6 in terms of the triadic harmonies of the bottom stave.³²

Nevertheless, such an acknowledgement of the association that the chords have with those derived from diatonic harmony is rare. It is immediately superseded in the discussion by Messiaen's description of the colours of each chord, which he separates into «zone supérieur» and «zone inférieur». In other words, the top three notes and the bottom four notes of each chord. For instance, the top three notes of the first chord in example I:6 are «cristal de roche et citrine» and the bottom four notes are «couleur cuivre à reflets d'or». In addition to assigning colours, Messiaen's own system of identifying *accords à renversements transposés* in analyses in *Traité* seems to be a conscious attempt to obfuscate any 'tonal' qualities. Each chord is described in terms of its «tableau» (the pitch on which the bottom note is placed),³³ and then its inversion in terms of the letters A to D. The four chords in example I:6 would be described as «renversements transposés n° 1, accords A, B, C et D», as would be the

first four chords of the chorale at the end of *Les Stigmates* (see example I:11). Similarly, the last four chords in example I:11 would be described as «*renversements transposés n° 4, accords A, B, C et D*». Discussion of *renversements transposés* chords in this thesis is less concerned with the inversion or transposition of specific chords *per se*, and centred more on the harmonic implications of each chord. In other words, there is a greater emphasis on the rôle of each chord within the broader context.

The second chord-type which requires discussion is the *accord à résonance contractée*. The first point to make about these chords is that they are not the same as, or even related to, the *accord de la résonance* mentioned in Technique.³⁴ The *accord à résonance contractée*³⁵ is related to the *renversements transposés* chords through the «*9^e de dominante avec la tonique à la place de la sensible*» (example I:14).³⁶ Messiaen precedes this chord with a quintuple appoggiatura, and provides two resonance notes in the bass (example I:15). The final step is to squeeze the pitches which had been spread across more than four octaves into less than two (example I:16). The resulting pair of seven note chords appears frequently as an emphatic punctuating or cadential device.

Like the *renversements transposés* chords, the genesis of the *accords à résonance contractée* can be traced back at least as far as the *Quatuor*. Example I:15 is essentially a refinement of an example provided in Technique during the discussion on «*enchaînements d'accords*» (example I:17).³⁷ Messiaen explains that, the second bar of example I:17 (marked B) «*contracte la résonance*» of another example taken

from a short passage in *Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps* (example I:18).³⁸ As with the *renversements transposés* chords, the *accords à résonance contractée* were formalized at least by the time of *Turungalila*, with the consequence that the two chords in the second bar (marked B) of example I:9 are described as such.

Harmonic interpretation is, again, ambiguous. The dominant ninth chord in example I:14 would suggest that the *accord à résonance contractée* of example I:16 has an affinity with A flat major or E flat. However, far more forceful is the sense of the D flat major triad, a point underlined by the distribution of pitches in the example from *Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps* quoted in Technique (see examples I:17 and I:18). The composer's own terminology again seems designed to avoid such discussion by referring to the «*tableau*» and chords A and B respectively.³⁹

The third chord-type which requires explanation has not, thus far, been classified by Messiaen.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, it does warrant a mention in Technique in relation to the modes. In the discussion of mode 3, Messiaen provides an example of an «*accord-type*» (example I:19).⁴¹ Mode 3 is, of course, built upon the augmented triad, and this chord plays on that fact. It simply combines two major triads, a major third apart (i.e. C and Ab majors). The upper triad is in root position, the lower triad is in second inversion and also has an added seventh. The pivotal note is the root of the upper triad and the third of the lower triad, C natural in this case. Like the *renversements transposés* chords and the *accord à résonance contractée*, this chord

plays on ambiguities and can be used as a bridging chord between harmonic areas (example I:20) or, as Messiaen suggests in *Technique*, as a cadence chord (example I:21).⁴² Although the chord is basically a combination of two triads, it does not imply bitonality so much as a modal disdain for diatonic sensibilities. This chord features prominently within Messiaen's modal writing, and it is an inescapable feature of the works featured in Parts II and III of this thesis. For ease of reference, therefore, and following Messiaen's description of the chord in *Technique*, it shall subsequently be referred to in this thesis as the *typical* chord. Taking account of its triadic implications, the chord in example I:19 would be described as the Ab7/C *typical* chord.⁴³

Finally, it is necessary for the sake of clarity to mention the genesis of the *accords tournants*. These three chords are not as pervasive as the *renversements transposés* chords, the *accords à résonance contractée* or the *typical* chord, but they do feature in the analyses in Parts II and III. Furthermore, they are easily confused with passages described by the composer as «*tournoyant*», notably the first entry of piano one in *Amen des étoiles, de la planète à l'anneau*.⁴⁴ Confusingly, the *accords tournants* can be traced back at least as far as a passage later in the same movement. As Messiaen explains in his analysis of *Visions* in *Tome III* of *Traité*, piano one is based on three chords from the last system of page 13 until the second system on page 14 of *Amen des étoiles, de la planète à l'anneau* (example I:22). These are split into pairs of notes and heard four times in total, a tone lower on each occasion (example I:23).⁴⁵ Messiaen says that the three chords in example I:22 «*sont des « colonnes d'air en résonance mobiles » (comme le vent dans les arbres) autour de la note*

Sol».⁴⁶ As with the other chords discussed in this chapter, these three chords fall under two hands, a fact underlined by Messiaen's use of two staves in *Traité*. Nevertheless, it is only the third chord which has any clear intimation of triadic harmony, in this case D flat major.

These *colonnes d'air* chords also appear in the works of the Tristan triptych,⁴⁷ but, at some point during the 1950s, they underwent a mutation so that by the time of *Chronochromie* they had become the three *accords tournants* (example I:24). The change from example I:22 is subtle. Whereas the top note, G natural in this case, remains the same in all three *colonnes d'air* chords, it moves a semitone either side of its starting pitch in the *accords tournants*. By doing this, the three top notes act as a mirror to the bottom three notes. Like the *renversements transposés* chords and the *accord à résonance contractée*, Messiaen classifies the *accords tournants* in terms of *tableau* and labels the three chords A, B and C. Only C has a clear triadic component, although it is worth noting that the pitches of its triad are the only constants of the three chords.⁴⁸ However, whilst the three *accords tournants* are clearly related, Messiaen appears to have fewer qualms about using one or two of the chords in isolation.⁴⁹

Whereas the *accords tournants* are used both as individual sonorities and as a related group, the *accords à renversements transposés* and *accords à résonance contractée* are specifically chord-groups which operate under fixed criteria, whilst the *typical* chord relies upon the context of mode 3. However, there are two areas of

Messiaen's music in which he relaxes his grip on these relationships; birdsong and passages employing *permutations symétriques*.

From at least the time of *Catalogue d'oiseaux*,⁵⁰ when he began his attempts to capture not just the melody, but also the timbre of each species, Messiaen was prepared to divorce chord-types from their usual context in order to convey with greater accuracy the complex timbral qualities of each bird. As a consequence, it is not uncommon to find just one chord from a pair of *accords à résonance contractée*, or an isolated harmony from the *accords à renversements transposés* either supporting or forming part of the birdsong. Example I:25 is taken from the sixth long solo for the central protagonist of *La fauvette des jardins*. The first bar contains an *accord à résonance contractée*, the second bar an isolated *renversements transposés* chord on A flat whilst the third bar begins with another *renversements transposés*, this time on B natural. Whilst Messiaen's harmony normally operates with clearly defined relationships, it is allowed to fly freely when applied to birdsong.

The second area of Messiaen's music in which he relaxes his grip on the harmonic relationships outlined above is during passages of *permutations symétriques*, notably in *Chronochromie*. These attach chords to durations in a manner not dissimilar to *Liturgie de cristal*. There are three separate sets of durations, and, hence, three distinct sets of chords. *Strophe I* of *Chronochromie* utilizes *introversions* 1, 2 and 3.⁵¹ The durations of *introversion 1* are played by eight first violins play chords chosen freely by the composer from among the three types of *accords tournants*, and twelve *tableaux* (pitches) at which they can be heard. Similarly,

introversion 2 is given to seven second violins, which play chords chosen from the four configurations of *renversements transposés* chord and, again, the twelve *tableaux* at which they can be placed. Finally, *introversion 3* is given to 3 violas and four cellos, playing *accords à résonance contractée*, chosen from the two chord-types and the twelve *tableaux*.

In his analysis of *Strophe I* of *Chronochromie* in *Tome III* of the *Traité*,⁵² Messiaen explains that each of the *renversements transposés* chords is chosen in isolation, «*séparé de ses 3 voisins du tableau*».⁵³ Nevertheless, he goes on to state that:

...j'ai gardé en plusieurs endroits, le principe de la même note de basse qui est une des caractéristiques des couleurs changeantes et de l'irisation de cet accord.⁵⁴

In other words, even though he has taken a quasi-pointillistic approach to each chord, Messiaen does not wish entirely to break with the relationship which defines the *accords à renversements transposés*; the utilization of a common bass note. Similarly, he states that each *accord à résonance contractée* is chosen in isolation «*séparé de son voisin du tableau*»,⁵⁵ but goes on to explain that:

...j'ai gardé en plusieurs endroits, le voisinage des 2 accords, soit dans la succession A, B, soit dans la succession rétrograde B, A, pour conserver l'effet de la résonance contractée commune aux 2 accords.⁵⁶

Messiaen wishes to retain some link with the idea that each pair of *accords à résonance contractée* is inextricably linked. In short, in a movement whose compositional logic is to undermine the fundamental relationships which define the *renversements transposés* chords and the *accords à résonance contractée*, Messiaen feels impelled to protect some examples of these relationships.⁵⁷ As we shall see, his attitude to these chords was markedly different in the works that he composed after *Saint François d'Assise*.

Before progressing, however, it would be beneficial to highlight one of the melodic formulae outlined in *Technique*. In his discussion of melody in chapter eight, Messiaen introduces the idea of a returning chromaticism («*chromatisme retourné*») which would be «*la joie d'un Béla Bartók*» (example I:26).⁵⁸ Messiaen then gives examples of these little chromatic turns in works ranging from *Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste* from the *Préludes* (example I:27) to the *Louange à l'Immortalité de Jésus* from the *Quatuor*, encompassing *Les offrandes oubliées* and *Les Mages* from *La Nativité* in the process.⁵⁹ What becomes apparent from these examples is that, in Messiaen's usage, the returning chromaticism is always followed by a tritone. In other words, it could be regarded as a decoration of a tritone leap. However, in *Neumes rythmiques*, Messiaen uses the returning chromaticism not as a decorative melodic device so much as a recurring pitch fragment (example I:28). As we shall see, this unassuming melodic formula assumes great significance in *Éclairs*.

This chapter has only touched on a select few of the myriad techniques used by Messiaen in his music. Others will be discussed later in this thesis as they occur.

This chapter has simply sought to provide a basic context for the last decade of Messiaen's life and to explain some of the technical resources which will be recurrent themes in later analyses and/or about which confusion might otherwise arise.

As was mentioned earlier, the opera *Saint François d'Assise* was the culmination of Messiaen's tendency towards ever more grandiose projects from the time of *La Transfiguration* onwards. Not only does it form the third panel of what this thesis terms the *monumental trinity* works, but, as we shall see, it stands as Messiaen's *summa*, his magnum opus. More importantly, there is clear evidence that Messiaen believed that it would be his last work. The works which appeared in the years after *Saint François* can only be understood fully in the context of the opera. Although it essentially stands outside the time period being discussed in this thesis, it is necessary, therefore, to look at the opera more closely before progressing to the main body of works being examined.

Notes

- 1 In conversation with Almut Rößler, for instance, Messiaen stated 'I abandon nothing!' with regard to *Mode de valeurs*. Rößler: Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen, p.75.
- 2 Hill: The Messiaen Companion, p.1.
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 Pierre Boulez in an interview shown as part of 'Messiaen at 80': programme broadcast by BBC2 on 10 December 1988.
- 5 *ibid.*
- 6 Henceforth referred to as 'Vatican II'.
- 7 For further discussion of the relationship between Vatican II and *La Transfiguration*, see Christopher Dingle: : Olivier Messiaen: La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ - A Provisional Study (Sheffield, September 1994), Volume I: Text; Volume II: Musical Examples. (M.Phil thesis.).
- 8 Paul Griffiths: La Transfiguration de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ [sic], program booklet to Decca compact disc: 425 616-2.
- 9 It is striking when reading *Traité* that Messiaen indicates only rarely how the harmony of his own music is put together and how different chords interact. This is in marked contrast to his analytical insights into the music of other composers.
- 10 Though not diatonic harmony or conventional tonal relationships.

Notes (continued)

- 11 It should be reiterated that the remainder of this chapter is not intended to be a guide to Messiaen's musical language. Rather, it is simply an opportunity to clarify precisely what is meant by certain terms, particularly some of those which have arisen since Technique.
- 12 Hill: Interview with Yvonne Loriod, p.285.
- 13 Hill: Interview with Yvonne Loriod, p.285.
- 14 As we shall see, for instance, with the *accords à renversements transposés*.
- 15 i.e. the part which would be played by the left hand in a piano score.
- 16 Technique, p.43.
- 17 Private communication from Peter Hill.
- 18 Technique, p.43.
- 19 ibid.
- 20 Technique, p.43.
- 21 Technique, p.43.
- 22 i.e. the first, third, fifth and seventh chords in examples I:3 and I:4.
- 23 Traité - Tome III, p.300.
- 24 The G natural of the first chord and E flat of the second chord are added notes.
- 25 Traité - Tome III, pp. 86-87.
- 26 No pun intended.
- 27 It also underlines the point that it is the bottom five notes which are inverted, then transposed.
- 28 Which are the same as those found in example I:6 and, hence, are clearly derived from example I:3.
- 29 i.e. a first inversion.
- 30 i.e. a second inversion.
- 31 Traité - Tome III, p.86
- 32 The first chord remains ambiguous. Whilst Messiaen says that it sound like a dominant (i.e. C#7), it is strongly suggestive of the B major triad.
- 33 C sharp is 1, D natural 2 and C natural is 12.
- 34 Technique, p. 43.
- 35 Messiaen's utilization of the singular when describing a pair of chords is explained by the fact that the first chord is an appoggiatura to the second. However, there are many instance when he uses the plural.
- 36 Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen: '*Étude sur l'œuvre pianistique d'Olivier Messiaen*' in Catherine Massip (ed.): Portrait(s) d'Olivier Messiaen (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1996), p. 105.
- 37 Technique, p. 47.
- 38 Technique, p. 47.
- 39 In this case, the pitch of example I:16 is number 1. Using the lowest note as reference, D natural is the lowest note. This contrasts with the *renversements transposés* chords in which C sharp = 1. However, this could be interpreted as supporting the notion that the D flat major triad is pre-eminent in example I:16.
- 40 It will surely feature in some guise in Traité - Tome VII, though it will be interesting to see whether Messiaen describes it in terms of mode 3 or gives it another name.
- 41 Technique, volume one, p. 54, volume two, example 335.
- 42 Technique, volume one, p. 54, volume two, example 337.
- 43 i.e. the lower triad first.
- 44 *Visions de l'Amen*, p.8. See, also, Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen's description of the hammering string chords in *Le chemin de l'Invisible* in the preface to *Éclairs*.
- 45 Traité - Tome III, p. 238.
- 46 Traité - Tome III, p. 238.
- 47 See *La ville qui dormait, toi* from *Harawi*, the piano part at rehearsal figure 22 in *Chant d'amour 1* and the strings and woodwind from bar five of rehearsal figure 15 in *Joie du sang des étoiles* from *Turangalila* and the first of the *Cinq rechants*.
- 48 These chords do not share a common bass note, so the *tableau* is relative. However, it is surely not just coincidence that the triadic element of chord C on *tableau 1* is D flat major, the pitch/triad at the basis of the first *tableau* for the *renversements transposés* and *résonance contractée* chords.

Notes (continued)

- 49 See, for instance, *Chorale de la Sainte Montagne* from *La Transfiguration* in which there is an isolated *accord tournant* in the second bar and pairs of *accords tournants* in bars fifteen and twenty-eight.
- 50 There are some one or two earlier instances.
- 51 For a detailed explanation of *permutations symétriques*, and terms such as *introversion*, see Traité - Tome III, pp. 5-76.
- 52 Traité - Tome III, pp. 84-91.
- 53 Traité - Tome III, p. 87.
- 54 *ibid.*
- 55 Traité - Tome III, p. 88.
- 56 *ibid.*
- 57 Messiaen conspicuously neglects to retain any link between the three *accords tournants*; see Traité - Tome III, p. 86.
- 58 Technique, p.23.
- 59 See Technique, volume 2, examples 96, 95 and 92.

Chapter two

Saint François d'Assise

Messiaen's formative years were dominated by works for the stage. His love of spoken theatre emanated from the influence of his literary parents, and the composer's childhood productions of Shakespeare's plays in his cellophane sweet-wrapper equivalent of *The Globe* theatre gained a place among the limited repertoire of anecdotes about his early life.¹ It was only natural, therefore, that when he discovered his talent and love for music, Messiaen rapidly developed a passion also for opera.² The genre was also prominent in his analysis and composition classes at the Conservatoire. Nevertheless, from the 1950s onwards, he stated both to his students and to the public at large that opera was dying, and even that «*le théâtre musical est toujours une espèce de trahison*».³

It was bemused astonishment, therefore, that greeted the announcement in 1978 that Messiaen was almost four years into composing a gigantic opera: *Saint François d'Assise*. He freely admitted that he had been extremely reluctant, at first, to accept Rolf Lieberman's commission, feeling that he was not suited to the task. After deliberation, however, Messiaen had realized that with Saint Francis as his subject, he could come close to fulfilling his dream of composing a Passion - a dream which modesty would not permit him to achieve in a more overt manner.⁴ Work on the opera increasingly dominated the composer's life for nearly nine years.

There could never be enough space in this thesis for more than a cursory glance at *Saint François d'Assise*. The opera is a work of such magnitude, richness and depth that it requires a major study in its own right. Nevertheless, it had a profound impact on the principal works being discussed in this study. *Saint François d'Assise* is not the focal point of this thesis, but it does define the works under discussion. This occurs in three ways:

- it defines the temporal parameters of the thesis.
- it defines the stylistic approach from which the works of Messiaen's last years changed.
- it provoked a creative crisis that was to affect profoundly the works which followed.

Whilst the first of these simply highlights the fact that the works examined in this study are those which Messiaen composed after the opera, the remaining two points are more complex and account for the majority of the discussion in this chapter. In addition to these issues, the opera raises certain questions regarding the organization of materials within a large-scale structure. The discussion of *Éclairs sur l'su-delà...* will consider many of these questions further, but it would be apposite to consider, albeit briefly, some of the ways in which Messiaen marshals his resources and how this can be misunderstood. Finally, there are certain technical and practical details which have a bearing on the discussion of later works.

Saint François is the culmination of the *monumental trinity* works and Messiaen's process of consolidation on an ever more monumental scale. As such, it

represents the most extreme example of the composer's desire to overwhelm the listener in every respect. The more quantifiable stylistic elements, such as duration, instrumentation, register and volume are all taken to their limits. A central tenet of this thesis is that the works of Messiaen's final years suggest a shift in the broad scale stylistic approach. This change in direction marks a departure from the desire to overwhelm which characterizes the *monumental trinity* works and, specifically, *Saint François*.

Saint François is a large work by any standards, even Messiaen's own. It consists of about four and a half hours of meticulously crafted music for the largest forces the composer ever requested. The manuscript score weighs about twenty-five pounds and contains approximately two thousand five hundred pages.⁵ It is scored for an orchestra of one hundred and nineteen and a choir of one hundred and fifty.⁶ The sheer magnitude of the orchestra, including many bulky instruments, would cause problems in even the most accommodating opera house pit.⁷ For instance, the opera contains five virtuosic parts for the *claviers* - glockenspiel, vibraphone, xylophone, xylorimba and marimba. The percussion section proper contains no less than three sets of tubular bells and a set of crotales as well as a vast array of instruments of indeterminate pitch including timbral subtleties such as the paper, wood and glass chimes which colour the principal theme of *Saint François*. Furthermore, with the exception of the percussion section, each member of the orchestra has an individual part which is specific to one instrument. Thus the three piccolo parts and the part for alto flute are entirely independent of the 3 flute parts. Similarly, each of the sixty-eight string players has a unique part.

The magnitude of Messiaen's requirements are, in part, a reflection of his age and status at the time of composing *Saint François*:

Je me suis alors: «Je vais avoir soixante-dix ans. J'ai le droit de faire des folies.»⁸

The lavishness of the resources he permits himself is in marked contrast to the mere forty-two performers required for *Des canyons*, a limitation admittedly imposed by the size of the venue for the première rather than prudence on Messiaen's part. Nevertheless, if the timespan of *Saint François* rivals Wagner in the opera house, the overall duration of about 100 minutes for *Des canyons* is Mahlerian in its ambitions for the concert hall.

Almost as long as *Des canyons* at an hour and a half, and approaching *Saint François* in the multitude of performers required is *La Transfiguration*.. Both the opera and the oratorio have a ten part chorus,⁹ the disposition of wind is similar, and the string requirements are identical. Crucially, both *Saint François* and *La Transfiguration* have seven soloists - singers in the opera, instrumentalists in the oratorio.

One of the most important timbral links between the works of Messiaen's *Monumental trinity* is the proliferation of wind instruments from the extreme lower register. Or, more accurately, the frequent use of the extreme lower register either in isolation or as the foundation of the entire texture. In *La Transfiguration*, this ranges from the cavernous B flats from tuba, saxhorn, contrabass tuba, trombone pedal notes

and low tam tam imitating Tibetan music in *Perfecte conscius illius perfectae generationis* to the the bass clarinet, bassoons, contrabassoon, trombones, bass trombone, tuba, saxhorn, contrabass tuba underpinning the chorales. In *Des canyons* the low brass combine with cellos and piano in fearsome passages in the opening movement, *Le désert*. They also add a granitic strength to the translation of Hebrew invocations into *langage communicable*¹⁰ in *Cedar Breaks et le don de crainte* and they also create profound fundamental notes for the final chords of *Bryce canyons et les rochers rouge-orange* and *Zion Park et la cité céleste*. *Lauds* from the opera juxtaposes the extremities of register during the brothers' prayers, particularly in the *Sanctus*. Indeed, this juxtaposition is not dissimilar to that created by the 'Tibetan' music from *Perfecte conscius illius perfectae generationis* mentioned above. In the pounding chord which occurs following the Angel's delicate tap on the monastery door in *L'Ange voyageur*, the bass drum gives extra emphasis to the low wind instruments (example I:29). Indeed, Messiaen's use of the bass drum in *Saint François* is more pervasive than in any other work, and it works in tandem with claves to striking effect in *Les stigmates*.

The most startling source of low sonorities in *Saint François* comes from an aspect of the orchestration which looks on paper like a purely retrograde step. The score calls for three Ondes Martenot, which are arranged spatially on the left, the right and in front of the conductor. Although Messiaen's name is synonymous with the Onde Martenot, he had not written for the instrument for over thirty years when he came to write the opera. In earlier works, such as *Trois petites liturgies*, Messiaen concentrates on the silken-voiced upper register of the instrument. This is certainly

not neglected in *Saint François*, particularly in the music associated with the Angel. However, he also draws extensively upon the unusual expressive capabilities of the instrument's lower register, notably in the opening music for *Le baiser au lépreux* and accompanying the declamations of *Frère Bernard*.

There is a plethora of possible examples of bass textures in the *Monumental trinity* works. That may not be a startling observation *per se*, but such prevalence highlights their near absence in the works from Messiaen's final years.

Whilst the instrumental and vocal requirements of *Saint François* are truly impressive, and their utilization is often remarkable, these stylistic traits are merely symptomatic of the fact that the opera covers, directly or by allusion, several subjects which had hitherto been taboos for the composer. Principal amongst these is the quasi-Passion setting of *Les stigmates*.

Considering the emphasis that Messiaen gave throughout his life to his Catholic faith, his reluctance to write a Passion is on the surface a little surprising. The reason he gave for this apparent omission was that he felt unworthy to approach such an undertaking. This is perhaps intertwined with his disinclination to compose liturgical music - the accounts of Christ's Passion are, after all, part of the Holy Week liturgy in the Catholic Church. Furthermore, the fundamental aspects of Messiaen's faith were traditional, even if his expression of them was often radical. For Catholics, the highpoint of the mass is the Eucharistic Rite during which, according to the doctrine of the Church, transubstantiation occurs and Christ's Passion is re-enacted.¹¹

For Messiaen then, Christ's Passion was not just the crucial passage in each of the Gospels,¹² or even the focus of the Good Friday service, but a regularly encountered phenomenon that formed a central pillar of his faith. In both *Saint François* and *Livre du Saint Sacrement*,¹³ Messiaen came much closer than ever before to addressing the entwined mysteries of the Eucharist and the Passion.

In *Les Stigmates*, Messiaen was able to come much nearer to composing a Passion than in any other work. Messiaen did not find the task an easy one:

j'ai rencontré les plus grandes difficultés, parce que je ne suis pas un musicien de la douleur, de la souffrance, de l'horreur, mais un musicien de la joie. C'est à dire que ce tableau était totalement contraire à ma nature, mais je l'ai néanmoins composé avec tout mon cœur.¹⁴

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that *Terribilis est locus iste* from *La Transfiguration* has a certain similarity of intent, with its portrayal of the Divine concluding with what can best be described as a musical depiction of 'holy terror'.¹⁵ Furthermore, *Terribilis est locus iste* occupies a comparable position within the overall structure of *La Transfiguration* - twelfth out of fourteen movements - to that of *Les Stigmates* within the context of *Saint François*.

More important is that *Les Stigmates* is a symbol for the Passion and that *François* is a symbol for Christ. The text of the choir, which represents nothing less than the voice of God, makes this link explicit when it informs the saint that he must become a second Paschal sacrifice. In addition, it contains many references to the

theology which underpins the services of the Easter triduum, whilst the music is utilized as a symbolic tool. For instance, the choir sings fully chromatic clusters at three crucial points in the *tableau*: humming quietly during the opening depiction of darkness (example I:30), as a crescendo on the words «*l'Homme Dieu!*» (example I:31), and hammered out with full orchestra during the infliction of the stigmata (example I:32).

Another instance of textual and musical symbolism occurs on the phrase «*Je suis l'Alpha et l'Omega*». Alpha and Omega are symbolic of the eternity of Christ as they are 'the beginning and the end' of the Greek alphabet, and the opening prayers of the Easter Vigil Mass, the most important service of the liturgical year, refers to them. This phrase is heard five times in succession in *Les Stigmates*, representing five wounds of Christ which *François* is about to receive (example I:33).

These kinds of allusions are not unusual in Messiaen's music, but the opera is especially rich in symbolism at every level. In this respect, it reflects the composer's profound love of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, although *Saint François* replaces the psychological concerns of the nineteenth century with the spiritual drama of mediaeval writers. Messiaen based his libretto on the writings of Saint Francis and the early accounts of his life.¹⁶ As a consequence, there is little about the opera which is biographical in the modern sense of the word and even less which could be termed realist.

The early lives of Saint Francis cannot be regarded as ‘biographies’ in the sense that we understand the word today. On the contrary, they were a record of the deeds of Saint Francis with the emphasis on the word *Saint*. Even the smallest of coincidences is explained in terms of the supernatural and it would be easy to dismiss these mediaeval writers as being unreliable and misleading. Nevertheless, they wrote the ‘truth’ as they understood it, whilst following the practice of their times in emphasizing the miraculous at the expense of the distinctly human aspects of their subject. Crucially, Messiaen appears to have had the same disarming conviction in the veracity of these early accounts as he did in Scripture. He constructed the libretto to *Saint François* from a perspective similar to that of the mediaeval ‘biographers’, omitting notable events and concentrating instead on the symbols of the spiritual development of Saint Francis and his followers.

The fourth tableau, *L’Ange voyageur*, in which the Angel appears to the Brothers in the guise of a traveller,¹⁷ illustrates the approach taken by both Messiaen and his mediaeval sources. The story of *L’Ange voyageur* is adapted from chapter four of the *Fioretti*, with the bulk of the text being taken unchanged by Messiaen. The first of the few additions and alterations is the introduction featuring Brother Leo, who does not appear again until the end of the next scene. Brother Maseo’s fear of disturbing Saint Francis when at prayer is taken straight from the *Fioretti*, as is his short conversation with the Angel, who asks to see Brother Elias in order to pose him a question.

Brother Elias, and hence this tableau, is included by Messiaen as an example of how not to follow the Franciscan ideal. He is depicted in the *Fioretti*, and so by Messiaen, as pompous, bad tempered, self-righteous and pharisaic.¹⁸ Other early Franciscan writers, with the exception of Celano's *Vita prima*, have also been hostile to Elias. He was regarded in many ways as being the 'Judas' of the Franciscan order due to his apparent betrayal of the way of life and, in particular, the ideal of poverty.¹⁹

In *Saint François*, Elias provides a marked contrast with the other Brothers and is the nearest character to a conventional anti-hero. In other words, the character provides a spiritual juxtaposition. His impatient demeanour in the confrontation with the Angel is exactly as chronicled in *The Fioretti* and his first phrase typifies his character:

Pourquoi me dérange-t-on sans cesse? Je suis Vicaire de
l'Ordre: je dois établir des plans, rédiger des textes.
Comment travailler dans ces conditions pareilles?

The Angel's theological question on Predestination is Messiaen's invention,²⁰ the *Fioretti* containing a relatively mundane query about eating restrictions (see footnote 19). When the Angel knocks again on the monastery door, having been thrown out by Elias, he asks Brother Masseo if he may see Brother Bernard.²¹ This also marks a departure from the original story for in *The Fioretti* Brother Bernard was in Spain when he saw the Angel.

There are three ways in which Messiaen deviates from 'fact' in *L'Ange voyageur*. In placing Brother Masseo's encounter with the Angel in Assisi, he ignores the narrative fact of the original accounts. Conversely, Messiaen accepts the exaggerated picture of Brother Elias painted by most early biographers, despite common acceptance among Franciscan scholars of its dubious pedigree, because it serves a useful allegorical purpose.²² The third manner in which Messiaen departs from 'fact' is by providing a physical depiction of the Angel.²³

It can be seen, then, that, rather than biographical detail, *Saint François* consists of stylized episodes. Each *tableau* explores an aspect of the Saint's demeanour and, in this respect, can be regarded as a fresco brought to life. The eight «scènes Franciscaines» are apparently self-contained units, and yet each needs to be seen in the context of the other scenes in order to realize its full potential. Indeed Messiaen links the three principal characters, Saint Francis, the Angel and the Leper, to specific frescoes when describing their costumes and deportment.²⁴

In the case of Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*, which provides the basis of the Angel's costume, Messiaen goes much further stating that the depiction of the Archangel Gabriel «m'a hanté pendant toute la composition de mon ouvrage».²⁵

The Angel's costume is representative of the colouristic symbolism which underpins the opera. Messiaen's insistence that this costume should reproduce exactly the boldly coloured stripes of the angel's wings in Fra Angelico's fresco inevitably provoked indulgent smiles and murmurs about naivety from supporters and detractors

alike. Nevertheless, the vibrancy of the colours of the Angel's costume signify that it heralds from a divine source. Whereas the other characters wear drab, monochromatic clothes, the costume of *L'Ange* is markedly 'other' in its colourfulness.²⁶ Indeed, colour is used in the opera as a symbol of the divine. For instance, when the leper is cured he loses his rags and gains the robes of a nobleman of Assisi.²⁷ The important aspect of this transformation is the change from drabness to rich colours reflecting that the cured leper is now in a state of grace.

Apart from the Angel and the cured leper, the soloists and chorus wear costumes which are distinctly lacking in colour and this distinction is mirrored by contrasts of timbre and register in the music. Indeed, *Saint François* could be characterised as juxtaposing terrestrial and celestial elements, with occasional movement between the two. There is the contrast between the resolutely high tessitura of the Angel and the other all-male soloists. The Angel's serenade in *L'Ange voyageur* and the resonating forest. Birds and humans. The tender music accompanying the embrace of the leper by *François*, and the aural portrait of the leper's repugnant physical state.

Hardly surprisingly, there is a general congruity between music in the higher register and the celestial, and music in the middle and lower registers and the terrestrial. The dochmaic orchestral pounding when the Angel taps on the monastery door in *L'Ange voyageur* would seem to contradict this, admittedly crude, analysis.²⁸ However, what is heard is the result of a celestial incursion into the terrestrial domain.

The Angel only taps the door, but the noise to human ears is immense and it includes much lower registers than the other terrestrial music.

The power of this interaction is greater still during the infliction of the stigmata. Taking the dochmaic hammering as its basis, it reaches chromatically upwards across three further octaves using virtually the entire chorus and orchestra, and suggesting a greater ambiguity regarding what is human and what is divine (see example I:32). There is no questioning the divinity, though, of the tender call from the chorus to *François* after he has received the stigmata (example I:34). These are, of course, simple observations, but much of the power of Messiaen's music comes from its very simplicity - a trait which should not be confused with it being simplistic. Indeed, many of the particularly memorable moments in the opera are ingeniously uncomplicated.

Large scale repetition, such as the return of the orchestral hammering from *L'Ange voyageur* during *Les Stigmates*, is one way in which Messiaen imbues the superficially unrelated scenes with integrity.²⁹ Nevertheless, the most obvious source of coherence comes from the groups of themes (including at least one birdsong) assigned to each of the soloists. These unifying elements, which provide the audience with clear aural 'signposts' have clear links with the Wagnerian 'leitmotif'. Indeed, this is a label that Messiaen himself advocated, especially for the principal theme of the Saint which he described as «*un véritable leitmotiv*».³⁰

Not for the first time, the clarity of these themes, which are analogous to the cyclic themes of earlier works, has led to misunderstandings. It is assumed that, because Messiaen provides elements which can readily be identified by the audience whatever the complexity of the surrounding music, the themes are simply juxtaposed or superimposed. In a review of the first production, Jann Pasler typifies this approach, commenting 'nor is there any attempt to integrate these themes'.³¹ Whilst it is true that there are many overt instances of the characters' themes, there are also more subtle instances.

The principal theme of *François* goes some way to illustrating this point. It appears many times in its basic guise (example I:35). It is true, also, that this theme often occurs altered only slightly in its presentation, such as at the end of *L'Ange musicien*, where it appears in a faltering, broken-up state to mirror Saint Francis' gradual return to consciousness after the Angel has played him celestial music. Nevertheless, whilst Messiaen himself said that the *François* theme 'is always confined to the violins',³² this statement only refers to the role of the theme as a leitmotif, and even then it is not entirely accurate. The theme occurs in a variety of states of development and many passages of *Saint François* are in fact derived from it.

In the first section of *La Mort et la nouvelle Vie* the *François* theme is extremely disjointed. Harsh brass chords repeatedly falling with a bass drum thud rather than rising, in order to portray the frail, unstable and painful body of *Saint François*. In the midst of the previous scene, *Les Stigmates*, the *François* theme is heard as a leitmotif, but it is then instantly expanded in both directions by means of

agrandissement asymétrique,³³ thus conveying the rapid spiritual growth which *François* is experiencing. The *François* theme is also the basis of the colossal resurrection chorale sung by the choir in the concluding pages of the opera.

Particularly striking, however, is the use of the *François* theme as the basis of the themes by other characters. The song of *Frère Léon* shares the opening falling C sharp-G natural tritone. Furthermore, the leper's theme is an inverted variant of the *François* theme. Both the melody and the rising pizzicato semiquavers draw upon it, but they emphasize the diminished seventh chord rather than the augmented triad which is the heart of the *François* theme (example I:36). The 'bad' leper's theme³⁴ can be considered as an opposite to the 'good' theme of *François*, but it also represents perhaps the inner beauty hidden deep beneath the sores, scabs and self-pity. Indeed, the words spoken by *François* after the leper's miraculous cure confirm the musical symbolism: «*Tu étais la pyramide renversée sur sa pointe*».

The miraculous cure of the leper is matched by a fundamental transformation of his theme to provide the music for his resulting ecstatic dance.³⁵ The distinctive rhythm of the original theme is retained, but the clusters and minor thirds are replaced by major thirds and exuberant A major harmonies (example I:37).

These are all reasonably clear instances of how the *François* theme influences the musical events. In addition to the overt, and not so overt, progress of the theme, there are relationships which are hidden deep within the texture. For instance, the answering phrase of the theme (see example I:35), is less prominent in the opera as a

whole, but it has an important function for it suggests that the ultimate goal of the work is C natural.³⁶ The opera ends in blazing C major and this is the ‘key’ of many crucial events, such as the kissing of the leper. However, C major is also alluded to by more subtle means. For example, after *François* has received the stigmata in *Les Stigmates*, the music repeatedly gravitates towards E major, a key often associated with divine glory in Messiaen’s music. The triumphant closing chorale ultimately concludes with a *fortissimo*, first inversion E major triad. The first words spoken by *François* after receiving the stigmata are a quotation of the Apostle Thomas, «*Mon Seigneur et mon Dieu!*». The inference of E major is clear, but Messiaen underpins the music with a C natural pedal note in the bass clarinet and tuba, linking this moment with the ultimate goal of resurrection in the C major conclusion to the opera. (example I:38).

In addition to melodic and harmonic unifying elements, Messiaen also uses timbre and texture to create relationships across his vast timescale. Four of the eight *tableaux* of *Saint François*, (*La Croix*, *Le baiser au lépreux*, *Les stigmates* and *La mort et la nouvelle Vie*) conclude with chorales. In each case the choir takes on the mantle of a Greek chorus, commenting in each case on the preceding action in the form of a moral from scripture. Chorale-like textures are also in evidence elsewhere, such as the interjections of the chorus into *François*’ prayer at the opening of *L’Ange musicien*. The slow-moving, homophonic, wind-dominated texture of the chorales creates one of the fundamental timbral links with the other *monumental trinity* works and their fore-runner, *Et exspecto*. It is also related, of course, to the first movement of *L’Ascension*, *Majesté du Christ demandant sa gloire à son Père*, but the harmony

and orchestration of the later chorales, with more chromatic harmony and reeds prevalent behind the brass, produce a more roughly hewn texture with a distinctly granitic quality.

Messiaen's penchant for this particular texture in the *monumental trinity* works can be related, in part, to the fact that all are inspired by mountainous habitats.³⁷ The two principal empyrean events which *François* experiences before his death, the angel's music and receiving the stigmata, are associated with Mount Verna. Messiaen had grown up in the mountains and had a compositional retreat in the alps. Indeed, in respect of *Et exspecto*, the forerunner of the *monumental trinity* works, Messiaen went so far as to say:

*J'ai même désiré une exécution en plein air et dans la haute montagne, à la Grave, face au glacier de la Meije, dans ces paysages puissants et solennels qui sont ma vraie patrie.*³⁸

In addition to the 'mountainous' texture of the chorales, *Saint François* also employs what can perhaps be termed a cyclic timbre in the way that *Turangalîla* has cyclic themes and *La Transfiguration* has a cyclic movement.³⁹ The opera opens with the song of the *Alouette des champs* performed by a trinity of xylophones (example I:39).⁴⁰ This instrumentation is allotted to several species during the course of the opera, thus creating an especially pervasive texture. Messiaen explains that the use of the xylophones is « ...une façon de rendre hommage à Bali, où les spectacles sont toujours introduits par le jeu des métalphones». ⁴¹

The scoring of lengthy passages for three xylophones represents the culmination of a natural progression from *Chronochromie* in which there is also an *Alouette des champs* played by xylos, though without the xylorimba. Messiaen uses the combination of xylophone, xylorimba and marimba in *Couleurs de la Cité céleste*, but only as a fragmentary part of birdsong textures passed between the sections of the ensemble, as in the song of the *Oiseau cloche*. There are also a few longer sections for the three xylophones in *Couleurs*, but these are an adaptation of the Alleluia for the eighth Sunday after Pentecost rather than birdsong passages. It is only with *Saint François* that the trinity of xylophones becomes a favourite scoring for substantial birdsong passages. Other species which contribute to this cyclic timbre are the *Fauvette des jardins* in *Lauds*, the *Merle bleu* in *Le baiser aux lépreux*, and the *Pinson* in *Le Prêche aux oiseaux*.

Messiaen's choice of the *Alouette des champs* as the species which both opens the opera and introduces this cyclic timbre provides a subtle link with the principal technical innovation of the opera and the zenith of the composer's achievements in the field of ornithological music. The bird choruses of the sixth tableau, *Le Prêche aux oiseaux*, are notable not just for the wealth of material involved, but also due to the manifestation of an important, and surprising compositional development within the context of Messiaen's œuvre: *hors tempo*. For the first time, Messiaen allows chance elements into the musical structure, albeit in a limited manner.

Although all the songs are still notated in full, certain birds are permitted to fly free of the barlines, taking their cue instead from the conductor regarding when they should commence their songs. In earlier works, notably *La Transfiguration*, Messiaen uses irrational values in an attempt to give the birds greater rhythmic flexibility. The introduction of the *hors tempo* birdsong marks a quantum leap in terms both of technique and effect. The results approach the freedom and suppleness of nature to a far greater extent than previously had been the case and the benefits of this liberation of the instrumentalist(s) far outweigh the problems incurred by the conductor.⁴²

The new technique is used at the very opening of the *tableau*, but the climax of *Le Prêche aux Oiseaux* is the tumultuous bird concert that constitutes the sixth section of the scene. It is complex in structure and presents a bewildering combination of songs, timbres and harmonies which Messiaen directs should be supplemented by the projection of films of the birds involved. The entire passage, lasting about three minutes, is underpinned by the *Alouette des champs*, performed on the cyclic timbre of three xylos. A second *Alouette des champs*, played by a woodwind group, joins in almost immediately, harmonized by chords of eight, nine or ten notes, with one chord for each note. The first and second violins intermittently play the songs of a *Fauvette des jardins*, two *Merles noirs* and a *Fauvette à tête noire* in various combinations. Superimposed on these birdsongs are the instruments which have been released from the barlines. There is a second *Fauvette des jardins* on Ondes Martenot I, a further two *Fauvettes à tête noire*, one on Ondes Martenot II and the other on piccolo trumpet. Ondes Martenot III depicts a *Oiseau-lyre* from Australia.⁴³ The most remarkable of the emancipated birdsongs, however, is that of the *Loriot* which is played by a

combination of three horns, crotales, glockenspiel and vibraphone. This obviously produces the problem for the instruments of trying to play freely, and independently from the conductor's beat, and yet remaining as a group (example I:40).⁴⁴

The catalyst for the complexity, scale and technical developments of the birdsong writing in *Le Prêche aux Oiseaux* was that, as with the opera as a whole, Messiaen wanted it to be his greatest accomplishment. The opera is, and was intended to be, a summation of his œuvre. It is his *magnum opus* and the crowning achievement of his composing career. *La Transfiguration* and *Des canyons* could each have served as a *summa*, but *Saint François* is, in the words of George Benjamin 'a grand summation of the summations'.⁴⁵ Claude Samuel's comments on this point warrant lengthy quotation:

...Messiaen a entrepris *Saint François* comme son œuvre ultime. Si l'on récuse le terme ambigu de 'testament', nous pouvons appliquer à *Saint François*, intention et réalisation, texte et musique, celui de 'somme'. Somme, cette extraordinaire leçon de théologie qui passe sans cesse du réel historique à l'imaginaire symbolique ; somme, ce déploiement orchestral où, dans le même temps, Messiaen joue sur tous les registres de l'expression instrumentale et, des ondes Martenot au tuba, pousse chaque timbre dans ses extrêmes retranchements ; somme et morceau d'anthologie, ce *Prêche aux oiseaux* de quarante-cinq minutes en subtile situation, dont Messiaen a dit : 'Je voulais absolument qu'il soit ma meilleure musique d'oiseaux' - se surpasser, dans un domaine où il n'avait plus rien à prouver : quel défi!⁴⁶

A further factor in the grandiosity of the project is that Messiaen believed that *Saint François* would be his final work, both whilst writing it and for some time afterwards. George Benjamin recalls that:

At some point there was an announcement that this would be his final work... I think there was the intention that it would be his last work.⁴⁷

The idea of summation is confirmed by Paul Crossley, who also reveals Messiaen's fear that he would die before the opera could be completed:

He was terrified of the idea of dying, for which his Catholic faith did not prepare him at all, strangely enough. He almost made himself ill by thinking he was not going to get through it [*Saint François*]... he was terrified that when he had got all the notes down, he was not going to have time to finish orchestrating it...He certainly thought it was going to be his swansong. And certainly thought it was going to be his *Magnum Opus*. It was supposed to stand for everything so that has to be an all-inclusive work.⁴⁸

Claude Samuel corroborates that Messiaen feared dying before completing the opera:

Pendant les huit années qui s'écoulèrent entre la mise en chantier de *Saint François* et l'achèvement de l'œuvre, Olivier Messiaen qui, quoique juste septuagénaire, se considérait déjà comme un vieil homme, répétait fréquemment que son premier vœu était d'achever, avant mourir, la composition de son opéra.⁴⁹

Even without the confirmation from Benjamin, Crossley and Samuel, the evidence for regarding *Saint François* as an intentionally final compositional statement is

compelling. To start with, the orchestra and chorus that Messiaen demands for *Saint François* are considerably larger in every sense than any other work that he composed. The opera lasts two hours longer than the entire *Catalogue d'Oiseaux*, for example, with a larger orchestra and chorus than *La Transfiguration de Notre Seigneur, Jesus-Christ*. Elements characteristic of earlier works, such as the *Onde Martenot*, return to Messiaen's music after an absence of several decades. Furthermore, Messiaen displays more or less the full range of his techniques in the opera, from the use of melodies in 'modes of limited transposition', to symmetrical permutations, birdsong, and even less favoured techniques such as quasi-serial procedures and irrational values.

Whilst not specifically stating that *Saint François* was intended to be *the* summing-up of his oeuvre, Messiaen stated that:

...it is, in fact, a synthesis of all that I've done so far; I think that all my works up to now⁵⁰ can be found in it, but there's an additional element: here we're dealing with a stage-play with a libretto, with spoken words which the music follows and, at least in part, one can see the colours which I've inwardly seen. To that extent this work represents progress as well as being a summary of everything preceding it.⁵¹

The structure of *Les Stigmates* is indicative of this approach combining large-scale summation and progress, in that it is the grandest manifestation of a structural idea prevalent in Messiaen's early works. It can be characterized as the relentless

build-up of chromatic tension which is released in an assuaging passage of prolonged consonance. It is symbolic of a life and death struggle,⁵² or suffering followed by healing. This simple bipartite structure is the basis of, for example, *Cloches d'angoisse et larmes d'adieu* from the *Préludes*, *La mort du nombre*, *Diptyque*, *Combat de la mort et de la vie* from *Les corps glorieux* and, in a more ebullient form, *Par lui tout à été fait* from *Vingt regards*.

Les Stigmates consists of a gradual increase in pain and suffering, which goes hand in hand with ever increasing chromaticism and bizarre effects. Once *François* has received the Stigmata, at what is really the climax of the opera, we are suddenly lifted onto a much higher spiritual, and musical, plane with tonally based music suddenly replacing the chromaticism until the end of the *tableau*. It is also the most testing *tableau* for the singer who plays *François*, as the dialogue takes place between the Saint and the choir, who represent nothing less than the voice of Christ.

The enormous effort of producing this gigantic 'synthesis of all that I've done so far' took its toll on Messiaen. Yvonne Loriod explains that:

He became exhausted, and after the work was finished he became very depressed - he was unable to eat or walk or indeed do anything. And he told everyone that he'd finished with composing.⁵³

George Benjamin echoes this description of Messiaen's physical and mental state following the completion of *Saint François*:

He had been used both to causing controversy and to numerous, numerous triumphs. The initially lukewarm reception that *Saint François* received, plus the sheer exhaustion of having completed such an undertaking, undermined his confidence... I think he was depressed. Yes, something changed. The first thing was his age, the second was the fact that there were no immediate other productions for the opera, apart from various incomplete concert performances. Plus the effort. But, I think that bit by bit, his morale improved.⁵⁴

The cool reception which greeted *Saint François*, combined with Messiaen's physical exhaustion from the effort of completing it, precipitated a compositional crisis comparable to those the composer experienced in 1949 and 1964. Benjamin explains:

...for a couple of years after finishing the opera he felt concerned that he was not going to start composing again. Even after then, for a long time he was very doubtful about the quality of the inspiration... He would say 'I don't know if I'm gifted any more'.⁵⁵

Asked by Jean-Christophe Marti during an interview shortly before his death how easy it was to recover from composing the opera, Messiaen replied:

J'ai en effet travaillé pendant huit ans, [on *Saint François*] nuit et jour. Après, je me suis senti vidé, j'imaginai avoir tout dit, je pensais que je pouvais m'arrêter de composer.⁵⁶

In other words, the completion of his *magnum opus*, his crowning achievement, his final compositional statement left Messiaen unsure of whether he could, or indeed should, compose again. All the works following the completion of *Saint François* must, as a consequence, be viewed in the context of a composer who thought that he had said all that he could.⁵⁷ Messiaen did compose again, but, the effects of his self-doubt provoked by this creative crisis can be detected in his music for several years following the completion of *Saint François*.

Notes

- 1 See, for instance, Messiaen: musique et couleur, p. 43. Less well known is that the young Olivier tried his hand at writing a play on at least one occasion and that the manuscript of a play by Messiaen, written in a school exercise book at about the age of ten and entitled *Anymoné*(sic.), still exists. It was sold at an auction of musical memorabilia to a private collector in 1993.
- 2 Messiaen: op. cit., pp. 117-8.
- 3 Messiaen: op. cit., p. 28.
- 4 Messiaen: op. cit., pp.229-230.
- 5 The printed scores contain 1450 pages excluding the pages listing costume and scenery details and providing Messiaen's analysis of each *tableau*.
- 6 For the production at the Royal Festival Hall in 1988 a ten tonne truck had to be hired to transport the chorus parts from United Music Publishers to the hall.
- 7 See appendix one for a full list of the orchestral requirements.
- 8 Messiaen: musique et couleur, p.242.
- 9 s.s.m-s.a.a.t.t.bar.b.b - *Saint François* has fifteen voices to a part as opposed to ten per part in *La Transfiguration*.
- 10 A musical cypher first used by Messiaen in *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité*.
- 11 Particularly in the pre-Vatican II liturgy.
- 12 Along with the Resurrection, of course.
- 13 See Part I, Chapter three.
- 14 Messiaen: musique et couleur, p.264.
- 15 Preface to the score of *La Transfiguration*.
- 16 The three principal textual sources for the libretto of *Saint François* are the *Fioretti*, the *Considerations on the Holy Stigmata* (henceforth referred to as the *Considerations*) and the *Canticle of the Creatures* (*Canticle of Brother Sun*). The last of these was written by Saint Francis, whilst the *Fioretti* (*Little flowers*) of Saint Francis of Assisi and its companion, the *Considerations*, are the most widely read pieces of Franciscan literature. The *Fioretti* and the *Considerations* are a slightly condensed Italian translation of Brother Ugolino di Monte Sante Maria's *Actus Beati Francisci et Sociorum Ejus* (The Deeds of Saint Francis and His Companions). The *Actus* was probably written between 1325 and 1335 and was based on second and third generation accounts of the Saint's life. Between 1370 and 1385 an anonymous friar translated most of that work into Italian. Although the particular Latin manuscript that he used as a source has been lost, it has been ascertained that, when not condensing the text, he translated it faithfully. The title *Fioretti* is one that was in vogue at that time. In addition to the *Canticle*, the *Fioretti*, the *Considerations* and quotations from scripture, Messiaen drew inspiration from the early accounts of Saint Francis' life; Thomas of Celano's *Vita prima* and *Vita secunda*, and Saint Bonaventure's *Legenda major* and *Legenda minor*. Thomas of Celano's *Vita prima* and *Vita secunda* were the first written chronicles

Notes (continued)

of the Saint's life and deeds, the *Vita prima* having been commissioned by Pope Gregory IX in 1228, less than two years after Francis' death. The *Vita secunda* was commissioned between 1244 and 1246 by Crescentius of Jeri, the minister general of the order at that time, who in 1244 'commanded all the friars to send to him in writing whatever they could know with certainty about the life, signs and wonders of Blessed Francis' (Chronica XXIV Generalium in the Analecta Franciscana - Volume III (Assisi, 1885-1941), p.262 cited by Placid Hermann in Saint Francis of Assisi - Omnibus of sources (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973), p.201). Celano's sources were Saint Francis' companions, notably Brother Leo, Brother Rufino and Brother Elias (though Brother Elias, who was minister general from 1232 to 1239, would only have been consulted for the *Vita prima* as he was expelled from the order in 1239 and subsequently excommunicated). Saint Bonaventure was entrusted with writing his two *Legends* at the General Chapter of the Friars Minor of 1260 while he was minister general. His sources were all the existing lives and testimonies, and his text was approved in 1263, being prescribed in 1266 as the only canonical, definitive and exclusive text of Saint Francis' life. Detailed discussion of all 'early' Franciscan texts can be found in Saint Francis of Assisi - Omnibus of sources (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973). Henceforth referred to as Omnibus.

- 17 This, incidentally, is the only *tableau* not to feature Saint Francis, who is praying in his grotto.
- 18 It is tempting to suggest that in addition to being a symbol of how not to follow the Franciscan ideal, Brother Elias served as an allegory for Messiaen of the modern, urban lifestyle which he abhorred.
- 19 As a result of the subsequent antipathy towards Elias and a confused chronology, the story in chapter four of the *Fioretti* is now regarded as being apocryphal. In the original account (Brother Ugolino in Omnibus, p.1310) the Angel asks Elias '...whether it is lawful for observers of the Gospel to eat whatever is set before them... also... whether it is lawful to impose anything that is contrary to the liberty of the Gospel?' The reason for this is that Elias is supposed to have imposed restrictions on eating meat. According to the *Archivum Franciscum Historicum*, however, this regulation was passed in 1219 by the two vicars appointed by Saint Francis while he was in Egypt. Elias was in Syria in 1219, and so the story probably evolved during the later conflicts within the order.
- 20 Que penses-tu de la Prédestination? As-tu rejeté le vieil homme? pour revêtir l'homme nouveau, et trouver ton vrai visage: prévu par Dieu dans la justice, dans la justice et la sainteté, la sainteté de la Vérité.
- 21 Brother Bernard was the first of Saint Francis' companions who, having previously been a prosperous merchant and magistrate, sold all his possessions once he was convinced that Saint Francis' conversion was genuine.
- 22 Messiaen acknowledged this in part in conversation with Claude Samuel: «*On peut me reprocher de l'avoir «chargé», mais les Fioretti l'avaient fait avant moi... Nous sommes au théâtre et j'avais besoin d'un élément de contraste.*» Messiaen: musique et couleur, p.239.
- 23 Angels are non-corporeal. Messiaen at no point countenances the possibility that discourse with an Angel might be a fanciful notion.
- 24 Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* (ca.1437) in the Museo di San Marco, Florence for *L'Ange*; Cimabue's *The Madonna enthroned among Angels and St. Francis* (ca.1380) in the Basilica di San Francesco, Assisi for the costume of *Saint François*; Various frescoes by Giotto for the gestures of *Saint François*, notably *Saint Francis preaches to the birds* (ca.1300), also in the Basilica di San Francesco, Assisi; Mathias Grunewald's *Temptation of Saint Anthony* from the altarpiece at Issenheim for the first costume of *Le lepreux*.
- 25 Preface to the score. The fresco depicts a side view of the Virgin kneeling before the Angel. The latter is pointing towards the Holy Spirit which is represented naturalistically as a bird flying in the sky. The Angel's large wings are marked with boldly coloured stripes and his halo is shown in profile rather than the flat disc used in Fra Angelico's earlier work.
- 26 In his otherwise excellent production for the Salzburg festival, Peter Sellars seems to miss this point by giving the Angel a costume and demeanour similar to the other characters.
- 27 Similar costumes can be seen each year in Assisi during the feast of Calendimaggio (29 April - 1 May) which is traditionally celebrated as the beginning of Spring and in tribute to the youthful years of Saint Francis when he was a leading light in the celebrations.

Notes (continued)

- 28 See example I:29.
- 29 Another example of this is that the final *tableau*, *La mort et la Nouvelle Vie*, is essentially a vast expansion of the second *tableau*, *Lauds*.
- 30 Preface to the score.
- 31 Jann Pasler: 'St. Francis at the Opéra' in Musical Times, vol.125 (1984), p.151.
- 32 Messiaen, Olivier: Programme notes for performance of *Saint François d'Assise* London, 10 December 1988.
- 33 This is a process developed in *Vingt regards* which systematically transforms a theme by breaking it into smaller elements on each of which a different function is performed repeatedly. In *Les Stigmates*, there is no 'constant' element to the *agrandissement asymétrique* such as can be found in *L'échange* from *Vingt regards*.
- 34 Spiritually lacking would be more accurate.
- 35 The score indicates that he should dance «*comme un fou*».
- 36 The temple blocks could be regarded as mere filigree, but they add a further ambiguity the accentuation of the theme. If they are omitted from the *François* theme, then, according to the principles expressed in *Tome IV* of Traité, it would unequivocally be a *thème masculin*. However, the quaver movement of the temple blocks on the final note of each phrase hints at a *thème féminin*. The simultaneous existence of 'masculine' and 'feminine' accentuation in the *François* is a remarkable feat which suggests the all-encompassing nature of the protagonist as a representative of humanity. Whether Messiaen consciously intended this co-existence of the two, supposedly mutually exclusive types of accentuation, or would have accepted this interpretation of the *François* theme will probably never be known. N.B. *Thème masculin* and *thème féminin* are Messiaen's terms. Traité - Tome IV, pp.127-199.
- 37 The mountain of the Transfiguration, the canyons and mountains of Utah and Mount Verna, the private retreat of Saint Francis.
- 38 Messiaen: musique et couleur, p.154.
- 39 In the form of the *Récit Evangélique*.
- 40 Xylophone, xylorimba and marimba.
- 41 Messiaen: musique et couleur, p.245.
- 42 Who has to conduct a series of complex and constantly changing time signatures for the strictly notated instruments with one hand, while providing cues for the *hors tempo* birds and turning pages with the other.
- 43 The score is, for once, ambiguous regarding which specific bird this would be, but it is presumably the *Oiseaux lyre superbe* rather than *Oiseaux lyre Prince Albert*.
- 44 It is surely not a coincidence that this bird received special treatment considering the link between its name and that of Messiaen's wife, Yvonne Loriod.
- 45 George Benjamin: Interview - see appendix four, p.354.
- 46 Claude Samuel: Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen: Dialogues et Commentaires, (Actes Sud, 1999), pp.415-6.
- 47 George Benjamin: Interview - see appendix four, p.354.
- 48 Paul Crossley: Interview see appendix five, p.370.
- 49 Claude Samuel: Permanences d'Olivier Messiaen, (Actes Sud, 1999), p.415.
- 50 16 December, 1983.
- 51 Rößler: Contributions, p.125.
- 52 Death and life struggle would be more accurate.
- 53 Hill: Interview with Yvonne Loriod, p.301.
- 54 George Benjamin: Interview - see appendix four, pp.354-5.
- 55 George Benjamin: Interview - see appendix four 354-5.
- 56 Jean-Christophe Marti: «C'est un secret d'amour» - Un entretien avec Olivier Messiaen, January 1992, reproduced in the programme booklet for the Deutsche Grammophon recording of *Saint François d'Assise*, catalogue number 445 176-2 GH4, p.81.
- 57 As we shall see in the next chapter, *Livre du Saint Sacrement* is a possible exception.

Chapter three

Livre du Saint Sacrement

Messiaen intended *Saint François d'Assise* to be both the summation of his career and his final work: of this there is no doubt. For a start, there is the epic scale of the work, in every sense, and the composer's admission that it was a synthesis of all his music.¹ That this grand synthesis was a conscious summation is confirmed by George Benjamin.² Then there are Messiaen's statements to all and sundry that 'he'd finished composing',³ that he had nothing more to add. Then there are the comments made to Jean-Christophe Marti in an interview shortly before his death that «je me suis senti vidé».⁴ These facts, together with the series of relative miniatures which gradually emerged in the wake of the opera, suggest a composer who had put everything into his final showcase and consequently had made no plans for its successors. At least, that would unequivocally be the case if it were not for the composition of his largest organ cycle by far within a year of the opera's première.

*Livre du Saint Sacrement*⁵ was commissioned jointly by the city of Detroit and the American Guild of Organists for the latter's biennial National Convention. With considerably more than two hours being required to perform the one hundred and sixty-five pages of this eighteen movement cycle, *LDSS* exceeds the scale of every aspect of its monumental predecessor, *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité*.⁶ It is necessary therefore to consider why Messiaen even accepted the commission and, having done so, set about his task so voraciously.

The speed at which *LDSS* was composed can be explained partially, of course, by the fact that organ music requires just three staves whereas certain passages of *Saint François* required as many as forty-seven.⁷ Furthermore, Messiaen played for Masses at Saint Trinité throughout the long gestation of the *Saint François*, and this was to be his only musical activity for some time in the wake of the opera.⁸ It is also worth remembering that work on the later stages of the opera became increasingly concerned with factors such as finer points of orchestrations and simple logistics. The organ became, therefore, the sole focus of his musical creativity, not only in 1984 but also in the few years beforehand. Although *LDSS* was composed during 1984, many ideas for it must surely have formed, at least in an embryonic state, during Messiaen's activity as organist over the preceding years.

In conversation with Jean-Christophe Marti the composer traced the inspiration for the piece to a specific short organ improvisation for a Maundy Thursday service:

Mon poste d'organiste liturgique m'obligeant à improviser, ma femme m'enregistre et je réécoute ces improvisations d'une oreille très critique. Un soir de Jeudi Saint, où l'Eglise commémore l'institution de l'Eucharistie par le Christ, j'avais trois minutes à remplir en jouant, et voici que j'ai eu une inspiration subite. J'ai joué une pièce qui n'a l'air de rien du tout au premier abord: un rythme bacchius très simple (brève - longue - longue), un accord de sixte banal...⁹ mais j'ai eu brusquement conscience, en me réécoutant, que cette musique n'était pas comme les autres.

Je crois avoir été inspiré par le moment, touché par cet office qui était très beau. J'ai réécrit ce morceau, je l'ai intitulé *L'Institution de l'Eucharistie*, et j'ai commencé à écrire le *Livre du Saint Sacrement*... C'était plus d'un an après *Saint François*.¹⁰

This rare insight into part of the creative process reveals the almost accidental genesis of *LDSS*. Despite Messiaen's statement that it was more than a year after *Saint François*, the service in question was presumably Maundy Thursday in 1984.¹¹ Nevertheless, it is likely, if not certain, that some of the material for the other seventeen movements came from improvisations made after Messiaen completed the composition of *Saint François* in 1979 and began working on the orchestration.¹²

As Gillian Weir has pointed out,¹³ Messiaen's choice of the word *Livre* suggests, as with the *Livre d'orgue*, a collection from which individual movements may be selected as required. Nevertheless, it should not be inferred from this that *LDSS* is simply a ragbag of assorted snippets, nor that the ideal is anything other than a complete performance.

The eighteen movements of *Livre du Saint Sacrement* are, as Messiaen explains in the preface to the score, divided into three groups. The first four movements are «des actes d'adoration devant le Christ invisible mais réellement présent dans le Saint Sacrement». Taking his cue from Dom Columba Marmion, Messiaen then presents the mysterious gifts of the Eucharist through their association with seven episodes of Christ's life. The remaining seven movements switch to the Mass, from the moment

of transubstantiation, at which point the sacrament comes into being, onwards. The broad plan of *LDSS* can be summarized as follows:

- I-IV Adoration.
- V-XI Chronology of Christ's birth, death and resurrection.
- XII-XVIII The Blessed Sacrament

On a broader scale, the first two groups can be regarded as fulfilling a preparatory rôle. They are general meditations on Christ and the Eucharist, whereas the final group of pieces contemplate the Eucharist within the celebration of the Mass and its ultimate purpose; the sacrament of Communion. This distinction between the functions of the first two groups and the third is reinforced by Messiaen stating in the score that, in a full performance, an interval can be taken after the eleventh movement.

Another interpretation of the superstructure of *LDSS* is that the cycle broadly mirrors the structure of the Mass. There are the acts of simple adoration provided by the first four movements which are analogous to the opening prayers. Then there are allusions to and representations of scriptural narrative, principally in movements five to eleven, suggesting the liturgy of the Word. Finally, the meditations on liturgical mysteries of movements twelve to eighteen correspond to the consecration and subsequent participation in the Eucharist.

This suggests a direct link back to *La Transfiguration*, which, in addition to being the first of the grand summations, was a conscious attempt to create a liturgy for the concert hall. Not surprisingly, *LDSS* can also be regarded as a work of summation

and its soundworld is not dissimilar to that of *La Transfiguration*. As with all the *monumental trinity* works, it is a synthesis of Messiaen's techniques, notably combining the divergent elements of his language from before and after 1949. Like the oratorio, the harsher, granitic spirit of the works from the 1950s and early 1960s seems to predominate. In marked contrast to *Saint François*, in which tender passages of pure consonance feature at regular intervals,¹⁴ it is only in the eighth, fourteenth and sixteenth movements of *LDSS*¹⁵ that there are sustained passages of tenderness.¹⁶ Elsewhere, the emphasis seems to be on the awe and power of the mysteries being contemplated. For instance, in relation to the seventh movement, *Les ressuscités et la Lumière de la Vie*, Gillian Weir observes that it 'has a stark strength and directness that is almost brutal'.¹⁷ and she goes on to comment that 'one might have expected a softening from the older composer, but the opposite seems to have occurred'.¹⁸

Even more uncompromising is the ninth movement, *les ténèbres* (sic). The darkness in question is that of the Passion, and specifically the crucifixion, as is made clear by the three quotations with which the movement is prefaced:

Jésus leur dit: c'est ici votre heure et la puissance des ténèbres.

Luke 22:53

Arrivés au lieu appelé Golgatha, ils le crucifièrent!

Luke 23:33

De la sixième heure à la neuvième heure, les ténèbres se répandirent sur toute la terre.

Matthew 27:45

As with the climax of the quasi-Passion of *Les Stigmates*, the composer's contemplation of suffering provokes an outburst of musical brutality. The movement opens with a series of chords in mode 2 and mode 3. Not, it would seem, a particularly unusual or innovative practice within Messiaen's music. However, whilst the materials are commonplace, the composer's treatment of them is unprecedented yet typically simple: each mode is presented vertically as a single, one octave cluster. In this way, Messiaen alternates the first and second transpositions of mode 2 and the first, second and fourth transpositions of mode 3 (example I:41).¹⁹ The one note common to each of these transpositions is G natural. This note frames each chord and is the anchor pitch of the movement. It also defines the boundaries of the chilling low, full chromatic cluster spanning two octaves²⁰ representing the darkness which "covered the land" and with which the movement reaches its unsettling conclusion.

The impact made by *les ténèbres* is actually more desolate than that made by *Les Stigmates*. Whereas the immense suffering depicted by the opera is immediately set into relief by the assuaging call of the heavenly voice, *les ténèbres* itself contains no hint of relief. A stark contrast of mood does come with the beginning of the next movement, *La Résurrection du Christ*, but Messiaen uses the power of the instrument to drive home an awe-inspiring message of jubilation with overwhelming force in a blaze of F sharp major. In other words, at no point in *LDSS* is the hand of tenderness held out in response to the suffering.

Despite this difference, the comparison with *Les Stigmates* is nonetheless pertinent. Indeed, it is crucial to understanding the position which *LDSS* holds within

Messiaen's output as a whole. The organ cycle can be viewed as being a companion piece to the opera and, as we shall see, the Passion related depictions of *Les Stigmates* and *les ténèbres* are central to this inter-relationship.

First, though, it is necessary to consider a more fundamental analogy with the opera; *LDSS* is another summa. This enormous organ cycle is as much a grand synthesis as *Saint François d'Assise*, but covering the one aspect of the composer's art which is *not* primarily destined for the concert hall: his organ works. By virtue of their close association with his personal worship at the church of Sainte Trinité in Paris, Messiaen's works for his own instrument to some extent stand apart from the rest of his œuvre. In addition to being directly and inextricably linked with Messiaen's observance of his faith, not to mention that of numerous organists worldwide, his organ works are separated from the rest of his output by the simple fact that very few suitable instruments exist for their performance outside places of worship.²¹

This situation is not peculiar to Messiaen's music but indicative of general musical attitudes. The distinction between organ music and virtually all other musical fields is most apparent, perhaps, when reading musical history books. Few authors writing about music in Paris in the first decades of this century make more than a cursory mention of Tournemire, Widor, Guilmant or any of the composer-organists based at the main Parisian churches. Likewise, little mention is made of Ravel, Debussy, Stravinsky and Les Six by those writing about the French organ school. Messiaen is unusual in having made an overwhelming impact as both an organist-composer *and* a composer of works for the concert hall.

Having made a final synthesis of his music for the concert hall in *Saint François d'Assise*,²² it is only natural that he should want to create a work fulfilling a similar function within the genre of organ music. As with the opera, it is possible to detect something of all his organ writing.

There are passages of pure, quasi-tonal modality, such as the contemplations either side of actually receiving the Eucharist, *Prière avant la Communion* (XIV) and *Prière après la Communion* (XVI) (example I:42). *La Résurrection du Christ* (X), *Les Deux Murailles d'Eau* (XIII) and *Offrande et Alleluia Final* (XVIII) (example I:43) contain dazzling toccatas over growling pedal lines recalling the post-Dupré fireworks of *Dieu parmi nous* or *Transports de joie*. There are monodies and direct quotations of plainchant in, among others, *Le Dieu Caché* (III), *Puer natus est nobis* (V), *La Manne et la Pain de Vie* (VI), *les ténèbres* (IX), *La Transsubstantiation* (XII) and *Offrande et Alleluia Final* (example I:44). Related to this are the passages in *langage communicable* in *Les Réssuscités et la Lumière de Vie* (VII), *L'Apparition du Christ réssuscité à Marie-Madeleine* (XI) and *Offrande et Alleluia Final* (example I:45). There are also, of course, numerous instances of birdsong, displaying the results of recent ornithological outings in the Holy Land. Two instances are particularly noteworthy as they are clear examples of Messiaen wishing to imprint as little of himself on the music as possible. Birdsong is one of the three elements from which the twelfth movement, *La Transsubstantiation*, is constructed, and it is the sole source of material for the movement representing the moment of Communion itself, *La Joie de la Grace* (XV) (example I:46). That an eighteen movement cycle dedicated to the subject of the Blessed Sacrament does not have a movement entitled

'Communion' is typical of Messiaen's humility. The title of *La Joie de la Grace* refers to the spiritual benefits of receiving Communion, and, rather than 'compose' a movement, Messiaen allows God's musicians to convey what cannot be conveyed.

Even this brief litany supports the view of *LDSS* as a summation of Messiaen's organ writing. However, there is one passage in the work which adds particular weight to this contention. As has already been mentioned, *La Transsubstantiation* is a movement in which Messiaen attempts to distance himself from the compositional process.²³ It contains three types of music. There is the transcribed material of birdsong, and borrowed material in the shape of plainsong. The movement begins, though, with a mode of pitches, timbres and durations (example I:47). The inclusion, albeit briefly, of a quasi-serial procedure creates a direct link back to the techniques utilized in the experimental works of the 1950s. Such techniques were largely rejected from Messiaen's palette in subsequent years due to their rejection of natural resonance and consequent lack of colour.²⁴ Methods inspired by serialism were nothing more than a technical cul-de-sac for Messiaen. The only other work in which a significant passage can be found after the 1950s is the opening of *Les Stigmates* from *Saint François*. In other words, Messiaen 'dusts off' his quasi-serial procedures after a couple of decades on the shelf for the benefit of his two grand summations. The suggestion is not that the modes of pitches, timbres, and durations in *Les Stigmates* and *LDSS* are not an intrinsic part of each work. They fulfil specific symbolic functions on both occasions, representing fear and darkness in the former and the mysteriousness in the latter. However, the utilization of these specific techniques to fulfil those rôles, when they had hitherto been absent from the

composer's music, suggests that the process of creating a summa was influential on his choice of materials.

As with Messiaen's other monumental works, various 'keys'²⁵ stand out amongst the wealth of harmonic and melodic resources. The most prevalent harmonic centres for movements are C major, G major and E major, with A flat major, F sharp major and A major also being given significant outings. As ever, symbolism in both its overt and covert forms is prevalent. For instance, the two movements in which resurrection is contemplated, *Les Réssuscités et la Lumière de Vie* (VII) and *La Résurrection du Christ* (X), have C major and F sharp major as their respective harmonic goals. The all-embracing nature of resurrection is reflected in this choice of two keys which, in terms of position within the octave, are exact opposites. Furthermore, according to Messiaen's colour associations, C major is bright white, and F sharp major is a dazzling combination of all possible colours. All colours in the spectrum derive from white light, and the clear implication is that these two keys which are apparent opposites are in fact two sides of the same coin.

In addition to being the harmonic goal of *Les Réssuscités et la Lumière de Vie*, the note C natural, and C major triad underpin the musical action at other crucial moments in *LDSS*, providing impetus and a destination for the work as a whole. The first movement, *Adoro te*, eventually reveals itself to be rooted in C major, before closing on a whole-tone cluster (example I:48). The same harmony rounds off the movements dedicated to the life of Christ by concluding the eleventh movement, *L'Apparition du Christ réssuscité à Marie-Madeleine*, and it supports much of the

Prière avant la Communion of movement fourteen. Most significantly, the entire work ends with an emphatic low C natural, the vibrancy of which is increased substantially by the seven blasts of the eleven-note chord with which it is preceded (example I:49). The only pitch missing from this chord is C natural. In other words, its function is to provide a foil for the final pitch, thus greatly increasing both its impact and its clarity.

Within the context of C major being the principal harmonic goal of *LDSS* as a whole, G major, and the note G natural act as dominants in harmonic and symbolic terms. Two examples must suffice. The first movement eventually reveals itself to be oriented towards C major and, presumably as a consequence, the second movement, *La Source de la Vie*, opens with C major as the underlying triad of the first in a sequence of *accords à renversements transposés sur le même note de basse*. However, the movement actually places greater emphasis on G major. In other words, Messiaen is discreetly establishing his tonic, and then moving to a contrasting, or dominant, key.

An even clearer example is provided by *les ténèbres*. In contrast to the underlying C major of *LDSS* as a whole, which was last experienced in *Les Réssuscités et la Lumière de Vie*, the chords representing darkness in this movement are framed by the pitch G natural. In this case, it acts as a musical dominant, outlining the limits of the clusters, and symbolically defines the borders of the eclipsing of the light. This light immediately returns in the following movement by rising up as far as possible from G natural to F sharp.

The fact that *LDSS* is underpinned by C major and C natural provides a further link with *Saint François*, which, it will be remembered, has the same harmonic goal. Indeed, *LDSS* can be thought of as a companion piece to the opera. However, the relationship between *LDSS* and *Saint François* does not adequately explain the fact that, despite being exhausted, Messiaen produced such a colossal work within a year of completing the opera.

There is a clear parallel in the relationship between *LDSS* and the opera *Saint François* and that between its organ predecessor, *Méditations*, and the oratorio *La Transfiguration*. At the time of its première, *La Transfiguration* was by far Messiaen's largest work. It also initiated a process of monumental consolidation in which his music tended towards gigantism, simultaneously combining the divergent compositional approaches to be found before and after 1949 and fusing them into an all-embracing, omnifarious whole.²⁶ Not surprisingly, *La Transfiguration* was hailed as being a summa. Given that Messiaen was in his late fifties and early sixties whilst composing the oratorio, and presumably beginning to contemplate old age, it is possible, maybe even probable, that this was the case.

The entirety of *Méditations* was composed within the same year that Messiaen completed work on *La Transfiguration*.²⁷ Having created a very public synthesis of his musical techniques in the oratorio, the composer did the same for the instrument associated with his own personal worship. In other words, *Méditations* is a companion piece to *La Transfiguration*. When, in *Saint François*, Messiaen made a final grand synthesis of his music for the secular and very public world of the concert

hall and opera house, it is only natural that he should want also to create a work fulfilling a similar function within the sacred and more personal domain of the church organ loft. He had started his process of monumental consolidation with *The Transfiguration* and immediately wanted to apply the same all-embracing aesthetic to his organ works in the *Meditations*. Now, with *Saint François* Messiaen had created a *summa* and, once again he wanted to create a companion for the organ.

The subject matter of the two pairs of works supports the contention that *Méditations* is a companion piece to *La Transfiguration*, and *LDSS* has a similar relationship with *Saint François*. One of the primary theological ideas related to the story of the transfiguration is the concept of filiation, which takes as its starting point the relationship of Jesus with the Father. In *Méditations*, Messiaen tackled one of the deepest theological mysteries, the concept of the Trinity. The concepts of filiation and the Trinity are, of course, close areas of theology whose significance goes to the heart of the Catholic faith. In a platform discussion before the European Première of *Méditations*, Messiaen stated:

I've been engaged as organist at St. Trinité Church for 40 years. I've been waiting 40 years for someone to speak about what the Trinity is. But it's spoken about far too little - people don't care to do so. At the age of 64, I believe that I'm now worthy to talk about it.²⁸

At the age of seventy-five, Messiaen was ready to tackle another cornerstone of Catholic theology: the Blessed Sacrament. This in turn is related to *Saint François* in which the Saint receives the stigmata, thus making him a “second Paschal

sacrifice”. In Catholic theology, the Eucharist is closely associated with the idea of Christ’s Paschal sacrifice. Furthermore, one undercurrent of the opera is the desire of Saint Francis to be in ever closer ‘communion’ with Christ. This desire is gradually fulfilled, first by the Angel’s viol playing, then in receiving the stigmata and finally by death and resurrection.

As was discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, *Les Stigmates* provided Messiaen with an indirect opportunity to compose a Passion setting. In this context, *les ténèbres* provides further proof that *LDSS* is a companion to *Saint François* in relation to the rest of Messiaen’s œuvre. It is intended to be not only a summation of the composer’s organ literature, but also its crowning achievement. Like *Les Stigmates*, *les ténèbres* is a portrayal, albeit indirectly, of Christ’s Passion and, as with *Les Stigmates*, it inspires the most striking departure from Messiaen’s earlier music.

Messiaen’s earliest work to have been published, *Le banquet céleste*, also had the Eucharist as its subject. Indeed, along with the unpublished *Le banquet Eucharistique* (orchestra) and *L’hôte aimable des âmes* (organ) it forms a trinity of contemplations on the subject which represents his first steps along the path of a religious composer. It is quite natural that Messiaen’s first religious works should be meditations on the Eucharist as it forms a central pillar of his Catholic faith. According to Church doctrine, Christ’s sacrifice is not just *commemorated* during the celebration of Mass but that unique event is made present through the transubstantiation of bread and wine into his body and blood.²⁹ One of the manifold consequences of this abstruse theological concept is that it provides Catholics with an

instance of the timeless aspect of God. Namely that Christ's Passion, an event that is fixed to one moment in the human perception of time, is also present in the realm of eternity, where the concept of Time does not exist.

The representation of the eternal co-existing with the temporal is, of course, a basic objective, and achievement, of much of Messiaen's art. As his earliest work to have been published, *Le Banquet céleste* announced that intention with astonishing assurance. It seems almost to have ground to a halt on its very first chord and then moves at such a slow pace that even the shortest chords become aural entities in themselves. And yet it is not simply static as claimed by some observers. There is logical movement, but it happens almost in the realm of the unconscious. Messiaen has not created stasis but something much more profound. *Le banquet céleste* provides the first example in his music of the simultaneous experience of movement and stillness thus representing one of the greatest theological mysteries - the ability of God to exist outside time yet act within it.

It is reasonable to assume that Messiaen's protestations after the completion of *Saint François* that he had finished composing still held true when he finished *LDSS*. Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen omits to mention *LDSS* when talking about Messiaen's state of mind after the opera, and implies clearly that his compositional renewal began with the *Petites esquisses*.³⁰ This suggests that *LDSS* was part of the same creative period as *Saint François*. Messiaen had been convinced that the opera would be his last work. Having decided to write a summa for the organ works, the mantle of last

compositional statement passed to *LDSS*. It is fitting that, in the vast organ cycle which he thought would be his last work, Messiaen should return to the same instrument and preoccupations as *Le Banquet céleste*, his earliest published work.

Notes

- 1 See Rößler: *Contributions*, p.125. Quoted in previous chapter, page 57.
- 2 George Benjamin: *Interview* see appendix four.
- 3 Hill: *Interview with Yvonne Loriod*, p.301.
- 4 Jean-Christophe Marti: «C'est un secret d'amour» - *Un entretien avec Olivier Messiaen*, January 1992, reproduced in the programme booklet for the Deutsche Grammophon recording of *Saint François d'Assise*, catalogue number 445 176-2 GH4, p.81.
- 5 Henceforth referred to as *LDSS*.
- 6 Henceforth referred to as *Méditations*.
- 7 Even the vocal score uses as many as seven staves.
- 8 Messiaen: *musique et couleur*, p.251.
- 9 i.e. a first inversion, not an added sixth as implied by the English translation, Jean-Christophe Marti: *op.cit.*, (trans. by Stewart Spencer) p.29.
- 10 Jean-Christophe Marti: *op.cit.*, p.81.
- 11 19 April 1984. We do not know at precisely what point Messiaen considered the opera to be completed. The dates are given simply as composition from 1975-1979 and orchestration from 1979-1983.
- 12 Indeed, it would not stretch the realms of probability that ideas could have been stored from improvisations dating back to 1969, when he composed his previous organ cycle, *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité*.
- 13 Weir: *Organ Music II*, p.380.
- 14 Notably in relation to the character of the Angel, although the music when the leper is cured is another prominent example.
- 15 *Institution de l'Eucharistie, Prière avant la Communion* and *Prière après la Communion*.
- 16 It should be noted, of course, that the precise timbres of *LDSS* will vary from venue to venue and organist to organist.
- 17 Weir: *op.cit.*, p.382.
- 18 *ibid.*
- 19 As always when examining an organ score, a cautionary note should be sounded that notes may be heard at a different register or pitch from that written due to the registration.
- 20 One octave is written but two octaves sound due to the registration.
- 21 It could be added that there is not an abundance of suitable instruments in churches either.
- 22 An opera house qualifies in this context as a concert hall as it is a non-sacred public venue which caters for musical events.
- 23 The reason for Messiaen's reticence is, presumably, the mysterious nature of the subject matter and his own humility when faced with a cornerstone of his faith. The doctrine of Transubstantiation is, of course, one of the defining mysteries of Catholic theology (it is also one of the principal stumbling blocks for ecumenism, a problem not aided by the fact that Catholic theologians find it difficult to agree upon the precise nature of transubstantiation).
- 24 These quasi-serial procedures should not be confused with the essentially durational mechanics of the *Permutations symétrique*.
- 25 For want of a more appropriate term.
- 26 For full discussion of the idea of monumental consolidation see: Christopher Dingle: *Olivier Messiaen: La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur, Jésus-Christ - A Provisional Study* (Sheffield: M.Phil thesis, September 1994).

Notes (continued)

- 27 The dates of composition for *La Transfiguration* are 28 June 1965 - 20 February 1969, the date for *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* is simply given as 1969.
- 28 Platform discussion on June 11, 1972, in the Bach Hall of St. John's Church during the Second Düsseldorf Messiaen Festival. Contained in Rößler Contributions, p.51.
- 29 N.B. One product of The Second Vatican Council is that official Catholic teaching on the subject, whilst not rejecting this doctrine, has shifted in emphasis, allowing a certain flexibility in interpretation. Whilst this is of theological interest, it remains outside the scope of this thesis, not least because Messiaen remained attached to pre-Vatican II teaching on doctrinal matters, even though some of his statements regarding other subjects fell outside the most liberal interpretation of any catechism (e.g. his enthusiastic interest in aspects of astrology).
- 30 Hill: Interview with Yvonne Loriod, p.301.

Part II

The miniatures

Introduction

Messiaen is not noted for composing miniatures. An examination of his œuvre made in 1985 would have revealed that his last published work of less than substantial proportions, *Verset pour la fête de la Dedicacé*, had been written in 1960. Messiaen had, of course, composed a number of relatively short works at the outset of his career, yet after that the only period in which he significantly scaled-down his compositional ambitions from his penchant for grandiose structures was during the creative crisis of 1949-1951.

Now, following the exertions of *Saint François* and *LDSS*, and declarations to all and sundry that he had retired as a composer, a further series of miniatures emerged hesitantly from Messiaen's pen. The opera had left the composer in a crisis of disillusion and self-doubt. Messiaen did not have the will or the energy to undertake a radical overhaul of style as he had done in the crisis following the *Tristan* triptych. Whereas his earlier plight had occurred when he was at the height of his creativity, Messiaen was now an old man.

Coaxed by his wife, Messiaen gradually regained confidence and a new flexibility in his established harmonic style through the composition of the unexpected series of miniatures which characterize the years between *LDSS* and *Éclairs*. This was achieved not by experimentation but by occupying safe musical territory and re-examining his most favoured compositional elements. In effect, Messiaen returned to first principles.

For these reasons, this thesis gives the miniatures of Messiaen's final years an emphasis which is disproportionate to their brevity. They may not be 'great' works, but they are of crucial importance nevertheless.

Furthermore, each piece is undeniably crafted with the hand of a master and their modest proportions provide an opportunity for closer examination of certain aspects of Messiaen's compositional processes than would be possible in the large works where many factors have to be considered. In particular, much of the chapter on *Un sourire* is concerned with just twelve bars in an attempt to understand better the workings of Messiaen's harmony at what could be described as quantum level.

Chapter one

Petites esquisses d'oiseaux

pour piano

Following the magnum opus of *Saint François* and the corresponding summa of his organ works in *LDSS*, Messiaen might have been expected to compose a monumental cycle fulfilling a similar function for the piano. Such a project could have been inspired by a religious topic and written on an even vaster scale than *Vingt regards* whilst incorporating the compositional developments of the intervening forty years. Alternatively, Messiaen might have been expected to channel his energy into producing a second *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, a project for which, as he informed Peter Hill, the composer had transcribed more than enough material.

As we now know, of course, Messiaen did not have any energy left after the exertions of *Saint François*. Furthermore, he feared that he would die before he could complete a second *Catalogue d'oiseaux*.¹ Messiaen's next work was indeed for piano, but it is the unassuming proportions and deceptive exterior simplicity which characterize *Petites esquisses*.

Having concluded that his vocation as a religious composer had been completed, and possibly assuming that death was not far away, Messiaen decided to retire. To repeat the words of Yvonne Loriod:

He became exhausted, and after the work was finished he became very depressed - he was unable to eat or walk or indeed do anything. And he told everyone that he'd finished with composing.²

In an attempt to coax Messiaen out of his depression, Yvonne Loriod asked her husband to write a musical depiction of a robin (*rouge gorge*). Messiaen eventually agreed and produced not one, but three portraits of robins. In addition, he had interleaved this unassuming triptych of robins with three further bird pieces to produce a total of six little bird sketches:

- 1) Le rouge gorge
- 2) Le merle noir
- 3) Le rouge gorge
- 4) Le grive musicien
- 5) Le rouge gorge
- 6) L'alouette des champs

In the context of his depression and lack of self-confidence it is not surprising that Messiaen chose four particularly favoured birds all of which had appeared in *Saint François*.

Taken in the context of Messiaen's previous works, these miniatures contain a number of unusual features, not least of which is their length or, more accurately, their brevity. The collection is less than quarter of an hour in duration and even the longest individual piece, the last *rouge gorge* movement, takes less than three minutes to perform.

Petites esquisses is also atypical amongst the composer's birdsong works for piano owing to the complete absence of depictions of the birds' habitats. Instead we are presented with the barest essentials of Messiaen's ornithological writing, with the song of each bird being provided with just a few coloured harmonic progressions. In this respect the collection is closer in spirit, if not style, to his earliest birdsong compositions - notably *Le merle noir*, *Réveil* and *Oiseaux exotiques* - rather than being an appurtenance to *Catalogue d'oiseaux* and *La fauvette des jardins*. Indeed, by concentrating on just one bird in each piece, Messiaen returns to the approach taken in his first specifically ornithological composition: *Le merle noir*.

One side-effect of the absence of the birds' habitats is a paucity of bass and tenor textures. Whilst this trait of *Petites esquisses* may not have been deliberate, it is worth noting since it accords with Messiaen's apparent reluctance to venture into the bass register in other post-*Saint François* works, particularly *Un sourire* and *Éclairs*.

In the preface to *Petites esquisses* Messiaen explains that, whereas the song of each bird is distinct from those of the others, homogeneity is created throughout the six pieces of the collection by means of the harmonic accompaniment:

Ce sont six pièces très courtes. Elles sont à la fois très semblables et très différentes. Très semblables par le style harmonique où évoluent des complexes de sons aux couleurs changeantes. Ce sont les bleus, les rouges, les orangés, les violets, des 'accords à renversements transposés', qui dominant. Les 'accords à résonance contractée' et les 'accords du total chromatique' y ajoutent leurs couleurs plus

violentes ou plus subtiles. Par contre, chaque oiseau ayant son esthétique propre, les mouvements mélodiques et rythmiques diffèrent d'une pièce à l'autre.

In other words, each piece has an (apparently) abstract framework of coloured chords within which the feathered protagonist can sing.

The comments regarding colour made in the preface by Messiaen prompted Robert Sherlaw Johnson to produce a table of 'colour chords' in the three *rouge gorge* movements in his book on the composer. Such a table has some benefits in understanding the construction of these movements. For this reason, whilst acknowledging its potential value, it is necessary to call attention to a number of deficiencies in Sherlaw Johnson's table as it stands before reaping the benefits of an adapted version. It is reproduced as Table II:i in Volume II³ and Sherlaw Johnson introduces it as follows:⁴

The three 'robin' movements are given a certain similarity of form by the distribution of *two colour-chords* [my italics] in various transpositions. These are distributed throughout the three movements in a similar way, providing the only formal frame of references in the whole work.

The most fundamental problem with Sherlaw Johnson's table is that it is based upon a supposition which is contrary to the composer's own declarations. Namely, that certain types of chord are 'colour-chords' whereas others are not. This presumption ignores Messiaen's many comments regarding his perception of a

relationship between musical sound and colour. For instance, in his address delivered at the conferring of the Praemium Erasmianum,⁵ Messiaen stated:

Whenever I hear music, I see corresponding colours.
Whenever I read music (hearing it in my mind), I see
corresponding colours.⁶

Table II:i provides an indication of chord-types, but to refer to **a** and **b** as ‘colour-chords’ and thus infer that the other music in *Petites esquisses* lacks colour is untenable: the entirety of *Petites esquisses* is coloured.

The most obvious consequence of Sherlaw Johnson’s colouristic selectivity is that no explanation is provided for what is represented by **c** in table II:i. As we have seen, Sherlaw Johnson refers to the distribution of just two ‘colour-chords’. **c** is a chord. Within the composer’s idiom it is, therefore, coloured: it should be given parity to **a** and **b**.

The lack of information regarding the complexion of **c** extends to **a** and **b**, for Sherlaw Johnson neglects to give any indication of the construction of any of the three chords in his table. Whilst it is possible to observe from table II:i that certain ‘transpositions’ of the chords are utilized at the same relative points in each movement, few conclusions regarding the harmony can be drawn from this information without knowing the type of chords being utilized by Messiaen. This is the fundamental weakness of Sherlaw Johnson’s table, as Messiaen’s colour associations depend more on register, pitch and harmonic similarities than the chord-

type. To put it crudely, it is more important that two chords have an affinity with the A major triad than whether they can be classified as chord x or y. Related to this is Sherlaw Johnson's use of figures to indicate transposition which muddy the harmonic waters still further. The first chord in table II:i is a_{13} . However, in terms of harmony and pitch, this is identical to a_1 . In other words, Sherlaw Johnson is masking harmonic links between registers.

Example II:1 contains all three chords listed in Sherlaw Johnson's table with C sharp as their lowest notes. The first chord, **a**, is a first inversion A major triad with added sixth and what appears to be three further added or resonance notes. In fact **a** is an *accord à renversements transposés*. It could also be described as the first inversion of the *accord sur dominante appoggiaturé* from which the *accords à renversements transposés* are constructed. In the discussion of the *accords à renversements transposés* in Part I of this thesis it could be seen that, by definition, these chords should appear over the same pedal note: the inversions are transposed down to the original bass note. This also means that they should always appear as a litany of at least two chords. However, in *Petites esquisses*, Messiaen releases the chords from their original function so that they can, in the words of Peter Hill, '...float with apparent freedom, gently guiding the music into fresh tonal areas...'.⁷

Under a strict interpretation of **a**, the underlying harmony is derived either from F sharp major, or, as first inversion of the *accord sur dominante appoggiaturé* on B natural, E major. However, the utilization of the *renversements transposés* chords in *Petites esquisses* is far removed from the original manner of their

construction. The chords do not appear as sequences on the same bass note, and often appear in isolation surrounded by different chord-types. It is entirely justifiable, therefore, to state that A major is the basis of the harmony of the **a** chord in example II:1. As discussed in Part I, this impression is reinforced by the manner in which Messiaen disperses the chord between the two hands, the triad with added sixth being in the left hand and the ‘added notes’ being given to the right hand.⁸ Messiaen implies such a transformation in his description of the *renversements transposés* chords in Traité - Tome II when he describes what each transposition sounds like.⁹

The second chord, **b**, in example II:1 also has a long history in Messiaen’s music, appearing in his earliest works. It is the *typical* chord,¹⁰ which, it will be remembered, is found in passages in mode 3. The *typical* chord characterizes the triadic ambiguity brought about by the augmented triads which are the basis of the construction of that mode. The chord possesses immense harmonic potential due to its ability to act as a pivot between harmonies by virtue of its combined triads. In the same manner that the *accords à renversements transposés* have been removed from their origins, the treatment of the *typical* chord in *Petites esquisses* is not modal: this chord also floats freely.

The third chord in example II:1 is **c**. This chord does not have quite as long a history as **a** and **b**, and has its origins in the works of the 1950s and 1960s. The bottom three notes form a second inversion major triad, but, taken as a whole, it is harmonically slightly less specific than either **a** or **b**. However, **c** is often a constituent of disguised total chromatic chords.¹¹ In *Petites esquisses*, this occurs by

means of the birdsong completing the full chromatic complement of pitches whilst *c* can still be heard due to the use of the sustaining pedal (example II:2). The first bar of example II:2 contains just one chord; the *c* chord on A flat. Four pitches are absent from the full chromatic complement: E natural, F sharp, A sharp and B natural. These notes are provided by the iambic declamation of the next phrase of the *rouge gorge* in the following bar. In fact, the third and final *rouge gorge* movement concludes with a disguised total chromatic chord created in the same manner (example II:3). Sherlaw Johnson seems to have overlooked the occurrence of this harmonic interplay between the coloured background and the song of the protagonist, with the consequence that he has omitted some *c* chords from Table II:i. Such an oversight helps to explain the absence of any designation by him of *c* as a colour chord when the preface specifically mentions the colouristic properties of total chromatic harmonies.

Table II:ii (see Volume II) is an adapted version of Sherlaw Johnson's table. In addition to specifying which chord types are being utilized in the *rouge gorge* movements of *Petites esquisses*, extra information has been added and changes made as follows:

- the underlying or prevailing triadic harmony of each chord.¹²
- underlinings indicate chords which combine with birdsong to create total chromatic chords.
- chords in brackets are part of the birdsong.
- In keeping with Messiaen's terminology for chords, the figures indicate the «*tableau*»¹³ of each chord (not the register).
- Similarly, the superscript letters next to *renversements transposés* (a) chords indicate the inversion.¹⁴

In order to make the distinction between the protagonist and the background chords explicit, Messiaen labels the first two birdsong entries in all three *rouge gorge* pieces and in *Le merle noir*. The propensity of **c** to combine with the birdsong to create total chromatic harmony becomes apparent on just its second appearance in the first piece. In the remaining *rouge gorge* movements, Messiaen also incorporates several instances when **a** and **b**¹⁵ mingle with the protean song of the *rouge gorge*, thus softening the differentiation between the two types of music (examples II:4 and II:5). In example II:4 the birdsong merges with the **c** and **a** chords to create disguised total chromatic chords, whilst a similar iambic birdsong leap to that which follows **c**, turns **b** into a ten note chord. Similarly, the birdsong gesture in example II:5 blends with the **b** chord sustained from the preceding bar to create a total chromatic chord. This colouristic interdependence blurs the distinction between the birdsong and the accompanying harmony. All three chords are recognizable elements of the (apparently abstract) background and yet they almost become part of the birdsong. The impression of coalescence between the bird and its background is increased further in the second and third *rouge gorge* pieces by **a** and **b** being incorporated into the birdsong proper, albeit briefly (example II:6) The effect created certainly imbues the *rouge gorge* movements with a greater sense of structural fluency than the relatively crude alternations between blocks of chord progressions and «*strophes ensoleillées*»¹⁶ of the movement dedicated to *Le merle noir* (example II:7).

The iambic birdsong leaps associated with the total chromatic chords are balanced in all three *rouge gorge* pieces by the slower iambic declamation of the *accords à résonance contractée* mentioned by the composer in the preface (example

II:8). However, whereas the iambic birdsong leaps propel the music forwards, this terse gesture stops the bird in its tracks, punctuating the outpouring of song.

The iambic leaps also occur as various types of chromatic cluster which threaten, but never quite manage, to make total chromatic chords (example II:9). These clusters are the equivalent in the vertical plane of the «*arpèges perlés, descendants, presque des glissandos*»¹⁷ which characterize the song of the *rouge gorge* throughout Messiaen's œuvre (example II:10). In *Le Prêche aux oiseaux* from *Saint François*, where they are described by *Frère Massée* as «*comme si l'on égrenait des perles très précieuses*», these arpeggios are given to the flutes and Ondes Martenot creating an effect reminiscent of passages in the *Pantomime* from *Daphnis et Chloë* by Ravel (example II:11). If the gossamer-like descending arpeggios are intrinsic to the *rouge gorge*, the equally striking high trilling clusters are a novelty. As Peter Hill has noted,¹⁸ these trills are redolent of the *locustelle tachetée* (grasshopper warbler) in *La rousserolle effarvatte* from *Catalogue d'oiseaux*.

As mentioned earlier, *Le merle noir* is a relatively stilted piece in the context of the collection as a whole. This seems to be a deliberate compositional ploy as the movement provides a marked contrast to the first and third *rouge gorge* pieces. Furthermore, in the words of Peter Hill, '...[the *rouge gorge* pieces] seem increasingly reflective, whereas the sturdier even-numbered pieces gain in energy'.¹⁹ The bed of coloured harmonies in *Le merle noir* is constructed almost entirely from *renversements transposés* and typical (a and b) chords. The only challenge to the hegemony of these harmonic components comes with the last chord of each phrase,

which is restricted in each instance to white-notes. This underlines a general trend towards C major; a goal which is attained with the last chord of the fourth and final harmonic litany.

Whereas the sequences of **a**, **b** and **c** chords are relatively consonant elements of the *rouge gorge* movements, the **a** and **b** chords in *Le merle noir* seem to be more brusque. This is not because the chords are intrinsically different in character. Rather, it is because sixths and thirds are prevalent in the song of the *merle noir* as opposed to the clusters of the *rouge gorge* (example II:12). In other words, the perception of the chords is altered by the relative consonance or dissonance of the particular birdsong which they support.

In contrast to the *rouge gorge* and *merle noir*, the *grive musicien* produces a violent torrent of song without any underlying framework of chordal progressions. Nevertheless, much of its song picks out by now familiar harmonic territory, such as *renversements transposés* (**a**) chords (example II:13), *accords à résonance contractée*, disguised total chromatic chords based on **c** and more overt total chromatic chords based on alternating black note and white note clusters (example II:14). *La grive musicien* is almost a gross caricature of the *rouge gorge* pieces. The clusters are larger, gestures are hammered out repetitively and the pace is, for the most part, relentless. Furthermore, the *grive musicien* seems to mimic the signature tune of the *rouge gorge* by turning the rapid descending arpeggio on its head (example II:15).

The fearsome toccata which concludes *Petites esquisses*, *L'alouette des champs*, requires the merest murmur of harmonic support from the lower register of the piano (example II:16). The first dour chord momentarily suggests a continuation of the ruminative mood which concludes the final *rouge gorge* movement. However, it merely catalyses the breathless outburst from the *alouette des champs* which barely pauses in its dizzying stream of song. Throughout the frenetic virtuosity of this deluge, the *alouette des champs* repeatedly strikes a ceiling of a high B natural. Usually heard in conjunction with C natural (example II:17), it also flirts with other pitches almost as if they might help the bird break through to even higher altitudes (example II:18). Although the *alouette des champs* burns brightly, it also burns quickly and, inevitably, it cannot sustain such intensity. Its light soon begins to flicker and before too long, it 'tumbles out of the sky'²⁰ landing exhaustedly in the bass register with a muffled thud (example II:19).

As mentioned at the outset, Messiaen was very reluctant to compose the *Petites esquisses d'oiseaux*, or anything else, after the labours of *Saint François* and *LDSS*. It is not surprising that if anyone was going to persuade him to put pen to manuscript paper once more, it would be his wife. Working on these vignettes would seem to have had some therapeutic effect, being in the words of Yvonne Loriod 'a kind of relaxation'.²¹

Nevertheless, Messiaen's self-confidence was still extremely low and he was still profoundly dubious about the prospects of composing any further works. Loriod continues:

He was very doubtful about the *esquisses* and said 'I am tired, I can no longer write. The pieces are not very good.' Well I worked at them and I told him 'they are marvellous, absolutely marvellous.' They are short but very difficult...²²

Despite the composer's gloomy assessment of their worth and his own ability, the *Petites esquisses* mark a beguiling first step on the path to the compositional rehabilitation and the brief Indian summer of *Éclairs*. In addition to their intrinsic charm, therefore, we should also be grateful that they were composed at all.

Notes

- 1 The fact that he had been saying this since the early seventies and had composed a large-scale opera in the meantime did not prevent the composer from continuing to make such an assertion.
- 2 Hill: Interview with Yvonne Loriod, p.301.
- 3 Table X in Sherlaw Johnson's book.
- 4 Robert Sherlaw Johnson: Messiaen (second edition) (London, 1989), p.188.
- 5 Amsterdam, June 15 1971.
- 6 Reproduced in; Rößler: Contributions, p.42.
- 7 Hill: Piano Music II, p. 347.
- 8 It should be remembered that, strictly speaking, the bottom note of the right hand chord belongs to the principal chord and that it is only the upper two notes which should be classed as added.
- 9 Traité - Tome II, p. 86.
- 10 See Part I, chapter one.
- 11 i.e. chords using all twelve pitches.
- 12 It should be noted that, for reasons discussed, the harmonies listed do not correspond to those from which the each respective chord type was created.
- 13 As opposed to Sherlaw Johnson's 'transposition' which masks the the fact that a1 and a13 represent the same pitch - C#/Db.
- 14 See Part I, chapter one.
- 15 To prevent confusion with Tables II:i and II:ii, this chapter continues to refer to the *accords à renversements transposés* and the *typical* chord as a and b chords.
- 16 Preface to the score.
- 17 Preface to the score.
- 18 Hill: Piano Music II, p.348.

Notes (continued)

- 19 Hill: Piano Music II, p.348.
- 20 Hill: Piano Music II, p.348.
- 21 Hill: Interview with Yvonne Loriod, p.301.
- 22 Hill: Interview with Yvonne Loriod, p.301.

Chapter two

Un vitrail et des oiseaux

pour Piano Solo et Petit Orchestre

and

La ville d'en-haut

pour Piano Solo et Petit Orchestre

One year after the tentative composition of the *Petites esquisses*, Messiaen was commissioned by Boulez to write a piece for the Ensemble InterContemporain which could be performed as part of the *Maître's* eightieth birthday celebrations in 1988. The result was a short orchestral work for piano solo, winds and percussion; *Un vitrail et des oiseaux*.

In 1987, one year after the composition of *Un vitrail*, Messiaen was commissioned by the *Festival d'Automne de Paris* to write a piece for the BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Boulez and to be performed during the 1989 festival. The result was a short orchestral work for piano solo, winds and percussion; *La ville d'en-haut*.

As we shall see, the similarities between *Un vitrail* and *La ville* are profound. Indeed, there is justification for suggesting that *La ville* is little more than the re-composition of *Un vitrail*. Phrased more sympathetically, *La ville* displays greater

self-assurance in exploring the same musical and theological territory as that charted in *Un vitrail*. Certainly, *Un vitrail* can only be understood fully in the context of *La ville*. As such, these short works mark crucial steps by Messiaen towards regained confidence as a composer after the crisis induced by *Saint François*.

The first performance of *Un vitrail* was given at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées, Paris on 26 November, 1988 with Boulez conducting the Ensemble InterContemporain and Yvonne Loriod as the piano soloist. The concert was the official 80th birthday concert for Messiaen in France with *Un vitrail* being preceded by *Sept Haïkai* and *Couleurs* and the concert concluded with *Oiseaux exotiques*. The work was repeated with the same forces as part of the British Messiaen festival at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London on 11 December 1988, the evening after Messiaen's birthday and the Royal Festival Hall production of *Saint François*.

Like the *Petites esquisses*, *Un vitrail et des oiseaux* is a work of modest proportions. Indeed, it is tempting to think that the commission may have been an attempt by Boulez to help ease Messiaen out of his compositional crisis. Boulez must have been aware of his former teacher's depression and declarations of having "finished with composing"¹ following *Saint François* and there is much circumstantial evidence in *Un vitrail* to suggest that the composer's self-doubt had not been entirely assuaged by the composition of the *Petites esquisses*.

With a duration of approximately nine minutes² *Un vitrail* is another miniature and one of Messiaen's shortest orchestral works. Furthermore, the forces involved are

modest, with the composer requiring only twenty-five players, including just one brass instrument (trumpet in D) and dispensing with strings altogether.³ However, it is the intrinsic qualities of the music which provide the strongest indication of a continued lack of confidence.

As the title of *Un vitrail* suggests, it could be said that there are two basic musical elements to the work - a colour chorale reminiscent of *Couleurs*, and birdsong. In the preface to the score, Messiaen comments «*Il n'y a pas grand chose à ajouter au titre, qui dit tout*». However, this would not provide the whole picture, for the birdsong passages cannot be classed as one kind of music but three distinct timbral groups:

- i) xylophone; xylorimba; marimba; triangle; temple blocks; wood block; 2 cymbals; 2 tam tams.
- ii) 3 flutes and alto flute; 3 oboes and cor anglais; E flat clarinet and 3 clarinets; bassoon.
- iii) piano solo; 1-3 flutes; 1-3 clarinets.

A further, less discernible distinction could be made within the first group. The entire complement is utilized for the song of the *Rossignol*, but for the *Pinson* the three xylophones have only the suspended cymbal for accompaniment. This may seem to be a punctilio, but the contribution of the unpitched instruments, particularly the wood block and temple blocks, is as important to the music of the *Rossignol* as the pitches because timbral considerations are a key factor in Messiaen's reproductions of birdsong.⁴ It is for a similar reason that all the instruments of the second group are

required for the *Fauvette à tête noire*. As Messiaen explains in the preface to the score, he creates a colour-chord⁵ for each note of the birdsong in an attempt to capture the timbre as accurately as possible.⁶

As if to underline this point, the two birds depicted by the xylophones are kept separate in Messiaen's formal scheme:

Figure II:i

The structure of *Un vitrail et des oiseaux*

A B C D E B' C' D' E' B'' C'' D'' E'' A' B'''

A = *Rossignol* (xylophones + percussion).

B = colour chorale.

C = *Pinson* (xylophones + suspended cymbal).

D = *Fauvette à tête noire* (3 flutes, alto flute, 3 oboes, cor anglais, E flat clarinet, 3 clarinets, bassoon).

E = *Fauvette des jardins* (piano solo) + other favoured birds (1-3 flutes; 1-3 clarinets), *hors tempo*.

Like the *Petites esquisses*, there is a sense in *Un vitrail* of Messiaen sticking to safe ornithological territory. All the birds in the score are particular favourites which could be notated at his country house near Grenoble and, with the possible exception of the *hors tempo* sections, they appear in very familiar guises. For instance, the *Rossignol* can be recognised easily with its combination of repeated notes, short flourishes and rocking major sevenths and minor ninths (example II:20). Table II:iii (see Volume II) provides a complete list of birds which appear in *Un vitrail* together with the names of works in which they have appeared previously. The basic elements of *Un vitrail* can be summarized, therefore, as a colour chorale and four types of birdsong. However, before discussing *Un vitrail* further, it is necessary to introduce its successor, *La ville*.

The following list demonstrates why *La ville* appears, on paper at least, to be a repetition of *Un vitrail*:

- Both works are miniatures.
- Both works dispense with strings.
- Both works alternate a colour chorale with birdsong sections.
- Both works have a piano solo which plays the song of the *Fauvette des jardins*.
- Both works employ the same trinity of ornithological xylophones which characterized *Saint François*.
- Both works contain a *Fauvette à tête noire* which is played by almost exactly the same woodwind grouping as *Saint François*

Such resemblances cannot be ignored and, as we shall see, they are particularly significant in determining the unspoken programme of *Un vitrail*. Nevertheless, it is the differences between *Un vitrail* and *La ville* which imbue the similarities with such relevance.

There are two aspects of *La ville* which mark it out as being fundamentally distinct from *Un vitrail*:

- the explicit religious title, coupled with biblical quotations in the score.
- a significantly larger orchestra.

These factors can be characterized as being concerned with intent and with substance respectively. However, whereas the more substantial orchestra of *La ville* disguises the intrinsic musical similarities with *Un vitrail*, the explicit theological programme is in reality a link with its predecessor.

Just as Messiaen restricts himself to particularly beloved common or garden European birds, the title of *Un vitrail et des oiseaux* reflects an intertwining of two of the composer's oldest and most favoured sources of inspiration: birds and stained glass. The former reflect his love of nature whilst the latter is associated with devotional images. For Messiaen, the divine is expressed through nature and, specifically, the songs of birds, whilst stained glass is a man-made phenomenon which depends upon nature to achieve its dual purpose of elucidation and bedazzlement. Furthermore, the multiplicity of colours in stained glass and Messiaen's description of the chorale as having coloured harmonies immediately creates associations with the coloured chorale passages of *Couleurs* and of other representations of the celestial city.

There is no shortage of utterances by the composer attributing celestial qualities to the birds or remarking on the colouristic aspect of the afterlife. The end of the preface to the score of *La ville* confirms that these preoccupations were uppermost in his mind during this period and could easily be mistaken as referring to *Un vitrail*:

Les oiseaux des xylos, des bois, du piano-solo, symbolisent la joie des ressuscités, assurés d'être toujours près du Christ. Les couleurs d'accords changent presque constamment et symbolisent à leur tour les couleurs de la lumière d'En-Haut.

However, despite its basic musical ingredients being almost identical to those utilized in *La ville*, the preface to *Un vitrail* contains no overt utterances regarding these associations.

That *Un vitrail* is an implicitly religious work is not in doubt, but, given the strength of the connotations of the two aspects of the title, it is also an *explicitly* religious work in all but name. In other words, anyone with a reasonable knowledge of Messiaen's preoccupations would recognize that *Un vitrail* is a religious work. Furthermore, it is reasonable to suggest that *Un vitrail* would be regarded as a 'religious' work even by those who would not acknowledge the *Catalogue d'oiseaux* or the *Turangalila-symphonie* as being works which are attributable to Messiaen's faith.

Despite this evident association with his faith, *Un vitrail* is unique among Messiaen's religious works in lacking any scriptural or theological preface and containing no specific message within the music. Messiaen contents himself simply with stating that:

Les tempi superposés sont une difficulté. Mais les oiseaux sont plus importants que les tempi, et les couleurs plus importantes que les oiseaux. *Plus important que tout le reste est l'aspect invisible* [my italics].⁷

The mention of «*l'aspect invisible*» reflects Messiaen's penchant for the mysterious qualities of his faith; a predilection which manifests itself throughout his religious works, notably permeating every aspect of *La Transfiguration*. That the mysterious should be held so dear by a composer concurrently at great pains to explicate his art and his faith is one of the fundamental contradictions surrounding Messiaen. It is not surprising, therefore, that he should encourage an incense laden cloud of mystery in

Un vitrail. What is unusual is the absence of even the slightest theological elucidation to suggest the precise mystery, the specific «*aspect invisible*», to which the listener's attention should be directed.

The lack of scriptural quotations and an overtly religious title raises three questions regarding *Un vitrail*:

- 1) Having composed works on the principal mysteries of his faith, all the major feasts in the liturgical calendar and having decided that his career as a religious composer had been completed by *Saint François* and *LDSS*, did Messiaen feel that there was little that he could add to the religious aspect of his *œuvre*?
- 2) Did his doubtfulness regarding his continuing ability as a composer mean that he felt unworthy to broach any specific religious topic?
- 3) Regardless of the reasons for the uncharacteristic lack of precision in his subject matter, should the work be approached in a different manner from Messiaen's other religious works?

The first two questions are, of course, related and the (admittedly circumstantial) evidence suggests an affirmative response to both propositions. Despite the almost complete absence of works intended specifically for the liturgy,⁸ Messiaen's *œuvre* is remarkably comprehensive in embracing all the major liturgical

feasts. This is certainly the view of the pianist turned priest Père Jean-Rudolphe Kars⁹ who stated in an interview with Caroline Atherton:

I think all the subjects that the liturgy evokes, the liturgy through the whole year (what we call the *cycle liturgique* which begins with Advent and ends with the feast of Christ the King) have been evoked by Messiaen...¹⁰

It is true that Père Kars is commenting on Messiaen's entire output, but the religious works after *Un vitrail*, *La ville* and *Éclairs*, mark a return to the eschatological dimension of his faith explored in a number of earlier works which were also inspired by the Book of Revelation, such as *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, *Couleurs* or *Et exspecto*. By the time he came to write *Un vitrail* as a religious-composer-in-retirement, the range of unexplored subjects may have seemed rather narrow, especially so given that he had little desire to compose a particularly substantial work. Furthermore, when composing a musical exegesis of an aspect of his faith, Messiaen would have wanted to work always to the best of his ability. He must have felt uncertain in his own mind of fulfilling this prerequisite in the wake of his doubts about the worth of the *Petites esquisses*. In other words, Messiaen felt that he should hold his proselytizing instinct in abeyance until his compositional crisis was resolved, either by permanent retirement or by rekindling his self-assurance.

The problem of whether *Un vitrail* should be received in a different manner from other religious works is not as straightforward. It raises supplementary questions as to whether Messiaen's religious and secular works should be approached in distinct ways when they utilize the same technique, whether the 'programme' is

intrinsic to the musical experience, and what actually constitutes a religious work in Messiaen's output. However, as regards the reception of *Un vitrail*, the subject matter is clear, despite Messiaen's uncharacteristic wish to keep it to himself. In common with the other post-*LDSS* religious works, it is a piece about the celestial city and the afterlife - an understandable topic for a composer in his late seventies. If the 'programmes' of Messiaen's religious or representational works are intrinsic to the musical experience, and if they do need to be approached with a different frame of mind to his non-representational works, then a performance of *Un vitrail* should be treated in the same manner as any other religious work.

By virtue of intrinsic musical similarities with its successor and the theological associations implicit in the title of *Un vitrail et des oiseaux*, the «*aspect invisible*» to which Messiaen refers in the preface to the score can be presumed to correlate almost exactly to the subject of *La ville*.

The title of *La ville d'en-haut* refers to the heavenly kingdom of Christ as described in Revelation. The work depicts, in Messiaen's own words «*...une brève apparition de la vie dans l'Au-Delà: les ressuscités dans une ville de Gloire et de Paix.*»¹¹ It is based on two texts from scripture:

Recherchez les choses d'en-haut, là où se trouve le Christ

Colossians 3:1.

Et je vis la Cité Sainte, qui descendait du ciel, d'auprès de Dieu

Revelation 21:2

The eschatological basis of *La ville* is significant in associating it with *Un vitrail* due to the colouristic nature of the earlier work and the prevalence of references to colour in Revelation. These are evident in earlier works such as *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* and *Couleurs*. In conversation with Almut Rößler, Messiaen confirmed his enthusiasm for the kaleidoscopic aspects of Revelation, recalling one passage in particular:¹²

...The loveliest Book and the one which dominates all others, the Revelation of St. John, contains many colours: the Celestial City is built of many colourful precious stones, of violet amethysts, red rubies, blue sapphires, etc. One thing touched me especially: where it says that One is seated on the throne and His appearance is like fire or like jasper - and fire and jasper are red. And round about Him is a rainbow like an emerald, which is green: two complementary colours, then. [sic]

As we shall see in discussing the music, the concept of complementary colours is crucial to both *Un vitrail* and *La ville*.

However, Messiaen's affinity for Revelation runs deeper than just his penchant for colour. As we have already seen earlier in this thesis, Messiaen preferred throughout his career to allude and symbolize rather than depict when tackling major aspects of his faith.¹³ The same is true of Revelation. For instance, the passage to which Messiaen was referring in conversation with Rößler is Revelation 4:3.¹⁴ The notes to *The New Jerusalem Bible* observe that 'John is careful not to describe God anthropomorphically; *he prefers to give an impression of light* [my emphasis]'.¹⁵ This

follows the biblical tradition in which the Israelites were permitted only to view the glory of God, and were afraid to glimpse the face of Yahweh.¹⁶ It seems that Messiaen felt unable to compose a Passion, or write a movement called *Communion* in *LDSS* for similar reasons.

This practice can also be seen in the preface to *La ville*. Although the composer explains the symbolic function of each musical ingredient, no aspect of the work is designated as representing Christ or God despite the scriptural quotations at the start of the preface which refer specifically to Christ and to God. Instead, Messiaen concludes the preface by stating that «*Les couleurs d'accords changent presque constamment et symbolisent à leur tour les couleurs de la lumière* [my emphasis] *d'En-Haut*». The colours created in both *La ville* and *Un vitrail* can be said, therefore, to allude to an aspect of Christ or God. This is a similar approach to that in *La Transfiguration* which covertly alludes to Christ by means of a textual leitmotif,¹⁷ and the musical and textual pervasiveness of light. In concordance with the rest of Messiaen's œuvre, immanence is rejected in *Un vitrail* and *La ville* in favour of the acceptance of the mysterious.

Whereas the religious title, scriptural quotations and brief exegesis in the preface to the score of *La ville* could equally apply to *Un vitrail*, the orchestration of the later work creates a physical, aural and visual distinction between the two pieces which camouflages their true congruence. *La ville* is written, like *Un vitrail*, for an orchestra of wind and percussion which dispenses entirely with strings; nevertheless it

employs thirty-nine players in marked contrast to the twenty-five utilized by *Un vitrail*.¹⁸ This difference is reflected by the fact that whereas the first performances of *Un vitrail* were given by the Ensemble Intercontemporain, *La ville* was first performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra. The difference in size is accounted for by the inclusion of a full brass section comprising fourteen instruments in *La ville* as opposed to just a single trumpet in D in *Un vitrail*. Messiaen also adds a piccolo to the woodwind, a glockenspiel to the *claviers*, but uses one less percussionist.¹⁹

Messiaen's utilization of the full brass section in *La ville* evokes the monumentalism which had dominated the composer's soundworld since the mid-1960's. In particular, the call to arms which opens *La ville*, described by Paul Griffiths as a "monumental chorale-summons",²⁰ distinguishes it from *Un vitrail* in terms both of musical style and grandiosity of gesture (example II:21). Indeed, it could be argued that the giganticist intention displayed at the beginning of *La ville* is out of proportion with a work of only nine minutes duration. Incompatible as the two terms may appear, the most appropriate description of *La ville* is that it is a monumental miniature - a monumentalette, perhaps.

If *La ville* can be distinguished in musical effect from *Un vitrail* by the august manner in which it opens, the remaining types of music are remarkable similar. The structure of *La ville* is shown in Figure II:ii (overleaf) and comparison with figure II:i²¹ reveals the striking similarity with the formal scheme of *Un vitrail*.

Figure II:ii

The structure of *La ville d'en-haut*

A B C A' B' C' (D+E)x5 A'' B''

A = Grandiose chorale-summons

B = colour chorale

C = *Hypolaïs polyglotte* (xylophones + suspended cymbal)

D = *Fauvette à tête noire* (piccolo, 3 flutes, alto flute, 3 oboes, cor anglais, E flat clarinet, 3 clarinets, 2 bassoons)

E = *Fauvette des jardins* (piano solo)

The principal structural difference is that the lengthening exchanges between the *Fauvette à tête noire* in the woodwind, D, and the *Fauvette des jardins* of the piano solo, E, are gathered together as the centrepiece of *La ville*. This creates a strong impression of a dialogue, a fact noted by Roger Nichols:²²

Then comes a conversation... in which five statements (questions?) of the Blackcap are followed by five counterstatements (answers?) from the Warbler, each contribution gradually getting longer. [sic]

It is hardly surprising that in the wake of *Saint François* Messiaen should be pre-occupied with the idea of an ornithological colloquy as opposed to the episodic, representational or symbolic usage of birdsong in earlier works. The *Fauvette à tête noire* is assigned to *Saint François* as the character's main theme-bird. Although its role in the opera is often ambiguous,²³ there are occasions, such as when *Saint François* is dying, when the saint and the bird enter into a brief dialogue. Whilst not suggesting that any link, conscious or sub-conscious, between Yvonne Loriod and

Saint Francis was made by Messiaen, it is notable that in *La ville*, the *Fauvette à tête noire* once again enters into a dialogue with the chief protagonist of the work, the piano solo.

There is a marked proximity of orchestration and gestures of the *Fauvette à tête noire* in *Un vitrail*, *La ville* and *Saint François* (examples II:22, II:23 and II:24). That the appearances of the *Fauvette à tête noire* in *Un vitrail* and *La ville* are nearly identical to those in *Saint François* provokes the impression that both works could have been constructed from preparatory material for aspects of *Saint François*. The opera is also permeated by a trinity of ornithological xylophones, often providing interludes to the action. Furthermore, as in *Un vitrail*, the xylophones provide the introduction for the opera. The most obvious connection with *Saint François*, though, is the use in *Un vitrail* of the principal technical innovation of the opera - *hors tempo* birdsong.²⁴ This immediately sets *Un vitrail* apart from previous works with piano solo because it means that other instruments can be included in the cadenzas without placing constraints upon the style of writing for the pianist.

There are three such cadenzas in *Un vitrail* with the piano solo being joined by a flute and a clarinet in the first, by a further flute and clarinet in the second and by three of each instrument in the final cadenza. All the parts are written *hors tempo* with the piano having the only metronomic tempo indication; a leisurely *Fauvette des jardins* at quaver=96.²⁵ In this respect *Un vitrail* marks an advance in the technique from *Saint François* in which the *hors tempo* birdsong in the opera is always

combined with strictly measured material under the conductor's direct control.²⁶ As we shall see, this is developed still further in *Plusieurs Oiseaux des arbres de Vie*, the ninth movement of *Éclairs*.

However, the concurrent presence of the *hors tempo* woodwind instruments during the *Fauvette des jardins* passages of the piano solo means that the conversational character of the exchanges with the *Fauvette à tête noire* is felt less strongly than in *La ville*. The sense of dialogue is reduced still further in each of the exchanges in *Un vitrail* due to the exchanges between the *Fauvette à tête noire* and *Fauvette des jardins* being separated by phrases of the colour chorale and the song of the *Pinson* on the xylophones. Nevertheless, the sense of tying up of compositional loose-ends from *Saint François* is tangible in both *Un vitrail* and *La ville*.

It would seem from figures II:i and II:ii that only the A sections of the two works bear no relation to each other. However, closer inspection does reveal that there may be a link even here. In example II:21, it can be seen that the glockenspiel, xylophones and piano solo turn the chord in bar three into a total chromatic chord, filling in the notes omitted by the wind. This is done by using rocking sevenths, ninths and tritones. Total chromatic chords are not unusual in Messiaen's music from the 1960s onwards, but these intervals, specifically the sevenths and ninths, are associated closely with the composer's *Rossignol* transcriptions from *Réveil des oiseaux* (example II:25) to *Un vitrail* (example II:20). Furthermore, one of the earliest instances of this particular technique of creating a total chromatic chord from a more consonant, triadically based chord occurs in *La Transfiguration*.

During the central episode of the outer sections of *Quam dilecta tabernacula tua*, the fifth movement, twelve voices hum pianissimo in four parts, doubled by eleven pianissimo strings. Messiaen then adds resonance to these chords, which he describes as red and gold,²⁷ with four solo violins marked *piano*. The strings and humming voices come to rest on a long chord and the piano solo pierces through this shimmering texture with the song of a *Rossignol*, as if on «*une belle nuit de printemps*»²⁸ (example II:26). The principal chord, in the voices and strings, is a first inversion E major chord with added minor sixth; i.e. a combination of major and augmented triads. The five solo violins have the notes G flat, B flat, E flat and F natural. Four notes remain to complete the total chromatic chord - C sharp, D natural, G natural and A natural. These appear in rapidly repeating parallel sevenths in the last phrase of the song of the *Rossignol* played by the piano solo, and are held on by the sustaining pedal.

In other words, a disguised total chromatic chord is achieved by means of the *Rossignol*, played by the piano solo. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to assume that the gesture by the piano solo and *claviers* in each A section of *La ville* is a *Rossignol*. There is consequently a link, albeit subliminal, with the song of the *Rossignol* which forms the A sections of *Un vitrail*.

If this gesture is derived from the song of a *Rossignol*, why did Messiaen refrain from naming the bird in the score? It is possible that Messiaen deliberately included a fragment of a *Rossignol* transcription but decided not to name it as such either because it was too brief to warrant a mention or because of a private symbolic

function attached to it. It is also possible that Messiaen wrote the gesture with the sole intention of completing a total chromatic chord, but, having worked very closely for many years with birdsong, he intuitively wrote a phrase idiosyncratic of birdsong. In other words, just as the composer's birdsong transcriptions were imbued with the musical characteristics of Messiaen, so Messiaen's music accrued the inflections of birdsong.

There is a further connection between *Quam dilecta tabernacula tua* and *La ville* for the text is eschatological, dwelling on the wondrous experience of being in the presence of God. Indeed, the principal text is taken from Psalm 84, which was originally written as a song of pilgrimage, praising the Lord as host in his temple. The opening phrase '*Quam dilecta tabernacula tua!*' translates as 'How lovely is your dwelling place!'; a reference to not only the temple but also to the heavenly kingdom being depicted in *La ville*.²⁹

The passage from *Quam dilecta tabernacula tua* also provides an indication of Messiaen's reasons for constructing a total chromatic chord in this manner. Messiaen described the respective colours of the three strata of music in the total chromatic chord of *Quam dilecta tabernacula tua* (see example II:26) to Claude Samuel. There is a large area of ruby red (voices and strings), a smaller amount of carmine red (solo violins), with all this being encircled by a brilliant, bright blue/grey (piano).³⁰ In other words, colour or, to be more precise, the contrast between colours is an essential factor in the construction of the chord. At the time of *La Transfiguration* this

approach may have been purely instinctive. In conversation with Almut Rößler, Messiaen discussed his approach to colour:

Since last year,³¹ I've noticed during the replaying some of my works [sic], that I'd unintentionally employed the well known phenomenon of complementary colours, called 'simultaneous contrasts' in the painting world, and used most of all by Delaunay. An example: if I have a chord made up of seven notes, one also hears the other 5 which are missing - played by other instruments or in another register, be it in a high register like a bell-resonance, or in a low register like an 'houm' of a bell... In this way, I have the twelve tones but not as a tone-row, not as a cluster, but rather as a simultaneous contrast of colours, with one real colour and with another one which one hears only faintly above and below it, a glow at the top and bottom.³²

Both the passage in *Quam dilecta tabernacula tua* and the opening of *La ville* are clearly examples of Messiaen utilizing 'simultaneous contrast'.

If the musical result of the technique is to produce total chromatic or near total chromatic chords, it is not surprising that Messiaen's intentions should have been primarily colouristic, particularly in works inspired by Revelation. The harmony of *Couleurs*, for instance, is constructed almost entirely from explicit total chromatic chords³³ which can be separated into two or three components. In fact Messiaen's remarks about simultaneous contrast were preceded by his comments regarding colour in Revelation.³⁴

It can be asserted, then, that the technique of simultaneous contrast is a crucial device in the representation of the kaleidoscopic nature of the «*couleurs de la lumière d'En-Haut*» mentioned in the preface to *La ville*. Simultaneous contrast is not restricted to the grandiose A sections of *La ville*, occurring also in the smoother, more fluent colour chorale of the B sections of both works. Indeed, these passages suggest that simultaneous contrast is not dependent entirely on the presence of all twelve chromatic pitches and that a similar effect can be achieved with fewer pitches. The «*mélodie de la trompette*»³⁵ in *La ville* is harmonized by almost the entire woodwind and brass complement. Like the equivalent «*thème de trompette et cloches*» in *Un vitrail*, the chorale is given a piano-based harmonic counterpart. However, its utilization in *La ville* differs in two respects from that of *Un vitrail*: whereas in the earlier work the complementary carillon only materializes during the fourth, concluding outing of the chorale as an off-beat semiquaver rhythmic echo, it is present throughout the equivalent sections of *La ville* as an eternally revolving, polychromatic halo of continuous semiquavers (examples II:27 and II:28).³⁶

The chorale in *La ville* is constructed in five phrases with a codetta. The first phrase corresponds to B in figure II:ii.³⁷ B' in figure II:ii adds the second phrase to the first, whilst B'' adds the remaining three phrases and a codetta to B'. The harmony of the chorale (excluding the carillon) is constructed almost entirely from *renversements transposés* and *typical* chords. These are the same two chord-types (misleadingly) identified by Robert Sherlaw Johnson as 'colour chords' in the *Rouge gorge* movements of *Petites esquisses*.³⁸ Table II:iv (see Volume II) underlines the economy of chord types utilized in the chorale and also illustrates its related harmonic

integrity. It charts the progress of the chorale, including the monumental introductory summons³⁹ using a modified version of the precedent set by Sherlaw Johnson for *Petites esquisses*.⁴⁰

As can be seen from table II:iv, five of the seven chords in example II:28 are *renversements transposés* chords (a). The exceptions are chord five, which is a *typical* chord (b), and the fourth chord (d) which is constructed in a similar triadic manner to the *typical* chord, but combining minor triads a tritone apart rather than major triads a major third apart linked by a common note.

Remembering once again that Messiaen composed the harmonic aspect of his music at the piano, it is striking that a reduction of the chorale music of both *La ville* and *Un vitrail* divides neatly between the two hands in much the same manner as the sequences of chords supporting the birdsong in *Petites esquisses*. Each chord can be seen as comprising two elements, from which harmonic observations can be drawn. For instance, the first phrase of the chorale in *La ville* (see example II:28 and table II:iv) begins with B flat major and gradually moves to E major before concluding with a tritone cadence back to B flat major.⁴¹ Similarly, the introductory chorale-summons - which is constructed exclusively from *accords à renversements transposés* (a), *typical* chords (b) and total chromatic chords (c) - progresses from D flat major to B flat major, via F sharp major. It ends with four total chromatic chords steering the harmony back to F sharp major. It should be stressed, of course, that the triadic elements of the harmony are not treated by Messiaen in a diatonic manner. Rather, they reveal tonal colourings within the harmony to which the music is drawn.

With one crucial exception, each phrase of the chorale in *La ville* concludes with a *renversements transposés* chord. Whereas the first phrase rises and falls before the tritone cadence, the second phrase answers by falling then rising before repeating the tritone cadence a semitone higher to conclude with B major underpinning the harmony (example II:29). Messiaen builds up tension in the third phrase by means of a series of brief pedal notes. He begins with two pairs of *accords à résonance contractée*,⁴² before progressing to *renversements transposés* chords. The fact that the latter actually appear, as their name implies, «*sur le même note de basse*» only serves to highlight the fact that elsewhere Messiaen is utilizing *renversements transposés* chords as isolated entities.⁴³ In other words, the harmonic freedom found in *Petites esquisses* is also a feature of *La ville*. The third phrase cadences first of all onto a *renversements transposés* chord with an underlying E major triad as the result of a series of chords on a pedal note of E natural. It then repeats the four chords of that pedal phrase a minor third higher to conclude with a *renversements transposés* chord underpinned by a G major triad (example II:30).

The fourth phrase yields the climax of the chorale and the work as a whole. Significantly, this is the only phrase of the chorale which does not end with a *renversements transposés* chord. For the climax, Messiaen chooses instead the same type of chord, *c*, which provides the total chromatic focus of the introductory chorale summons. This chord is approached by a spiralling melodic and harmonic sequence, rising at first by semitonal steps before breaking the circular motion and continuing to rise to a *renversements transposés* chord, underpinned by E major, which creates a pedal point for the climax to the *c* chord based on D flat major (example II:31).

Beginning with strong elements of F sharp major - the harmony which had bridged D flat major and B flat major in the introductory chorale summons - the fifth phrase returns the chorale to the opening B flat major based *renversements transposés* chord, via its tritone counterpart, E major (example II:32). The following phrase, which fulfils the function of a coda, repeats the journey from F sharp major to B flat major but by a slightly different harmonic route, although the tritone cadence still concludes the phrase. This element of *déjà vu* prepares the listener for the repeating tritone cadences which conclude *La ville*. These can be regarded as an allusion to eternity; if the conclusion can be repeated once, it can be repeated indefinitely, an impression which is reinforced by the circularity of the tritone cadence.

No mention has been made thus far of the melody of the chorale. In the preface to the score of *La ville* Messiaen emphasizes the melodic aspect of the chorale, describing it as a «*mélodie de la trompette*». This suggests that the chorale is a harmonization of the melody, in the same way that the chorales of J.S. Bach are harmonizations of Lutheran melodies. This is unlikely to have been the case in *La ville*. Given that, as far as we know, the melody is original, it is inconceivable that it would have been created without any harmonic considerations. Rather, it would seem that Messiaen either composed the melody for the chorale in conjunction with the harmony or that it was simply a by-product of the harmonic scheme. On the evidence of the music, the former of these two options is most plausible.

The melody is clearly delineated by a combination of first trumpet and trumpet in D, doubled by first oboe, first clarinet and tubular bells. It takes the top line of the harmony throughout. Due to the prevalence of *renversements transposés* chords, this means that the melody is largely removed from the triadic elements of the harmony. Messiaen is consequently able to incorporate large steps into the melody, even when the underlying harmony is confined and often moving in parallel motion. For instance, the fourth phrase of chorale is built on a taut harmonic sequence. By means of a judicious interplay of *renversements transposés* and *typical* chords, the triadic aspect of the harmony remains within a narrow sphere whilst the melody follows its own sequence up and down tritones. Indeed, the movement of the underlying harmony is contrary to that of each tritone leap (see example II:31).

Whilst the melody and harmony of the chorale are distinct, yet interrelated, the carillon in the piano and *claviers* appears at first glance to be simply decorative. Nevertheless, it is no mere curlicue. Closer examination of example II:28 reveals that the combined harmony of the chorale and the carillon is only fully chromatic in the concluding chord of the phrase (bar four). Furthermore, this is the only chord for which the carillon does not double any of the notes. This must be deliberate because the harmony in the wind is identical to that in the first chord of the phrase, even as regards instrumentation (bar one).

It could be argued that only the total chromatic chords are employing the technique of simultaneous contrast. However, the difference in effect between the total chromatic chords and those with, for instance, ten pitches is a matter of degree

rather than fundamental characteristics. In other words Messiaen is utilizing complementary colours throughout the chorale by means of the carillon.

The consequences of the pitches added by the carillon to each chord of the chorale should be considered in terms not only of harmonic tension but also of vivacity of colour. The pattern of total chromatic chords can be determined from table II:iv. However, if these provide the full bloom of colour, it can be presumed that the intensity of the complementary colours waxes and wanes accordingly from the manner in which the carillon varies the number of pitches that it adds to the other chords. For instance, the number of pitches in each chord of the fourth phrase of the chorale is as follows:

Figure II:iii

***La ville* - number of pitches in phrase four of the chorale**

Bar	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8					
No. of notes	10	9	11	10	10	9	9	8	11	9	12	12	12

Given the sequential nature of the harmony and the melody until the second chord of bar five, it is curious that the ebb and flow of chromatic intensity breaks the sequence in bar four. The rhythm may provide an explanation for this anomaly.

The rhythm of the fourth phrase derives from the two divergences from the flow of quavers in phrase one. Bars one to five of phrase four use the quaver-semiquaver produced by rhythmic diminution in bar two of phrase one. Bars six to eight utilize and develop the dotted quaver rhythmic augmentation of the second

chord in bar three of phrase one (see examples II:28 and II:31). The second chord in each of the first five bars of phrase four is rhythmically weaker. By reducing the chromatic intensity in bar four, Messiaen creates potential for an increase in intensity; a technique similar to reducing dynamic levels before a crescendo in order to exaggerate the extent of the increase in volume. Thus, the first chord of bar four contains nine rather than eleven pitches. Messiaen also ensures that the shorter, second chords in bars four and five have a significantly lower chromatic intensity than the chords which follow them. Similarly, whilst the last two chords of phrase three are total chromatic chords, the preceding chord contains just nine pitches. It can be seen, then, that the chromatic intensity is manipulated by Messiaen in order to control the harmonic tension, or colouristic vivacity, of the chorale. Whilst simultaneous contrast chords are totally chromatic, they form one end of a sliding scale with doubling of the fundamental chord at the other end of the scale.

We have seen that, in respect of basic musical ingredients, *Un vitrail* and *La ville* display profound resemblances. Nevertheless, there are, particularly in the chorales, several basic differences between the two works which it is worth noting. In terms of structure, the chorale in *Un vitrail* has just four phrases and lacks both an introduction and a coda, although the latter epithet could be applied to the fourth phrase. Table II:v (see Volume II) illustrates the distribution of chord-types throughout the four phrases of the chorale in *Un vitrail* in the manner that table II:iv performs the same task for *La ville*.

It can be seen that *résonance contractée* (e and f) chords prevail whereas *La ville* contains just two instances of them. However, as with the *accords à renversements transposés* (b) and the *typical* (c) chords, they are often removed from their original function and only appear as a pair on the same bass note at the ends of phrases. Although *renversements transposés* chords figure prominently in the chorale of *Un vitrail*, there are only two *typical* chords.

The first three phrases end with the same four chord cadential sequence of *résonance contractée* chords, first suggesting E flat major and then G major, the harmonic focus of the chorale (see example II:27). Relationships between harmonies at a distance of a major third tend to be particularly strong in the music of Messiaen; a trait that probably derives from the preponderance of these relationships within mode three. It should be noted from example II:27 that Messiaen adds the note C sharp to the chord (marked with an asterisk) which starts this double cadence in order to produce a melodic sequence of repeating tritones ending on G natural.⁴⁴ The cadential sequence is progressively elongated in each phrase so that the repeating tritones of the melody become ever more prominent (example II:33).

The fourth phrase of *Un vitrail* rather perplexingly breaks this series of progressions towards tritone cadences and harmonies based on G major. In fact the last chord of the work is based upon F sharp major. However, the melody concludes on a G natural, which Messiaen may have felt to be more important than the triadic implications underlying harmony (example II:34). It can be seen that the melody of the fourth phrase is a rising whole tone scale. In other words, it is a rare appearance

of mode 1, a modality which tends to occur only when Messiaen wishes to imprint as little of himself on his subject as possible. It is used for instance in the vocal line of the sixth movement of *La Transfiguration, Candor est lucis aeternae*, which is an abstruse allusion to Christ. The appearance of mode 1 in *Un vitrail* concurs with the theory of the work being based on the same subject matter as *La ville*, specifically the inscription from Colossians.⁴⁵

Significantly, the only appearance of a *c* chord in *Un vitrail* is the final chord. In *La ville*, *c* occurred five times: four times in the introduction and just once in the main chorale at the climax. From this it can be observed that Messiaen reserved *c* for key moments in both works. In fact, *c* occurs at exactly the same point in the chorales of both works: the end of the fourth phrase. In both chorales the fourth phrase provides a contrast both in terms of chord types and of melodic progression. The only appearance of *accords à résonance contractée* in the chorale of *La ville* is during the fourth phrase. Similarly, the *typical* chord is not heard in the chorale of *Un vitrail* until the fourth phrase, at which point the melody unexpectedly uses mode 1. In other words, the chorale in *Un vitrail* is, perhaps, curtailed. Like *La ville*, it could have had a further phrase returning to the harmonic and melodic progressions of the first three phrases, which would have meant concluding with the melodic tritones and a cadence onto G major by means of the *résonance contractée* chords. Alternatively, the chorale in *La ville* is an extension of the structure of *Un vitrail*.

Although the liberation of long established harmonic techniques would continue in *Un sourire* and *Éclairs*, there is little in either *Un vitrail* or *La Ville* which foreshadows the transformation of style in Messiaen's remaining compositions. However, the final two bars of *La ville* do perhaps hint at the more restrained sound-world of his final few years. This inkling of what was to come seems to have been recognized by Roger Nichols when he commented that 'although the tam-tams have their say in the final pages, the overall effect is of "onward and upward" - spiritually as much as physically'.⁴⁶ Whilst his reference to the tam-tams suggests a more grandiose conclusion than is actually the case, the description by Nichols of the effect at the end of *La ville* is well-founded. Piano and glockenspiel maintain a resolute *fortissimo*, but the brass and woodwind confound expectations of an overwhelming, tam-tam aided crescendo, dying away instead on the last chord of the chorale to produce a curiously understated conclusion. The gradual transformation of timbre and colour in favour of the higher register extends even to a crescendo on the cymbal whilst the tam-tam dies away (example II:35). The technique is reminiscent of *Et exspecto* in which a chord is changed by removing its constituent notes one at a time. In the case of *La ville*, rather than the gradual disintegration of a texture, the glistening piano and glockenspiel emerge from the chorale. In the light of the earlier discussion on complementary colours, this must surely represent a striking change in the relative intensity of the different colouristic strata perceived by the composer. Beyond Messiaen's very personal colour associations, the conclusion of *La ville* is peculiar in the context of the monumental manner in which it opens.

If Messiaen succeeds in reconciling the expansive spirit of *La ville* with its brevity, it is because the work sounds as if it is part of a much larger scheme. Indeed, the initial summons is reminiscent of the brief re-gathering of forces which occurs at the start of *Choral de la Lumière de Gloire*, the final movement of *La Transfiguration*. Similarly, the rocking tritones of the carillon in the last bar of *La ville* bring to mind the end of the penultimate movement of the *Turangalîla-symphonie* (see example II:35). We have also seen how the chorale of *Un vitrail* could be regarded as being interrupted and that the work fails to conclude on its harmonic focus of G major, even if the melody does end on G natural.

The similarity between *Un vitrail* and *La ville* coupled with the surface grandiosity of the latter does point to Messiaen making a more confident statement in *La ville* of the same subject as *Un vitrail*. The basic musical elements employed in both works are those most favoured by Messiaen throughout his creative life and it is not unreasonable to interpret this trait as the composer occupying safe territory at a time of crisis. Nevertheless, the freedom with which these basic musical components are utilized, particularly the harmonic elements, suggests that the composer was experimenting with his language in order to find the way forward.

By the time that Messiaen completed *La ville* towards the end of 1987, he had accepted the commission for *Éclairs*. Although he could not foresee at this time the size which that project would take, his ready acceptance of a request for a potentially large-scale work suggests that, as he approached his eightieth year, the trauma of composing *Saint François* was close to being assuaged.

Notes

- 1 Hill: Interview with Yvonne Loriod, p.301.
- 2 The composer optimistically suggests fifteen minutes in the score but the first performance (which can be heard on Disques Montaigne, XX1111) lasted 8'20" whilst Rickenbacher's recording (Koch Schwann, 3-1123-2 H 1) lasts for 9'35".
- 3 See appendix one for the full instrumentation.
- 4 See, for instance, Rößler: Contributions, p.32.
- 5 Although, as discussed in the previous chapter, the idea of a colour-chord verges on being a tautology as Messiaen stated that all musical sound was coloured.
- 6 *Fauvette à tête noire aux Bois (avec un accord-couleur à chaque note)*.
- 7 Preface to the score.
- 8 The only exceptions are the short motet *O sacrum convivium!* and, possibly, *Messe de la Pentecôte*.
- 9 Père Kars was a professional pianist from a non-practising Jewish background. He won the second Messiaen piano competition at Royan in 1968, performed much of the composer's music and the two men became good friends. In 1976 he underwent a conversion to Catholicism, which he attributes in part to his experience of playing Messiaen's music.
- 10 Caroline Atherton: Olivier Messiaen's Vingt Regards sur l'enfant-Jésus: The Catholic Perspective, M.Mus. thesis, (Sheffield, June 1998), Appendix.
- 11 Preface to the score.
- 12 Rößler: Contributions, p.79.
- 13 For instance, *Les stigmates* from *Saint François* and *Les ténèbres*, *La Transsubstantiation* and *La joie de la grâce* from *LDSS*.
- 14 In actual fact, neither *The New Jerusalem Bible* nor the *New Revised Standard Version* of the bible specifically mention 'fire' in this section of Revelation. This may be accounted for by the idiosyncracies of the specific edition of the bible which Messiaen read. However, it is also worth noting that *Revelation* draws significantly on the imagery of the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah in this passage, (see Ezek. 1:26-28; 10:1 and Isa. 6:1) and 'fire' is mentioned by both the *Jerusalem* and *RSV* bibles in Ezekiel 1:27 when describing the appearance of Yahweh.
- 15 New Jerusalem Bible, The (standard edition) (London, 1985), p.2035.
- 16 For instance, in theophanies, such as the Transfiguration or the receipt of the Ten Commandments, God appears as a bright cloud.
- 17 Which, incidentally, is the basis of the central section of *Quam dilecta tabernacula tua* from *La Transfiguration*.
- 18 Both figures exclude the piano solo.
- 19 See appendix one for complete instrumentation.
- 20 Griffiths: Last Works, p.513.
- 21 See page 100.
- 22 Programme booklet for concert given by the London Symphony Orchestra under Pierre Boulez, 3 October 1993.
- 23 For instance, is the bird supposed to be present during the first *tableau*, *La Croix*, and, if so, can *Saint François* and *Frère Leon* hear it?
- 24 See Part One, chapter two.
- 25 This continues a marked slowing down of the bird across Messiaen's career. In *Le Loriod* the suggested speed is quaver=160 and in *La fauvette des jardins*, the protagonist sings at quaver=136.
- 26 See, for instance, Part II, chapter two, example I:40.
- 27 Messiaen: musique et couleur, p.161.
- 28 See footnote to the score.
- 29 For full discussion of *Quam dilecta tabernacula tua*, see Christopher Dingle: Olivier Messiaen: La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur, Jésus-Christ - A Provisional Study (Sheffield, September 1994), Volume I: Text; Volume II: Musical Examples. (M.Phil thesis.) Vol. I, p 43-47; Vol. II, p. 19-27.
- 30 Messiaen: musique et couleur, p.161.
- 31 The interview was conducted on April 23, 1979. Messiaen is referring, therefore, to the various retrospectives given in his honour the previous year to celebrate his seventieth birthday.
- 32 Rößler: Contributions, p79-80.

Notes (continued)

- 33 As opposed to the disguised total chromatic chords in *Quam dilecta tabernacula tua* and *La ville*.
- 34 See page 107.
- 35 Preface to the score.
- 36 Example II:28 is from the full score of *La ville*. For the sake of clarity, subsequent examples from the chorale are reductions which omit the carillon. It should be noted that the manuscript score of *La ville* gives no metronome marking for the chorale sections.
- 37 See page 110.
- 38 Robert Sherlaw Johnson: Messiaen (second edition) (London, 1989), p.188. See previous chapter.
- 39 As it appears in combined form before the complete version of the chorale (rehearsal figure 20 in the score).
- 40 Robert Sherlaw Johnson: op. cit., p.188. The letters a, b and c correspond to those assigned by Sherlaw Johnson; i.e. the chords found in *Petites Esquisses*. There are three further chords represented by the letters d, e and f. The last pair, e and f, are the components of the *accord à résonance contractée*. The numbers indicate the «*tableau*» of the chord in terms of the bass note. For chords a, b, c and d: 1=C#/Db, 2=D, 3=D#/Eb... 12=C. However, for e and f: 1=D, 2=D#/Eb, 3=E... 12=C#/Db. Although potentially confusing, this distinction is made in order to maintain consistency with Messiaen's classifications of the *renversements transposés* and *résonance contractée* chords respectively (see Part I, chapter one). The table takes no account of register. Underlinings represent chords in which the carillon completes the total chromatic.
- 41 It should be remembered that in Messiaen's harmony tritone relationships are as important, indeed essentially interchangeable with, more conventional tonic-dominant relationships.
- 42 e and f in table II:iv
- 43 i.e. either surrounded by other chord-types, or by *renversements transposés* chords with different bass notes.
- 44 Without the added C sharp, the melody note would be A natural.
- 45 See page 106.
- 46 Roger Nichols in the programme booklet for concert given by the London Symphony Orchestra under Pierre Boulez, 3 October 1993.

Chapter three

Un sourire pour Orchestre

Composed in 1989 as Messiaen's contribution to the Mozart bicentenary, *Un sourire* heralds the almost classical restraint which characterizes *Éclairs*. It is notable among Messiaen's orchestral works for being well within the capabilities of many non-professional orchestras.¹ Furthermore, with the brass being restricted to a trumpet and four horns, and double basses being dispensed with altogether, it does not pose untoward financial or logistical problems.

As is well documented, Messiaen was secretive regarding work in progress and it is therefore difficult to ascertain the exact chronology of *Éclairs*, *Un sourire* and the *Pièce pour piano et quatuor à cordes*. Nevertheless, it can be presumed from the dates given for each work² that Messiaen twice interrupted work on *Éclairs*... in order to compose the smaller works. Messiaen's letter to Zubin Mehta accepting the commission for what would become *Éclairs* mentions two outstanding projects to compose orchestral works.³ *La ville* must have been one, and *Un sourire* is, presumably, the other. In other words, either Messiaen undertook work on *Éclairs* in the full knowledge that it would have to be interrupted, or he did not expect *Éclairs* to be so big. Messiaen's secrecy extends to the whole of his output. It is known that earlier large scale works, such as *Turangalila* had relatively modest beginnings.

However, so far as we can tell, this is the only instance in which there is clear evidence that Messiaen postponed work on a major project in order to fulfil relatively minor commissions.

There are two possible (and not incompatible) reasons for such a change from his normal, single-minded working practice. First and foremost, it is clear that these were commissions that Messiaen was particularly keen to accept and fulfil. The *Pièce* was commissioned, along with miniatures for the same forces from many other leading composers, to celebrate the ninetieth birthday of Alfred Schlee, head of Universal Edition. Universal Edition had not only published *Cantéyodjayâ* and *Oiseaux exotiques*, but also many works by Messiaen's pupils. In addition, Messiaen and Schlee had become long term friends and so it was only natural that Messiaen should be particularly keen to write the *Pièce*.

There can be no doubt that Messiaen was particularly enthused by the prospect of writing a tribute to Mozart. His lifelong love of the music of Mozart is evidenced by the inclusion in *Traité* of his analyses of all the Mozart piano concerti. The only other composers accorded such prominence are Debussy, Le Jeune's *Printemps* and Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. At the British première of *Un sourire*⁴ Kent Nagano related how, shortly before the work's world première the previous December, he had spoken to Messiaen in Paris. Messiaen had said that he had particular affection for *Un sourire* because, for the first time in his life, he had composed the work without any concern for how it was received. He had composed it purely for his own pleasure. This could raise questions about Messiaen's attitude in every other work, but I would

suggest that it merely means that Messiaen would not have been concerned even if the piece had been a complete flop.

The second reason for interrupting work on *Éclairs...* could have been Messiaen's health. Kent Nagano has indicated that even in December 1991, when *Éclairs...* must have been nearing completion, it was not certain whether Messiaen would be able to finish it before his death.⁵ Throughout the last few years of his life Messiaen's health was fragile. For instance, Yvonne Loriod withdrew from a performance of the *Turangalîla-symphonie* with the London Symphony Orchestra under Kent Nagano at the Barbican on 15 June 1989 to look after Messiaen who had had a bad fall.⁶ Uncertain of whether he would live to complete *Éclairs...*, and doubtful of the worth of the pieces he had composed after the completion of *Saint François*, it is not surprising that Messiaen was not averse to turning his attention to short-term commissions which he could be more certain of completing.

As the more substantial of these two interruptions in the composition of *Éclairs...*, both in terms of duration and instrumentation, it is quite natural that *Un sourire* should be closest in spirit to the larger work. Like much of *Éclairs...* it inhabits a free-floating, string dominated sound world which has essentially dispensed with bass textures.⁷ Furthermore, with the intimacy and surface simplicity of the gestures, built upon strong 'tonal' foundations, *Un sourire* could be viewed as a preparatory vignette for the larger work, especially as it shares the same basic tonality of A major. Indeed, Paul Griffiths states that it 'stands close to *Éclairs sur l'Au-*

Delà... in points of style and form as well as orchestration'.⁸ As the first public intimation of the sound-world of *Éclairs*, it is worthy of particular attention.⁹

Just two types of music appear in *Un sourire*. A warm string melody, coloured by solo woodwind instruments, alternates with the chirpy song of an “exotic” bird from the xylophones and wind instruments. As is to be expected, successive sections of the resulting ABABABA form do not so much develop as expand previously heard material. Indeed, the birdsong passages could be viewed as making somewhat whimsical interjections into a single, seamless string melody.

Harmonically *Un sourire* explores tonal and modal ambiguities and can be analysed in terms of either. In this respect *Un sourire* is very close to the world of Messiaen's earliest works, especially in the passages of string melody. However, other aspects of *Un sourire* place it firmly within later years. For instance, the subtle colouration of the string melody by solo woodwind instruments at a low dynamic (example II:36). This alteration of timbre in conjunction with melodic and harmonic movement must surely be a reciprocal benefit not only of Messiaen's increasing emphasis on colour from the 1950s onwards, but also of his attempts to transcribe the timbral diversity of birdsong in his compositions.

Nevertheless, it is the modal and tonal ambiguity which will dominate discussion of the string melody. In fact, ambiguities would be more accurate because there is ambiguity at every level: between tonal and modal systems, within each of

those systems and also between melody and harmony. A detailed examination of the first twelve bars will illustrate this point.

A modal analysis

In modal terms, the opening melody passage progresses from mode 2 to mode 3, with the first two phrases (bars 1-4) being different transpositions of mode 2, whilst the longer third phrase (bars 5-12) moves through two incarnations of mode 3 (example II:37). The first two bars swing through the tritones of mode 2ⁱⁱ, whereas bars three and four are mode 2ⁱ. The 'modulation' to mode 3 harmonies in bar five instigates parallel movement in all parts. This is where the modal ambiguities begin to surface for, whilst bar five is comfortably mode 3ⁱⁱ, 'foreign' notes begin to infiltrate the harmony in bar six. This chord does not correspond exactly to any of the regular modes.¹⁰ It is still essentially mode 3ⁱⁱ, but with the intrusion of a foreign note in the form of B-flat. The chord in bar seven is a bigger problem. On the one hand, it could be viewed still as being mode 3ⁱⁱ, but with both B-flat and D natural as foreign notes, or, on the other hand, it could equally be regarded as being mode 3ⁱ with D-flat and F natural as foreign notes. However, the prominence of D-flat and F natural within the chord suggest that mode 3ⁱⁱ is still dominant.

Such explanations of the harmony may at first seem dubious and raise a number of questions. Why, for instance, should bar seven be thought of as having two foreign notes when it could be labelled as mode 3ⁱⁱⁱ with E-flat being the only foreign note? In other words, what is the basis for deciding which modes are prominent and, therefore, which notes are foreign notes? Furthermore, given the intrusion of foreign

notes, what is the basis for analysing this passage in modal terms? These questions can be addressed by examining the differences between mode 3ⁱⁱ and mode 3ⁱ and then returning to bars five to seven.

Mode three is constructed from the intervallic sequence of a tone followed by two semitones. A mode of nine notes is thus created. The three notes absent from the twelve of the chromatic scale create an augmented triad. In mode 3ⁱ, the three missing notes are C sharp, F natural and A natural and in mode 3ⁱⁱ, they are D natural, F sharp and B-flat. In other words, a comparison of any two transpositions of mode three reveals six common notes and hence six different notes.

The passage in *Un sourire* from bar five to bar twelve begins firmly in mode 3ⁱⁱ and ends in mode 3ⁱ. The intervening bars are a transition by step from one transposition to the other. Bar five is not merely in mode 3ⁱⁱ, but emphatically not mode 3ⁱ. D-flat, and F natural are each heard in all three chords and A natural is heard twice. In other words, the three notes missing from mode 3ⁱ are given prominence. In bar six, the foreign note, B-flat, represents the first tentative assertion of mode 3ⁱ, and this is strengthened by the arrival of D natural in bar seven. Bar eight reaffirms mode 3ⁱⁱ by virtue of the dominance of C sharp and A natural, two of the notes absent from mode 3ⁱ. As such, it can be regarded as the resolution of the modal dissonances created by the encroachment of mode 3ⁱ. It is also the last gasp of mode 3ⁱⁱ, for the next bar strongly asserts mode 3ⁱ by the inclusion of B-flat, F sharp and D natural, all of which are absent from mode 3ⁱⁱ. As such, it is the A natural in bar nine which is the foreign note. The concluding two chords are both in mode 3ⁱ, although it is worth

noting that the chord in bar ten is relatively ambiguous with only F sharp confirming the specific modality.

It is possible, therefore, to analyse this phrase purely in terms of Messiaen's modes of limited transpositions and without making any reference to tonality. However, the string melody can also be viewed as an exploration, without recourse to pastiche, of that most classical of devices, the perfect cadence.

A tonal analysis

The first two chords in the bottom stave of example II:37 are a dominant seventh chord of E major (third inversion) and the first inversion of A major (with an added sixth). The harmonized melody in the violins gently swings in each phrase between the accompanying harmony and triads built at a distance of a tritone. **Example II:38** gives the first twelve bars of *Un sourire* with enharmonic alterations to emphasize the tonal derivation of much of the harmony. The chord progressions explore the ambiguities created by a chordal parity between dominant and tritone relationships.

With the dominant seventh chord of E major as a touchstone, the upper harmonies of the first two bars open and close on its tritone partner of B-flat major. In between, E major turns into its relative minor, C sharp minor, although this could be interpreted as adding a sixth to the bed of E major. Bars three and four chart a similar course. With a chord of A major with added sixth as the base, the upper harmonies commence with C minor, which is, of course, the relative minor of E-flat major, the

tritone partner of A major and which has B flat major as its dominant. The C minor chord moves to its tritone partner, F sharp minor, thus highlighting the ambiguity between A major with added sixth and a seventh chord in F sharp minor. A leap up to E flat major enables a tritone resolution onto an unambiguous chord of A major, the key of *Un sourire*.

With the start of parallel movement in bar five, the harmony begins to cloud and diatonic interpretations become slightly more tenuous. Nevertheless, major or minor triads are prominent in every chord with the exception of the third chord in bar five (marked x). It is difficult to believe that this is simply a coincidence, as suggested by George Benjamin,¹¹ which would happen with any chord of six or more notes. The spacing of the notes appears to emphasize the triadic basis of these chords even if the enharmonic notation, used for modal reasons or to assist the performers, disguises the fact. For instance, the D-flats in the first two chords of bar five mask the presence of A major in both of these chords. Indeed, these two chords can be described as the combination of A major with harmonies at a distance of a major third: D-flat major and F major, respectively. It is probably fanciful to suggest that this may be related to the penchant among composers from the Classical period for harmonic relationships with chords at a distance of a major third from the tonic.¹² Nevertheless, whilst bars one to four are exclusively based on tritone and dominant relationships, these are largely superseded by major third relationships in bars five to twelve.

As has already been said, *x* is the only chord in which there is no clear diatonic triad and, as such, it can be regarded as a transitional chord before the harmony expands in both directions in bars six to eight. E minor is admittedly contained within this chord, and there are strong elements of both diminished and augmented triads, which perhaps assist the chord's transitional quality.

Having gently eased the harmony away from A major in bar five, it then returns in bars six to eight by the progression A-flat major (dominant of D-flat major and major third from E major), D-flat major (major third from A major), A major in the upper parts. The function of lower parts (bars six and seven) is more difficult to explain in diatonic terms, essentially being resonance or colouristic elements typical of Messiaen's harmonic writing. They obviously create tension with the chords that they support and could be given the paradoxical label of displaced clusters. Their pitches are those required to turn the A-flat major triad into a cluster but these pitches have been displaced by an octave. Taken as a whole, each of the chords in bars six and seven thus retains both harmonic clarity and the tension provided by the dissonances of a cluster.

The first inversion seventh chord of B minor in bar nine suggests a diatonic 'Iib' relationship with the 'tonic' of A major and its dominant, and the goal of this phrase, E major. However, given Messiaen's preference for major tonalities, it is more consistent to describe it as a D major chord with added sixth. This, of course, is the sub-dominant of A major and has a tritone relationship with the dominant seventh chord of A-flat major in the next bar (ten). Bar ten could be regarded as elongating

the progression to E major in bar eleven as it would be plausible to progress from the chord in bar nine directly to E major. The chord in bar ten has a double resolution onto E major, approaching it harmonically-speaking from both sides by the distance of a major third. This provides a peculiarly effective resolution, presumably because the combination of A-flat major and C major in bar ten shares A-flat (G sharp) and E natural with E major and yet there are also notes which require resolution.

On a broad scale, the opening phrase of *Un sourire* can be described as a decorated perfect cadence followed by an elongated imperfect cadence. As befits an imperfect cadence, there is little sense of finality to the E major chord in bar eleven. It is in first inversion and its dominant function within *Un sourire* is stressed by the presence of both D natural and F sharp. The 'perfect cadence' chords also operate on a larger scale, with each of the melody's four phases alternately ending with E major and A major harmonies, so that the piece eventually comes to rest on an unadulterated, root position chord of A major.

Both the modal analysis and the quasi-diatonic analysis have their values and shed light on these twelve bars but neither one is particularly adequate in explaining the compositional thought behind the music. Messiaen stated on many occasions that he did not recognise the division of music into modal, tonal, serial or any other 'system' and the truth of the matter is that his music is an amalgamation of such systems. Any analysis of his music must, therefore, draw upon the languages of, for instance, modality *and* tonality if it is to reflect the composer's conscious or sub-conscious thought processes in creating the music.

Chord-types

Whilst the first five bars can be described relatively succinctly in terms either of modality or tonality, several of the chords from bar six onwards are more problematical. It is at this point that we discover the benefits, and the pitfalls, of Messiaen's own terminology for chord-types. Messiaen would describe bar six as «*accord à résonance contractée N° 8, accord B*», bar seven as «*accord à résonance contractée N° 1, accord B*» and the chord in bar nine as being «*renversements transposés N° 2, accord D*». On the one hand, this tells us very little about the actual relationship between the various chords. In particular, it obscures the clear triadic progression (A flat major, D flat major, A major, D major, A flat major) from the upper to middle registers in bars six to ten. On the other hand, the presence of identifiable chord-types confirms that these bars are not specifically modal and that, in example II:37 as a whole, Messiaen is using a 'pick and mix' approach to mode and chord-type. Nevertheless, it is worth observing that, in this passage, Messiaen uses the *typical* chord as a strictly modal device. First of all, bar five contains the A7/Db and F7/A *typical* chords, which have the function of re-inforcing the sense of A major whilst moving the music gently away from that specific triad. Secondly, bar ten consists of the Ab7/C major *typical* chord. Remembering that the *typical* chords are built upon the augmented relationships of mode 3, this chord 'resolves' onto the related triad of E major.

Melody

The implications, whether modal or tonal, of one as yet unconsidered aspect of the opening phrase of *Un sourire* provides the key in this case to the analytical synthesis mooted earlier: the melody. It is not surprising to discover that the linear aspect of the first twelve bars of *Un sourire* starts in mode 2 and then changes to mode 3. However, the precise modalities involved unlock both the modal *and* the tonal structure of *Un sourire*. Although in harmonic terms bars one and two are in mode 2ⁱⁱ and bars three and four are in mode 2ⁱ, the melody in all four bars is in mode 2ⁱ (example II:39). Likewise, whilst bars five to twelve are a harmonic progression from mode 3ⁱⁱ to mode 3ⁱ, the melody throughout is in mode 3ⁱⁱ. The significance of the utilization of mode 2ⁱ and mode 3ⁱⁱ only becomes apparent when it is realized that these are the transpositions of modes 2 and 3 which contain the A major triad, the key of *Un sourire*.¹³

In addition, the melody reinforces some of the harmonic relationships noted above. Although bars five and six are still very much in the modal and tonal domain of A major, the melody picks out the augmented triad of E natural, A-flat and C natural which is crucial to the 'resolution' onto E major in bars ten and eleven. At the same time, in its approach to the A major chord of bar eight, the melody delineates its major third partner in the form of the triad of F major.

Bars eight to eleven are derived from the retrograde of bars three and four (which are a variant of bars one and two). Furthermore, it would not be too fanciful to suggest that either bar nine or bar ten has been displaced by an octave, thus disguising

the 'leading note' relationship between the two bars. This adds further weight to the suggestion that the chord in bar nine could resolve onto E major as easily as that in bar ten.

It could be argued that the melody is purely a product of the harmony and that any of the linear parts could carry as much importance as the top line. This would be to forget the orchestration, however, as the woodwind highlighting of the top string line reaffirms that this passage has as much to do with melody as with harmony. As such, this simple, but effective example provides ample justification for Messiaen's wish that quotations of his music should be of the full score. Although the limitations of short score in terms of its disregard of timbral considerations are of admittedly minor significance in *Un sourire*, there are many works in which the orchestration is at least as important as the harmonic and melodic criteria.

The remainder of Un sourire

Each occurrence of the string melody in *Un sourire* becomes harmonically more adventurous, developing aspects of the original melody as if inspired to be slightly more daring by the exuberant birdsong which punctuates each unfolding of the melody. In the second string passage (example II:40), the developments are minimal. Two extra *typical* chords are added (bar five) to prolong the encircling of A major at the start of the melody's second section. The progression towards the final cadence is different to enable the passage to end in A major (without any added notes) rather than E major. However, the final chord is approached not by the Db7/F

typical chord in the manner of the first phrase, but by the Bb7/D *typical* chord. In tonal terms, this could be regarded as a combination of the sub-dominant of A major and a variation on the 'dominant of the dominant' in the form of the tritone of the dominant.¹⁴ In modal terms this chord is in mode 3ⁱⁱⁱ, which is the only transposition other than mode 3ⁱⁱ to contain the A major triad. In addition, it does not contain the E major triad. It is underlining the move away from E major towards A major. This is supported by the two chords in the preceding bar.¹⁵ The first is the D7/F sharp major *typical* chord, and can be seen as a preparation for the Bb7/D *typical* chord in the penultimate bar of the phrase as it is from the same mode 3ⁱⁱⁱ family. The second chord in bar eleven of example II:40 is the F7/A *typical* chord, which is from the mode 3ⁱⁱ family. In other words, the final A major chord of the phrase is approached by three *typical* chords, two from mode 3ⁱⁱⁱ and one from mode 3ⁱⁱ - the two modes which contain the A major triad. Messiaen is broadening the modal scope in order to reinforce the sense of A major.

The bracketed bar in example II:40 is a melodic variation, and development, of the intervallic sequence in bars eight to eleven of example II:37, which is itself derived from the opening bars of the melody. The parallel harmony of the bracketed bar is formed by a series of independently minded *renversements transposés* chords. These do not, of course, fit comfortably into any mode. We have seen, nonetheless, that the *renversements transposés* chord in bar nine of example II:37 can be interpreted in modal terms as a simple linking harmony, with one foreign note from the previous transposition of mode 3. On this basis, its appearance in the bracketed bar of example II:40 takes the harmony through three transpositions of mode 3 before

coming to rest on the remaining transposition with the first chord of the next bar. This progression also forces the melody out of its hitherto relatively strict modality. It can be seen, therefore, that Messiaen is breaking down the clear monogamous relationship between just two transpositions of the mode outlined in the first twelve bars. Furthermore, triadic elements of the second and third *renversements transposés* chords, D flat and G flat, suggest a link with the *typical* chords in the following two bars, as the D flat major triad is part of the mode 3ⁱⁱ family of *typical* chords whilst G flat belongs to the mode 3ⁱⁱⁱ family.

The third string passage (**example II:41**) dispenses with the opening four bars of the melody, commencing instead with its second section which is repeated exactly as far as the original cadence. E major appears but, by being transferred upwards in register as part of a *résonance contractée* chord, it confounds expectations of resolution. It becomes instead the catalyst for a development of the basic components of the melody, notably the falling tritone and thirds. Broadly speaking the passage moves away from E major harmonies towards the realm of D major harmonies, only to revert back to E major at the last moment. The movement is dominated by falling tritones which are interspersed with rising major thirds and a major seventh. The three bracketed bars are of particular interest. The first of these starts with a clear chord of A major in the upper harmonies, but by this point the harmony has been clouded to such an extent as to diminish any sense that this is the tonic. In this harmonically hostile terrain, the links this chord has with its neighbours are pointedly tenuous. It is worth noting, however, that although the three chords which follow are *accords à renversements transposés*, the triads which underpin them delineate

harmonies built on the augmented triad on D natural. These triads combine to form the family of *typical* chords which form the basis for the principal A major cadences of *Un sourire*. These chords are paving the way for the Bb7/D *typical* chord, thus creating the expectation of a resolution onto A major in the manner of the previous string passage (see example II:40).

The melody meanwhile has descended a tritone from C sharp to G natural but, by means of a passing note, has also initiated another sequence of major thirds: B natural, G natural, E-flat. These three notes are, of course, the basis of the only family of *typical* chords not so far mentioned. The *typical* chord combining G major and E-flat major is the only member of this family to appear in *Un sourire*, and then just as a single instance during a sequence in the fourth (and final) string passage. In other words, this group of *typical* chords is essentially 'foreign' to *Un sourire*, with its only overt interjection being the result of a device designed to increase harmonic tension. It is no surprise, therefore, that the basic augmented triad of this family of *typical* chords is highlighted in the melody line at the moment of greatest harmonic instability in the work. Messiaen switches the principal harmony from the upper to the lower parts at this point by changing from *résonance contractée* to *renversements transposés* chords, thus enabling this melodic fragment to occur.

The fourth string passage is the longest of all and develops the material in a manner similar to the third passage, with the same intervals providing the basis of the melodic movement. Allusions to A major are frequent, but the significance of E major has largely been displaced by the D natural/F-sharp/B-flat family of *typical*

chords. This prepares the way for the final cadence onto root position A major from the Bb7/D *typical* chord, with the horns and bassoons adding a little bloom to this understated conclusion (example II:42).

The four passages of string melody in *Un sourire* are thrown into relief by the exuberant exotic birdsong from the winds and percussion which periodically interrupts the proceedings. One slightly puzzling aspect of *Un sourire*, marking it out as unique amongst the works written after 1951, is that Messiaen declines to name the specific 'exotic bird' which cheerfully breaks the flow of string melody. Given his punctilious nature, especially in the context of the hundreds of birds named in other works, it seems extremely unlikely that this was a mere oversight. There is also no mention in his programme note to the work, nor did he add the bird's name after the first performance (and before the score was engraved) when he must surely have received enquiries, not least from the conductor. Harry Halbreich has identified it as the Southern African *Cossyphes d'Heuglin*,¹⁶ a bird which inspired an entire solo piano movement in *Des canyons* (example II:43). In *Un sourire*, however, the *Cossyphes d'Heuglin* produces harmonies which are far simpler than in its earlier, more dissonant outing, which are clearly derived from the tonal preoccupations of the work.

Although clearly in the *style oiseau*, the birdsong passages in *Un sourire* provide one of the clearest examples of Messiaen overtly manipulating the birdsong for tonal considerations. In fact, despite retaining a greater speed, it is very close in spirit to the *souvenir* passages in certain pieces from *Catalogue d'oiseaux* in the extent to which tonality has permeated the birdsong.¹⁷

The first birdsong entry (**example II:44**) alternates A sharp minor and E major harmonies. In other words, the tonality reached at the end of the first string passage preceded by its tritone partner. Furthermore, the second E major chord is combined with C major to make it a *typical* chord whilst the melody falls through a major seventh, incorporating *en route* the falling major sixth identified by Messiaen as a notable Mozartian trait.¹⁸

The ensuing passage for the xylos is less clear in its tonal allegiances, but the intervals are mostly consonant with just one minor ninth nestling amongst the minor tenths (**example II:45**). This is in marked contrast to similar passages in works such as *Chronochromie* in which major sevenths, minor ninths, tritones and seconds reign supreme.

Just as Messiaen moves away from and back to his principal harmonies in each of the string passages, the birdsong sections return to the harmonic realm of the string melody. There is, therefore, a clear harmonic bridge linking each birdsong section with the ensuing string passages. For instance, the last section of the first birdsong passage¹⁹ initiates a dialogue between the xylos and the wind (**example II:46**). The xylos, move in minor tenths and in elevenths, and suggest a link with A flat harmonies. This is answered in the wind by a pair of *résonance contractée* chords, with the second being topped by an A flat major triad. Furthermore, this chord has an added E natural, so that the top of the chord is the augmented triad on A flat. This starts the preparation for the E major harmonies at the start of the second string phrase.

The last bar of the first birdsong section uses *renversements transposés* chords to move from A major, via its tritone partner of E-flat major, to D major. This last chord is, in fact, the same one which is found in bar nine of the first string passage (with an additional G sharp added at the top) and is thus the basis of the expansion of the second string passage. As mentioned in the discussion of the first string phrase, it resolves comfortably onto E major. In addition, by virtue of being part of the same *typical* chord family, the D major component of the chord links it with B flat major, which partners E major at the beginning of the second string passage.

The third birdsong section is the only one in which fragments could be said to develop, albeit in a limited manner. After opening with identical material to the first birdsong outing (the preceding string cadence being identical), two short passages plant the idea of systematic rising stepwise motion in the mind of the listener (**example II:47**). The next twenty-four bars consist of the, by now familiar, repetitive fragments before Messiaen returns to the rising motion in a progression which has had virtually all its ornithological characteristics plucked out for the sake of harmonic unity (**example II:48**). It rises from E major to conclude with its *typical* chord partners of A flat and C major, via a series of *renversements transposés* chords, arranged so that they are framed by E naturals, which are picked out by the trumpet. This progression has, in the words of Paul Griffiths ‘a marked introductory force’.²⁰ Indeed, it provides the fanfare for the extended final string passage.

Messiaen admitted on several occasions that his birdsong notations inevitably bore an element of his voice. Tonal considerations can often be found in birdsong passages and common chords are not infrequent in their harmonization. It is rare, however, to find an example which is so explicit about its rôle within the larger harmonic strategy, particularly in a work in which the birdsong is not the primary subject matter. Perhaps it was for this reason that Messiaen refrained from naming the species in the score. In a piece composed for his own satisfaction, he was, for once, willing to take all the credit.

Notes

- 1 For instance, it has been performed successfully by the orchestra at Sheffield University.
- 2 1988-1992 (*Éclairs...*), 1989 (*Un sourire*) and 1991 (*Pièce...*)
- 3 See appendix six.
- 4 20 September, 1992.
- 5 Private communication from Kent Nagano.
- 6 She was replaced by Jean-François Heisser.
- 7 The lowest note in *Un sourire* is A natural a minor tenth below middle C, and this note only appears as the root of the final A major chord.
- 8 Griffiths: *Last Works*, p.517.
- 9 It is worth noting, however, that despite hearing *Un sourire* the general expectation was still that *Éclairs* would be a monumental work in the vein of *La Transfiguration* or *Des canyons*.
- 10 It could be regarded as being in the rather dubious mode 7 (7ⁱⁱⁱ to be precise).
- 11 See interview, appendix four.
- 12 This trait is, of course, more closely associated with Haydn and Beethoven than Mozart.
- 13 It is true that mode 3ⁱⁱⁱ also contains the A major triad, but the important point is that mode 3ⁱ does not.
- 14 Or the dominant of the tritone!
- 15 Bar eleven of example II:40.
- 16 French programme note in the booklet to DG compact disc: 445 947-2. Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen performs on the same disc so it would seem likely that, at the very least, she confirmed the species of bird for Halbreich.
- 17 See, for example, the end of *Le Lorient*.
- 18 See *Technique*, p.23.
- 19 Rehearsal figure four in the score.
- 20 Griffiths: *Last Works*, p.517.

Chapter four

Pièce

pour piano et quatuor à chords

Composed whilst Messiaen was still labouring on *Éclairs*, the *Pièce* for piano and string quartet is an anomalous work in almost every respect, especially so in the context of the composer's other post-war music. It is the first chamber work since the composition of *Le merle noir* forty years earlier. It is an entirely abstract work. At approximately four minutes it is by far the shortest free-standing post-war work.¹ Most remarkable of all is that this miniature is an occasional piece, written «pour le 90^e anniversaire d'Alfred Schlee et d'Universal Edition».² It was first performed at a special gala concert by Claude Helffer and the Arditti string quartet, together with many other specially commissioned works from composers represented by Universal Edition, including several of Messiaen's former students.

In the (justifiably) brief paragraph devoted to *Pièce* in *The Messiaen Companion*, Paul Griffiths states that:

...its form is a simple palindromic ABA of generally antiphonal patches around a toccata which similarly... uses the keyboard and the quartet in alternation. It could easily have been written at the time of the *Préludes*, and to that extent it makes a small, acutely direct statement of the permanence of musical thought displayed so much more vastly by *Éclairs sur l'au-delà*...³

Griffiths is, for once, appreciably wide of the mark.

The sound world of the *Pièce* is closest in spirit and musical language to radical works of the 1950s and 1960s. Messiaen may have been precocious in the development of his inimitable style, but it is inconceivable that he could have written the *Pièce* with the compositional devices at his disposal in 1929. It does make a 'statement of the permanence of musical thought' in his music, but, perhaps mindful of the progressive attitude towards publishing radical music at Universal Edition, Messiaen's thoughts turned in this instance to works such as *Chronochromie*. For example, the short passage in the *Pièce* of ten, eleven and twelve note chords which, uniquely, combines piano and strings is strangely redolent of passages such as the depiction of the *Pygargue* in the *Introduction* and *Coda* in *Chronochromie* (example II:49). Furthermore, it is built upon harmonies which had not been invented at the time of the *Préludes*, namely the *accords tournants* and *accords à resonance contractée* in the piano part. However, the most obvious aspect that sets *Pièce* apart from Messiaen's early works is the inclusion of precisely notated birdsong⁴ - the B section of the palindromic ABA form⁵ consists of the song of a *Fauvette des jardins* with string interjections.

A comparison of the two A sections reveals that the structural palindrome also operates at a deeper level with the four types of music in the first A section returning in reverse order after the B section. *Pièce* is an example of Messiaen's idiosyncratic brand of motivic development, albeit on a modest scale.

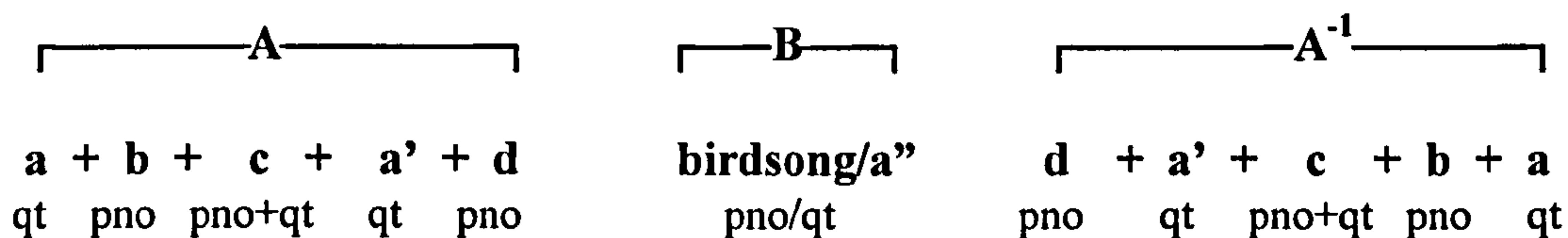
The opening four note unison string flourish is the basis for all the unaccompanied string music (example II:50). It appears in a further guise in the A section as a canon with the motif being displaced by a semiquaver as it descends through the quartet (example II:51). This burst of energy is reminiscent of far more complex passages based upon the same simple principle, notably the fearsome depiction of 'holy terror' at the end of *Terribilis est locus iste* from *La Transfiguration*.

Messiaen develops the same four note motivic cell to construct the string comments on the piano's rendition of a *Fauvette des jardins*. The quartet continues the canon of example II:51, but with the added spice of octave displacement. Messiaen then transposes the pitches of the motif, starting successive entries on the notes B natural, C sharp and B flat respectively, the consequence of which is to use all twelve pitches (example II:52). Finally, he provides a climax to the 'B' section by developing the motif and the pitch relationships it has encountered en route in an almost Beethovenian manner (example II:53).

The seamless nature of the interplay in the B section between the string motif and the *Fauvette des jardins* on the piano is an attempt to confound the sense of timbral and stylistic juxtaposition on the horizontal plane, just as the chords in example II:49 provide vertical coalescence. Indeed, the complete absence of sustained string writing - either providing a harmonic bed for, or being decorated by, the piano - is indicative of the fact that the exploration of the interaction of opposites

is the principal concern of the *Pièce*. This can be seen from a more detailed representation of the form:

Figure II:iv
The structure of *Pièce*



The two passages for solo piano in the A sections are the closest to the *Préludes* style to which Griffiths alludes. However, although the harmony hints at triads, the kinds of non-modal chords employed do not appear in Messiaen's music until at least the 1940s, and then within a much more transparent tonal perspective. The first piano fragment steers a course towards an underlying A major, yet upon its return contrives, by means of inverted progressions, to conclude instead on A flat major (examples II:54 and II:55)

Although there is no overt harmonic link between the first and second solo piano sections, the latter containing no clear tonal allusions, there is a rhythmic link (x in example II:54). This may seem to be a tenuous connection, but it is noticeable by virtue of the absence of any other rhythmic activity. In the second solo piano passage, it first occurs in the Stravinskyian chromatic tune entwined within the space of a major third (example II:56). The importance of this rhythmic cell becomes apparent on its appearance in a bass texture counter-melody (example II:57). The bracketed notes (a) are a clear reference to the string motif, even if it is frustrated in its descent towards D natural until the end of the phrase.

The correlation of the rhythmic cell, *x*, with the melodic motif, *a*, creates a subliminal association between the opening flourish of *Pièce* and the ensuing, apparently unrelated, piano passage. That this is discernible only in retrospect by means of the second A section, merely strengthens the sense of an accommodation having been found between contradictory elements. Although the material at the end of the work is the same as at the beginning, the seemingly disparate components have acquired a new depth of meaning.

Notes

- 1 *Chant des déportées* is, admittedly, not much longer. Several other short works have recently come to light, such as *Monodie* for organ. However, unlike the *Pièce*, these were not really intended for public consumption.
- 2 Dedication in the score.
- 3 Griffiths: Last Works, p.517.
- 4 As opposed to the highly stylised birdsong passages that occur in a few works before the 1950s.
- 5 Messiaen might have preferred the term non-retrogradable.

Chapter five

The miniatures: an overview

By the time that Messiaen wrote the *Pièce*, work was at an advanced stage on *Éclairs*. He had gone from stating that ‘he’d finished with composing’¹ to writing an ambitious work for his largest ever orchestra. The series of miniatures composed in the wake of *Saint François* charts this revival. We have seen in the four preceding chapters that Messiaen effectively returned to compositional first principles in *Petites esquisses* and *Un vitrail*. He pared his music down and drew upon the materials which were most familiar. This can be seen in his choice of birds in these two works. All the species could have been notated at or near his mountain retreat at Petichet. In the progression from *Un vitrail* to *La ville*, Messiaen can be seen attempting to work out the best way forward. There are signs that confidence is returning with the more grandiose gestures of *La ville*, but it is essentially a bolder statement of the same materials that are used in *Un vitrail*.

La ville was composed in 1987, before the worldwide celebrations of Messiaen’s 80th birthday. By the time he composed *Un sourire* in 1989, he had already begun *Éclairs sur l’au-delà...* and there are distinct signs of renewed confidence. Not least is his use of an anonymous «*chant d’oiseau exotique*».

There are aspects of these miniatures which suggest echoes of *Saint François*, not least of which are the passages for *Fauvette à tête noire* in *Un vitrail* and *La ville*. Nevertheless, there are also features which suggest renewal. There is evidence of

Messiaen taking a more liberal approach to some of his harmonic techniques, such as the *renversement transposés* chords. The distinct lack of bass textures throughout these works should also be noted. Furthermore, there are several specific passages which are prophetic of *Éclairs*. The *hors tempo* birdsong sections of *Un vitrail* take the technique a step further than *Saint François*, suggesting possibilities which bear fruit in the ninth movement of *Éclairs*, *Plusieurs Oiseaux des arbres de Vie*. The chorale textures of *Un vitrail* and *La ville* pave the way for the opening movement of *Éclairs*, *Apparition du Christ glorieux....* The string writing in *Un sourire* suggests profound resonances with the two broad movements for strings in *Éclairs*, *Demeurer dans l'Amour...* and *Le Christ, lumière du Paradis*. Finally, the rather manic string passages which develop the opening motif of the *Pièce* create a similar effect to the hammering string passages found in the tenth movement of *Éclairs*, *Le chemin de l'Invisible*. As we shall see in Part III, there are also other links between the miniatures and *Éclairs*.

Despite lacking confidence and, at first, direction, the miniatures are always well crafted. It may be that some of them, in the words of George Benjamin, 'don't add anything new to the catalogue',² but they contain, nevertheless, moments of charm. More importantly, they imbued in Messiaen the self-assurance to write *Éclairs*, a work which finds a confident composer at the height of his powers.

Notes

1 Hill: Interview with Yvonne Loriod, p.301.

2 Benjamin: Interview - see appendix four.

Part III

*Éclairs sur
l’Au-Delà...*

Introduction

1988 was a busy year for Messiaen. In December he would be eighty years old and just about the entire musical world wished to mark this milestone by celebrating the many achievements of his long career. Showing some modest signs of frailty, the composer undertook a world tour to attend the numerous festivals, concerts and lectures in his honour. During the course of a single year, he heard the entirety of his *œuvre* several times over. The festivals held during June in Australia and December in London were particularly thorough. The latter stretched back to the *Préludes*, incorporated the British premières of *Petites esquisses d'oiseaux* and *Un vitrail et des oiseaux*¹ and presented all three *monumental trinity* works, culminating on the composer's birthday with the first complete British performance of *Saint François d'Assise*.

For those celebrating this giant of twentieth century music, the evidence suggested that, if *Saint François* was not his final work, it would most definitely stand as his last significant work.² The *Petites esquisses* and *Un vitrail* were received politely, with admiration and respect for their undoubted craftsmanship, but there was little sign of the *frisson* which had marked just about every previous Messiaen première. However, these were works which had been written in the immediate aftermath of *Saint François*, when Messiaen's confidence was at its lowest ebb. By the time that *Un vitrail* actually came to be heard, Messiaen was at work on what was rapidly becoming a major project.

In the summer of 1987, the Music Director of the New York Philharmonic, Zubin Mehta, wrote to Messiaen offering a commission to write a work for the orchestra's 150th anniversary season in 1992-93.³ Messiaen replied to Mehta accepting the commission for «*une œuvre de grand orchestre*» on 2 August 1987, but the composer's letter suggests that his confidence was far from overflowing.⁴ The apparent certainty of his concluding «*...vous pouvez compter sur moi, c'est oui !*» is tempered by the series of caveats with which it is prefaced. Despite having five years to complete the commission, Messiaen was obviously concerned about finding enough time to compose. He mentions his «*voyages incessants*» to concerts abroad and he reveals also that he has to complete two other commissions for large orchestra. It is worth remembering that the initial plans for the trips of 1988 would have been made several years before, in the wake of *Saint François*. In other words, Messiaen agreed to devote so much time to travelling during a period when he was convinced that his composing days were over. In addition to time constraints, the composer also refers to his increasing years and alludes to concerns over his future health. These eminently reasonable causes for concern are cited, in part, by Messiaen to explain his reluctance to give any indication of the duration or instrumentation of the proposed work.

It is reasonable to assume that the original scope of Messiaen's ambitions were for a work of similar dimensions to the orchestral miniatures. This may seem surprising, given that Messiaen specifically indicates «*une œuvre de grand orchestre*», but the «*deux autres commandes pour grand orchestre* » to which he refers in his letter can only be *La ville d'en-haut* and *Un sourire*. Indeed, it would be surprising if

the composer envisioned a piece lasting more than about twenty minutes given not only the concerns listed to Mehta, but also the fact that the only orchestral work written since *Saint François* was the distinctly modest *Un vitrail*.

In this context, it seems that, time-consuming though they were, the travels (and travails) of his eightieth birthday year were vital to Messiaen's compositional rehabilitation. Hearing so many of his own works so many times in a relatively short timescale appears to have rekindled the composer's enthusiasm, acting as a catalyst for renewed creativity. In addition, each trip brought opportunities for notating birdsong, including many species new to Messiaen. The Australian tour in particular was responsible for some especially rich pickings, notably the composer's encounter with a *Superb Lyrebird* resulting in the most remarkable orchestral transcription of his entire output. Even though the foreign trips prevented Messiaen from devoting much time to composition during 1988, they patently galvanized and revitalized the elderly composer's creative spirit. Despite the need to complete first the score of *La ville d'en-haut*, the endless touring of 1988, the concurrent composition of *Un sourire* and the *Pièce* for piano and string quartet, and, most significantly, increasing ill-health, Messiaen completed the New York commission in 1991.⁵ The posthumous première of *Éclairs sur l'Au-Delà...*⁶ was given by the New York Philharmonic under Zubin Mehta at the Avery Fisher Hall on 5 November 1992.

Far from being a miniature, *Éclairs sur l'Au-Delà...* is an eleven movement series of meditations on the afterlife lasting for about seventy minutes. Its scope is far beyond anything suggested by *Un vitrail* or *La ville d'en-haut* and, at 128

instrumentalists, the orchestra is the largest ever used by the composer. In addition to his standard sixty-eight strong string section,⁷ there are no less than twenty-eight woodwind, seventeen brass and fifteen percussion parts.⁸ Indeed, when it emerged that Messiaen had written such a large work, the presumption was of an overwhelming, monumental canvas in the manner of *La Transfiguration*, *Des canyons* and *Saint François*. However, as Roger Nichols observed, 'it's always dangerous to think you've got a great composer buttoned up'.⁹

Not for the first time in his life, Messiaen both exceeded and confounded expectations and, in contrast to the monumentalism of the previous twenty-five years, *Éclairs* is often disarming in its charm and intimacy. Many passages have the demeanour of chamber music, with Messiaen rarely deploying more than about a third of his vast orchestra at any one time. The work also exhibits a freshness and vitality which, with the possible exception of *Un sourire*, had been lacking in the composer's music since *Saint François*.¹⁰ Nevertheless, *Éclairs* shares some characteristics with the series of miniatures composed after *Saint François*. In particular, it shares the reluctance to venture below the tenor register which has been noted in *Petites esquisses*, which characterizes *Un vitrail* and *La ville d'en-haut* and which is a defining feature of the bass-free string writing in *Un sourire*. Most striking, perhaps, is that Messiaen somehow manages to blend the effervescence of these 'lightning flashes',¹¹ with a prevailing sense of serenity.

Significant parts of the orchestra for *Éclairs* are included for specific movements. The large numbers of flutes and clarinets are needed for the remarkable birdsong chorus of the ninth movement, *Plusieurs Oiseaux des arbres de Vie*. The bass instruments are included for just the eighth and tenth movements, *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* and *Le Chemin de l'Invisible*. Indeed, the double bassoon and the double-bass tuba play just two notes in the entire work. Nevertheless, the orchestra of *Éclairs* is equally notable for its omissions, of which the most surprising is the absence of a part for solo piano. Messiaen also omits non-standard instruments from his orchestra. There is no Ondes Martenot and there are no cencerros in the percussion section. His requirements may be voluminous, but there is little to tax the orchestral manager in the way of oddities requiring specialist instruments and performers with fees to match.

Éclairs revisits some of Messiaen's favoured theological preoccupations. The principal source of inspiration is the Book of Revelation, quotations from which preface six of the eleven pieces, whilst the Gospels, the first epistle of Saint John and the Book of Daniel also provide inscriptions. In addition, there are many allusions to luminosity through the imagery of stars, nebulae and galaxies, as well as the figure of Christ, «*lumière du Paradis* ». Then, of course, there are the birds. Forty-eight species sing the praises of God in this score, ranging from passages, and an entire movement, for individual birds, to complex heterophonies evoking an Elysian aviary.

The literature on *Éclairs* is, inevitably, all but non-existent. There have been many reviews of performances, not to mention the three recordings which have already appeared.¹² The two longest sources on the work, though, are the chapter by

Paul Griffiths in *The Messiaen Companion*,¹³ and the lengthy preface by Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen to the engraved score. The latter shares many traits with Messiaen's own programme notes for works in that it is simultaneously commendably informative and, at times, frustratingly obfuscatory. Nevertheless, it is a logical starting point when listening to or analysing the work.

The structural framework of *Éclairs* is based around three slow movements. A majestic opening chorale for woodwind and brass, *Apparition du Christ glorieux*, sedately unfolds at a pace which eases the listener into Messiaen's broad timescale and away from the hustle and bustle of everyday concerns. Two great adagios for strings balance the chorale with both the fifth movement, *Demeurer dans l'Amour...*, and the eleventh movement, *Le Christ, lumière du Paradis*, finding Messiaen unashamedly wearing his heart on his sleeve. The second movement, *La Constellation du Sagittaire*, explores images of light and the third movement, *L'Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée*, is a riotous transcription from the song of just one bird. *Les Élus marqués de sceau* is a multi-dimensional kaleidoscopic aviary in the manner of the two *Strophe* sections of *Chronochromie* which inserts a period of emotional detachment between the exuberance of *L'Oiseau-Lyre et la Ville-fiancée* and the intense lovesong of *Demeurer dans l'Amour....* The sixth movement, *Les Sept Anges aux sept trompettes* is a brutal depiction of the apocalyptic messengers, and provides a rude awakening from the reverie of the first slow movement for strings. Despite its forceful nature, *Les Sept Anges* is one of the most lucid of all Messiaen's orchestral movements, drawing upon just two musical factors - melody

and rhythm. The ensuing movement, *Et Dieu essuiera toute larme de leurs yeux...*, is as tender as *Les sept Anges* was forthright. In marked contrast to earlier works in which Messiaen overwhelms us with the glory of the almighty, we here have God as the assuager, comforting humanity. The eighth movement, *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* is the most developed and complex. It sees the entry of the hitherto silent basses and ends with a near *tutti* 'chorale'. The ninth movement, *Plusieurs Oiseaux des arbres de Vie*, is constructed exclusively from the songs of twenty-five distinctly exotic birds played in free tempo on ten flutes and eight clarinets, thus providing the sole outing for many of Messiaen's large woodwind contingent. Between this magnificent ornithological *mélange* and the final slow movement for strings comes *Le Chemin de l'Invisible*, a harsh, troubled piece reflecting on the difficulty of the path to paradise.

The title of *Éclairs* suggests that the work consists of a series of individual moments or glimpses, each of which is essentially a self-contained unit; lightning never strikes the same place twice. This concurs with the prevailing image of Messiaen's late music as being a mosaic juxtaposing many unrelated phenomena. Accordingly, the discussion and analysis of the music in the following chapters is initially, and primarily, conducted on a movement by movement basis. Conscious of the responsibility of charting virgin analytical territory, a fundamental aim of the first eleven chapters is to record the structure and materials employed in each movement. They are intended as a first step in understanding *Éclairs* and, due to the immense richness of Messiaen's music, the analysis could never pretend to be comprehensive or exhaustive. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the discussion does much more than scratch the surface of this sublime work. In some cases, the opportunity is taken to

examine a particular aspect of Messiaen's musical language. Chapter one, for instance, explores ideas of cadence and chapter nine proposes a partial solution to the problem of understanding how Messiaen maintains lucidity within his complex birdsong heterophonies. Other chapters reflect the more variegated nature of the music, notably the chapter on the immense, heterogeneous paean of the eighth movement, *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*. As a consequence of the vast amount of material involved, chapter eight is more than twice the length of the other chapters.

Certain preoccupations will inevitably emerge during the course of the discussion of each movement. There is an attempt to understand how Messiaen can imbue his music with an underlying sense of coherence when the surface texture suggests fragmentation. His harmony is not examined as a series of unrelated *objets sonores*, but in terms of triadic relationships underpinning apparently atonal material. There is, perhaps, less emphasis on rhythm than Messiaen would have wished, and allusions to colour tend to be utilized to reinforce more conventional discussion of harmony. Nevertheless it is worth reiterating that, as with all of Messiaen's orchestral writing at least from *Chronochromie* onwards, the orchestration is often just as important as the melody, harmony or rhythm. For this reason, reduction of the score is often resisted, or is only partial so that the instrumental groupings at least are retained. In cases where it makes sense for the music to be discussed primarily in reduction, such as the first, fifth, sixth and eleventh movements, an example is given of the full score at the outset so that the timbral disposition of the music can be registered before concentrating on other factors. The engraved score of *Éclairs* was published by *Éditions Musicales Alphonse Leduc* in 1998 and became available in

Britain in late spring 1999. Whilst this beautifully prepared score is invaluable for its clarity, not least in picking out the details of *Plusieurs Oiseaux des arbres de Vie*, many examples will be of a facsimile of the manuscript score used for the first performances. This is due in part to a personal attachment to this document developed over several years of study. Nonetheless, it is also a reflection of the belief that this facsimile takes us several steps closer to the genesis of *Éclairs* and, hence, the answers to some of the questions and issues which are explored during the following chapters.

Having examined *Éclairs* at face value, with each movement regarded as a separate entity, chapter twelve examines whether the work can be regarded as more than a sequence of eleven miniatures. It will explore the notion that there is more to Messiaen than juxtaposition at both the local level and in terms of the compositional superstructure of *Éclairs*. In other words, it will attempt to uncover some of the mystery about how Messiaen's music works and why it is effective.

By the time that *Éclairs* received its première, the artistic world was showing signs of having caught up with Messiaen. Religious art and, in particular, religious music was enjoying a resurgence after the puritanical abstraction which dominated the middle of the century. Furthermore, links with tonality were no longer being treated as heretical. Tavener's *The Protecting Veil* and Górecki's Third symphony had become popular classics. It is an irony that, alongside these works, *Éclairs* sounds distinctly un-saccharine. It makes a profound impression on first hearing, but also, in

marked contrast to the works of the 'holy minimalists', *Éclairs sur l'Au-Delà...* is a work of immense depth, the stature of which increases with each subsequent encounter. The following chapters are an attempt to understand some of its riches.

Notes

- 1 The world première of *Un vitrail* was in Paris just a few days earlier on 28 November.
- 2 Along with *Livre du Saint Sacrement*.
- 3 The commission was made with funds provided by the 'Francis Goelet and the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust'.
- 4 A copy of Messiaen's letter, as it appeared in the programme for the première of *Eclairs sur l'au-delà...*, is reproduced in appendix six.
- 5 Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen states that the *Éclairs* was written between 1987 and 1991. She has not given a precise date in 1991 when *Éclairs* was completed. The detailed nature of the letter to Jane Williams at United Music Publishers dated 14 March 1991 and reproduced in appendix six suggests that the work was all but complete by that time. However, in her interview with Peter Hill (Hill: Interview with Yvonne Loriod, p.302) Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen says that 'the work was actually finished only a fortnight before he died' [in April 1992], when Messiaen sang the themes of *Éclairs* to her so that she could write down the metronome markings.
- 6 Referred to henceforth as *Éclairs*.
- 7 16.16.14.12.10
- 8 See appendix one for the full orchestral requirements.
- 9 Roger Nichols: 'Messiaen: *Eclairs sur l'au-delà*' in Musical Times, vol.cxxxv (February, 1994), p.117.
- 10 A trait also noted by Roger Nichols (op.cit., p.116), quoted in chapter twelve.
- 11 «*Éclairs*» is one of those words which stand in resolute defiance of adequate translation. A literal translation would be 'lightning flashes' with all the suggestions of rapidity, brilliance and immediacy that entails. However, in the context of Messiaen's title, it also suggests the enlightenment of 'illuminations'.
- 12 The first was a live recording by the Orchestre National de la Radio Polonaise, Katowice under Antoni Wit for the JADE lable, catalogue number JAD C 099, which was released in spring 1994. The second recording was by the Orchestre de l'Opéra Bastille under Myung-Whun Chung for Deutsche Grammophon, catalogue number 439 929-2. The third was by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra under David Porcelijn on the ABC label, catalogue number 442 510-2.
- 13 Griffiths: Late Works. The passage specifically about *Éclairs* starts at page 517.

Chapter one

I. *Apparition du Christ glorieux...*

Je vis un Fils d'homme, revêtu d'une longue robe serrée par une ceinture d'or. Ses yeux étaient comme une flamme ardente, son visage brillait comme le soleil. Dans sa main droite, il y avait sept étoiles...

Revelation 1:13-16.

'In the last few years of his life, Messiaen's music underwent a discernible change in style.' As regards the underlying tenet of this thesis, the opening movement of *Éclairs* is not particularly auspicious. *Apparition du Christ glorieux* is a slow-moving, homophonic chorale for thirty-five *forte* winds; a characteristic texture of the *monumental trinity* works. It is a sonority which also underpins both *Un vitrail* and *La ville*, reinforcing the sense of Messiaen nervously looking over his shoulder. Furthermore, *Apparition du Christ glorieux* also bears a superficial resemblance to the opening movement of *L'Ascension*, *Majesté du Christ demandant sa gloire à son Père*.¹ Both pieces are slow-moving meditations for wind instruments which open longer works, the trumpet carries the melodic line on both occasions, both have the E major triad as their oft-heard harmonic goal and both have the idea of the divine glory of Christ as subject matter. Indeed, at first glance, *Apparition du Christ glorieux* represents the antithesis of the concept of a new direction, in terms of both style and technique.

It is not inappropriate that a large work meditating on matters which lie beyond the end of time should be grounded in some of the more enduring traits of its composer's style. In many ways Messiaen is deliberately looking over his shoulder, for this is a movement which has as its subject the risen Christ, 'the Alpha and the Omega... who is, who was, and who is to come'.² It is a movement which is intended to ease the listener away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life towards contemplation of the eternal and matters which lie beyond everyday concepts of time.

Apparition du Christ glorieux differs nonetheless from the *monumental trinity* works, if not the vast majority of Messiaen's œuvre,³ in one particularly pertinent respect. It simply happens. There is no fuss. There are no gong crashes in the manner of *La Transfiguration*, no provocative soloist or wind machine as in *Des canyons* and no hint of the unusual xylophone sonority which opens *Saint François*. The opening of a Messiaen work is usually arresting, a statement of intent often introducing a vital aural signpost. In earlier works, such as *La Nativité*, *Visions* or *Vingt regards*, an important theme is introduced. In later works, such as *Oiseaux exotiques*, *Chronochromie* or the *monumental trinity* works, the timbre is at least as important as the motif heard and the opening gestures return later in the work.

Apparition du Christ glorieux is resolute, but undemonstrative and immutably calm. It is not dissimilar to *Danseuses de Delphes*, the opening piece in Debussy's first book of *Préludes*. In the light of this deliberate understatement, it can be seen that, far from being diffident, the movement betrays a supreme confidence for it needs no frills and no dramatic gestures. In this respect, it is analogous to the end of *La*

Transfiguration. The penultimate movement of the oratorio, *Tota trinitas apparuit*, is replete with drama, finishing with cymbal crashes and E major blazing across six octaves supported by gongs and tam tams. The harmonic and theological goals of the work have been attained. The final movement, *Choral de la lumière de gloire*, does not attempt to supercede such a dazzling conclusion. In effect, it lies beyond the end of the work, outside of the timescale of the oratorio. It also ends in an emphatic E major, but dispenses with the percussion section and avoids flamboyant gestures. Like *Apparition du Christ glorieux*, it is. That is all the drama that is required.

The inscription for *Apparition du Christ glorieux* comes from a passage early in the book of *Revelation*. Each physical attribute of Christ is symbolic of an aspect of his authority. The robe symbolizes his priesthood, the golden cord his royalty, the burning eyes his divine knowledge which probes minds and the brightness of his face conveys the awe instilled by his majesty.⁴ The seven stars held in his right hand, the hand which represents power, are the Angels of the seven churches of Asia. It is probable that Messiaen was fully aware of such symbolism, but it seems that, as in the first septenary of *La Transfiguration*, his over-riding concern was for images of light. In fact, he omits several physical attributes, such as hair ‘with the whiteness of wool’,⁵ and slightly alters the order of the text to emphasize luminosity of the vision and to conclude with the image of the seven stars.⁶ As the title suggests, images of light permeate *Éclairs*, and in several movements these take the form of stellar phenomena. *Apparition du Christ glorieux* is essentially a prelude to these refulgent explorations, for it does not just meditate on light, it meditates on *the* light.

The movement consists of fourteen phrases, mostly ranging between four and eight bars in length, although the penultimate phrase extends to fourteen bars. The phrases fall into three broad periods, the third period being an expanded repeat of the first. The boundaries of the three periods are demarcated by two silences each of which lasts for five semiquavers:⁷

A		B		A'
Period I		Period II		Period III
phrases 1-5	(pause)	phrases 6-9	(pause)	phrases 10-14

Whilst *Majesté du Christ*, which the composer described as a chorale,⁸ largely consists of the trumpets tracing out a broad melody over slower moving chords (example III:1), *Apparition du Christ glorieux...* is more recognizably chorale-like with homophonic harmony changing for each successive note of the melody (example III:2).

As has already been mentioned, both movements gravitate towards versions of the E major triad. The earlier work is quite clearly in a (modally flavoured) E major, including a strong relationship with its dominant and subdominant. In *Apparition du Christ glorieux* the E major triad is more prevalent, concluding thirteen of the fourteen phrases. Nevertheless, the sense is less that of being in a key or mode than of a harmony to which the music is ineluctably drawn like a moth towards a flame.

In the preface to the score, Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen states:

Les harmonies sont en mode 2, en mode 3, en “accords à résonance contractée”. Tout l’œuvre fera appel à ces harmonies.

As with the composer’s own prefaces to works, this is accurate, but not entirely helpful. For instance, there are no *accords à résonance contractée* until the end of phrase eight. Following this belated appearance, which only serves to highlight their absence hitherto in the movement, there are just two further instances of the *accords à résonance contractée* in the movement.⁹ On all three occasions, they have been altered so that the bottom note is absent from the first chord and notes are added to the top of both chords.¹⁰ In other words, there are just six *accords à résonance contractée* in the entirety of *Apparition du Christ glorieux*, appearing in modified form. It is surprising, then, that Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen should state in the preface to the score that, along with modes 2 and 3, «*Tout l’œuvre fera appel à ces harmonies*». Even more puzzling is the absence of any reference in the preface to the *accords à renversements transposés* which are far more prevalent in *Apparition du Christ glorieux* than the *accords à résonance contractée*. One explanation may be that, whilst the *renversements transposés* chords appear more frequently, the *accords à résonance contractée* occur at vital points in the movement. This is arguably the case at the end of phrase eight, but more dubious for the chords in phrase ten. The omission of any mention of the *accords à renversements transposés* is nonetheless perplexing. Indeed, it is especially so because they not only appear as isolated chords as in the miniatures, but also in their original form as short litanies on the same bass note¹¹ - another instance of Messiaen looking over his shoulder.

Less caution need be applied to Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen's remarks concerning modality. It is certainly the case that much of the harmony is derived from modes 2 and 3. A look at a reduction of example III:2 reveals that the first two bars are in mode 2ⁱ, whilst the next two bars are in mode 3ⁱⁱⁱ (example III:3). The remaining two bars, which are cadential in nature, also have mode 3 harmonies, but Messiaen slides down two transpositions in as many chords. Bar five contains a *typical(7)* chord in mode 3ⁱⁱ, whilst the second inversion E major triad, with added seventh, in bar 6 can be interpreted as being a chord in mode 3ⁱ. In other words, whilst the movement draws many of its harmonies from modes 2 & 3, it is only fleetingly 'in' a transposition of a mode. Indeed, example III:3 is one of the more stable passages in terms of modal identity. As the movement progresses, chord-types derived from the modes, particularly the *typical* chords, often appear as entities divorced from their modality.

It could be argued then that, with just four notes and being a recognizable harmony in its own right, the chord in bar six should not be tied down to a modal interpretation and certainly not a specific transposition of a particular mode. It is true that the E major triads in *Apparition du Christ glorieux* have a variety of relationships with the preceding harmonies. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that Messiaen's harmony exploits, indeed relies upon the ambiguities between the modes, other chord types (such as the *accords à renversements transposés*) and a free tonality.

As has already been mentioned, there is a sense that the music is repeatedly drawn to a particular harmonic area. The evidence suggests that the omnipresent E major triads occur with the context of the first transposition of mode 3. Each of these concluding E major triads has an added seventh, and about half of them also have an added ninth. Whilst those with added sevenths could be ascribed to mode 2ⁱⁱ, major triads with added ninths are an impossibility in mode 2. In modal terms, therefore, the E major triads are in mode 3ⁱ. The contention that this a modality to which the music is drawn, rather than an isolated harmony, is supported by the final cadence of the movement (example III:4). At the last moment, Messiaen confirms what has hitherto only been hinted at by means of the E major triads. The final E major chord is, for once, preceded by an unambiguous mode 3ⁱ harmony; the *Ab7/C typical* chord.

This chord is closely related to the E major triad within mode 3ⁱ by virtue of the augmented triad relationships upon which the mode is built. The triads on A flat, C natural and E natural form a cyclic family of interchangeable harmonies within the mode through the *typical* chords. In a sense, preceding the E major triad with the *Ab7/C typical* chord is the equivalent both of a direct premonition of E major and of a perfect cadence.

The idea that each phrase ends with a cadence may be surprising in the context of a complex harmonic system which not only purports to have dispensed with the functions behind diatonic relationships but also with the coherence of conventional notions of modality. How does Messiaen create a sense of tension and release? Is the feeling of resolution at the end of each phrase purely the product of having a major

triad, albeit with added notes? In other words, does the chord preceding each E major triad have a function or will the triad suggest resolution by virtue of being more ‘consonant’ than its predecessors?

An examination of the thirteen cadences in *Apparition du Christ glorieux* reveals a far from arbitrary approach. The concluding E major triads are approached in five ways:

Table III:i
Cadences in *Apparition du Christ glorieux*

Penultimate Chord	Phrases which the cadence concludes ¹²	No. of occurrences
1) F7/A <i>typical</i>	1, 4, 9, 10, 13	5
2) A natural diminished/Ab9	2, 5, 11	3
3) <i>renversement transposés</i> (B major)	3, 12	2
4) <i>renversement transposés</i> (D flat major)	6, 7	2
5) Ab7/C <i>typical</i>	14	1

As can be seen from table III:i, cadence 1 is the most prevalent, accounting for five of the thirteen cadences onto the E major triad in the movement. In addition, cadence 5, the final cadence in the movement, shares most of the traits of cadence 1, which can thus be regarded as the most important progression in *Apparition du Christ glorieux*.

Examining cadence 1 more closely (see example III:3), the first point to consider is that the chord in bar five halts the flow of steady semiquavers. In addition, Messiaen deliberately inserts a breath mark before the final chord, thus creating an

agogic, or rhythmic, accent. This is a device favoured by organists to compensate for the general inability of the instrument to produce accents through the use of dynamics.

The second way in which Messiaen suggests a sense of coming to rest is by repeating the melody note, E natural, whilst the underlying harmony moves to the major triad which has the melody note as its root. This is clearly intertwined with the idea of a harmonic litany as described in *Technique* and it is one of the devices which Messiaen describes as being like a rainbow.¹³ More pertinent here is that the repeating melody note with changing chord suggests tension and release by progressing from a harmony which happens to contain the melody note, or on which it has been superposed, to one which is built upon it.

This is related to the third aspect of cultivating the sense of a cadence; the choice of the penultimate chord. Messiaen’s choice of the F7/A *typical* chord is extremely careful. As has already been suggested, he is deliberately avoiding any explicit revelation that the E major triads to which the harmony is repeatedly drawn are in mode 3ⁱ. The concluding three chords of example III:3 slide down the transpositions of mode 3. At the same time, and despite not using parallel harmony, the harmonies themselves change almost exclusively through semitones. Of the thirty-five instruments playing in *Apparition du Christ glorieux*, only three move by more than a semitone between the penultimate and final chords of example III:3. The fifth horn rises a tritone, the cor anglais descends a perfect fourth from A natural to E natural, whilst clarinet 3 falls through the same interval, but pitched a fifth higher from E natural to B natural. The falling perfect fourths, which create parallel fifths

between the cor anglais and clarinet 3, gently reinforce the sense of a plagal relationship between the upper part of the F7/A *typical* chord and the concluding E major triad. Nevertheless, it should be reiterated that the vast majority of instruments either play the same note, or move just one semitone between the two chords.

Cadence 2, the next most prevalent in table III:i, involves a progression from a chord which is non-modal and which does not conform to any of Messiaen's classifications of chords. It first occurs at the end of the second phrase and can be described as a combination of a diminished seventh chord on A natural and an A flat major triad with added ninth (example III:5). In other words, the penultimate chord in example III:5 contains a dominant minor ninth, with the root omitted, in E major. The idea that Messiaen is, consciously or sub-consciously, drawing upon harmonies related to the dominant of E major is reinforced by the antepenultimate chord in example III:5. It is a *renversements transposés* chord with a first inversion B major triad as its underlying harmony. Indeed, when the rhythm is taken into account, it could be argued that this *renversements transposés* chord is the principal element in the cadence. The penultimate chord is simply a reiteration, or a bridging chord to the E major triad. This view is supported by the fact that on this occasion Messiaen directs the performers to take a breath before the penultimate chord, rather than just before the final chord as in the progression at the end of example III:3.

Further evidence that the penultimate chord is an insertion, elongating the cadence formed by the antepenultimate *renversements transposés* chord and the concluding E major, is provided by cadence 3 in table III:i, which first occurs at the

end of the third phrase (example III:6). On this occasion, there is a straightforward progression from the same B major *renversements transposés* chord as in example III:5 to E major. Messiaen again disguises the dominant relationship between the two chords by adding an F natural to the top of the *renversements transposés* chord so that the melody line suggests a tritone cadence. Messiaen also utilizes the rhythm to ensure that this is a relatively weak cadence. The semiquavers flow until the final chord and no breath should be taken until after the end of the phrase.

Returning to cadence 2 (example III:5), the penultimate chord is undoubtedly intertwined with the B major *renversements transposés* chord which precedes it. In other words, it is a substitute for, and prolongation of, B major related harmonies. In this respect, the G sharp and A sharp at the top of the chord could be regarded simply as additional notes from B major. In fact, the A sharp has a dual function, being the tritone partner of E natural and yet resolving as a quasi-leading note onto the fifth of E major. This contrasts with the chord's appearance at the end of the fifth phrase, when it is clearly the cadential partner of the concluding E major chord and the A sharp is unequivocally the tritone partner of E natural (example III:7). On this occasion, it is preceded by the F#7/Bb *typical* chord, which can be regarded as a combination of the tritone with the dominant of the dominant.

Nevertheless, despite the wealth of evidence for viewing the penultimate chord of examples III:5 and III:7 as a B major harmony, it also has an important secondary function. It will be remembered that the final cadence of the movement is a progression from the Ab7/C *typical* chord to the concluding E major triad (see

example III:4). In addition to a diminished seventh on A natural, the penultimate chord in examples III:5 and III:7 also contains an A flat major chord (with seventh). In other words, in addition to suggesting dominant harmonies, the penultimate chord in examples III:5 and III:7 is also a disguised premonition of the cadence which ultimately confirms that the E major triads are in mode 3ⁱ. When it appears as the penultimate chord of example III:5, this chord is not only a substitute for and prolongation of B major, as suggested earlier, but also a substitute for and an augury of E major through the mode 3ⁱ *typical(7)* chords.

This relationship between the A natural diminished/A flat major chord and E major, by means of the mode 3ⁱ *typical(7)* chords, is reinforced by the fact that the same harmony precedes the cadence at the end of the movement. This suggests that the final progression is, perhaps, a double cadence from B major and Ab major harmonies onto E major (see example III:4). The lower brackets in example III:4 show the progression of B major related harmonies and the upper bracket indicates the progression of A flat major harmonies. Furthermore, as has already been mentioned, the final cadence is basically the same type of cadence as occurs at the end of example III:3. In other words, this final progression is a variant of the most prevalent cadence in *Apparition du Christ glorieux*, an extension of the second most prevalent cadence and the resolution of the tension created by the modal ambiguity within the movement.

The only cadence from table III:i remaining to be discussed is that involving a *renversements transposés* chord with D flat major as its underlying harmony. This cadence occurs in the middle period of the work (phrases 6-9). It occurs at the end of phrases six and seven, which are identical (**example III:8**). It would be legitimate to question whether the end of example III:8 actually constitutes a cadence. There is no rhythmic emphasis and the harmonic relationship between the final two chords is rather obscure. Indeed, it is the third bar which appears to be the focal point of the phrase, suggesting a possible move towards D major. Nevertheless, it will be noted that the E major triad occurs twice in the final three chords. This double statement of the harmony which has concluded every other phrase up to this point suggests some kind of harmonic closure.

It is certainly the case that the central section of *Apparition du Christ glorieux* has a slightly different harmonic emphasis from the outer sections of the movement. The decidedly unemphatic progression which ends phrases six and seven is followed by the only phrase to end with a harmony other than the E major triad (**example III:9**). Rather than E major, the *accords à résonance contractée* appear for the first time in the movement. The final chord of phrase eight is the *second accord à résonance contractée* on D natural, and which thus has the D flat major triad at its heart. Finally, after three phrases in which the E major triad is almost replaced by the remote harmonic territory of D flat major, the final phrase of this central section of the movement, phrase nine, returns the music firmly back to E major in conjunction with B major and A major (**example III:10**). The first section of the movement is then given an expanded repeat.

The choice of D flat major as the harmonic challenger to the hegemony of E major is not as arbitrary as it might at first seem. It has been seen how harmonies built upon the A flat major triad have an important function in *Apparition du Christ glorieux* due to its relationship with E major through the mode 3ⁱ typical chords. The D flat major harmonies which appear in the central section of the movement can be regarded as having a similar relationship with the A major triad by virtue of the mode 3ⁱⁱ typical chords. Both the *renversements transposés* chord with underlying D flat major and the *second accord à résonance contractée* incorporating the D flat major triad can be regarded as substitutes for A major. In this reading, the penultimate chords of phrases six and seven are not as remote as they suggest. Similarly, at the end of phrase eight, the centre of the movement, the harmony has only moved as far as the subdominant, not the submediant. In other words, Messiaen is giving the impression of allowing greater harmonic freedom in the central section of *Apparition du Christ glorieux* whilst barely relaxing the taut harmonic grip which characterises the outer sections of the movement.

Despite a misunderstanding, Paul Griffiths comments on *Apparition du Christ glorieux* are perceptive:

Characteristically, the chords are monumental and smoothly fused, except the tubas, equally characteristically, bulge out a dissonant bass line, so that these huge blown sounds have a thrumming inharmonicity of bell resonances, and the achievement of a primitive immensity depends on a twentieth-century understanding of harmony and instrumentation.¹⁴

A cursory glance at a reduction of the score reveals that, whilst the bass line is dissonant when set alongside the melody, more often than not it is part of consonant or triadic harmony which is oblivious to the melody. In other words, the tubas are not dissonant, but the trumpets. Nevertheless, Griffiths' description of the broad effect is illuminating. The movement does have a monumental spirit, and we have glimpsed some ways in which the harmony is smooth fused. Most importantly, it is undeniable that, whilst the spirit of *Apparition du Christ glorieux* is timeless, the harmony is rooted firmly in the twentieth-century.

The harmonic integrity of *Apparition du Christ glorieux*, with the increasing inevitability of its recurring E major triads, is crucial to its becalming function at the start of *Éclairs*. It is also pertinent to its broad subject matter, being analogous to the perpetuity of Christ. This broad chorale does not attempt to depict the specific details of the inscription from *Revelation*. Rather, it conveys a mood, an unruffled sense of majesty and strength. Nonetheless, just as the symbolic physical attributes of the '*Fils d'homme*' represent latent forces, the consequences of which become apparent later in *Revelation*, the movement suggests an inherent, but restrained dramatic potential; an underlying, unresolved tension amid the impressive composure of its serenity.

Notes

- 1 Henceforth referred to as *Majesté du Christ*.
- 2 Revelation 1:8. These are also among the first words spoken at the Easter Vigil.
- 3 *L'Ascension* being a notable exception.
- 4 See *The New Jerusalem Bible*, page 2031, footnote n.
- 5 Revelation 1:14.
- 6 The full text of Revelation 1:13-16 (RSV) reads '...¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. ¹⁴His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many

Notes (continued)

waters. ¹⁶In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.'

7 Nearly seven seconds at the metronome marking of semiquaver = 44.

8 Programme booklet to Erato disc 4509-91706-2.

9 Bars 5-7 of phrase 10.

10 These changes may appear to be minor, but they make the first *accord à résonance contractée* particularly difficult to spot 'with the naked eye' and would cause both *accords à résonance contractée* to be classified as different harmonies in a strict pitch class analysis.

11 See phrases 3^{4-5} , 5^3 , 8^{1-2} , 12^{3-5} and 14^3 .

12 The phrases correspond to the rehearsal figures in the score.

13 Technique, p.45-6.

14 Griffiths: Late Works, p.518.

Chapter two

II. *La Constellation du Sagittaire*

Étoiles et nébuleuses, dans la constellation du Sagittaire, au centre de notre Galaxie.¹

Ô vous, astres du ciel, bénissez le Seigneur!

The song of the three young men, Daniel 3:63.

Is the reference to Sagittarius astronomical or astrological? It may be thought that Messiaen’s faith renders the question an irrelevance - astrology being regarded by the Church as, at best, superstition and, at worst, bordering on the Occult and Paganism. Messiaen, however, was certainly not averse to incorporating certain astrological ideas into his music. Movements drawing upon the symbolism of planets and zodiacal signs can be found in *Visions de l’Amen*, *Vingt regards* and *Des canyons*. Furthermore, he admitted to using an astrologically inspired theme to open one of his major works:

Once I received a letter from an elderly astrologer who suggested that I work with him by [his] sending me a “melody of the stars”. By the time I finally realised the significance of his letter, he was dead. He’d written down the following melody for me:

“G# - A - G - G# - F - D - B - G - F - C - F# - F - A”.

According to him, that’s the oldest melody in the world; it arises from the resonances emitted by each planet and from the vibration ratios resulting from the distances of the planets from each other and from the sun; these are expressed by means of intervals. G# - that’s the sun - and I’m talking about this because this melody is found right at the beginning of my *Méditations (The Father of the Stars)* -

A is Mercury, G is Venus, G# is the Earth, F is Mars, G is Jupiter, C is Saturn, F# is Uranus, F is Neptune and A is Pluto. One peculiar thing: the Earth and Sun have an octave relationship to each other, the same as Pluto to Mercury, so there's a direct relationship between Intelligence (Mercury) and Death (Pluto): one has to pass through Death in order to understand. There's also an octave relationship between Neptune (Water) and Mars (Fire) as well as a two-octave distance between Jupiter (Man) and Venus (Women). Finally, there's the tritone relationship (= half an octave) between Saturn and Uranus: the C of Time, which devours everything (Saturn), cuts the F# of Heaven (Uranus) into two parts: Time cuts Eternity in two.²

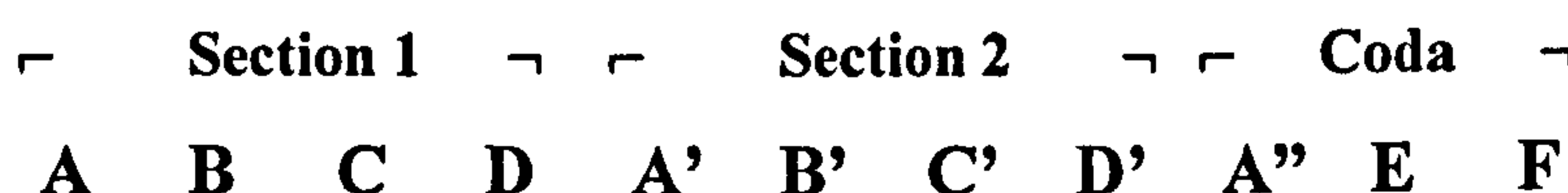
The most striking aspect of Messiaen's description of the 'melody of the stars' is his attempt to harness its symbolism, however tenuously, for the benefit of his own Christian spirituality. It is surely not a coincidence that Messiaen's birthday falls within the dates of the zodiacal sign of Sagittarius.³ However, whilst there may be a personal astrological reason for the movement's title, it is astronomy which provides the most potent symbol. The centre of our Galaxy lies in the direction of the constellation of Sagittarius.⁴ It is to this that Messiaen refers in his inscription in the score, demonstrating as well his knowledge that Sagittarius consists not only of stars, but also nebulae.⁵ In the words of Paul Griffiths, 'invisible heaven is foreshadowed in the visible heaven of the night sky'.⁶ The scriptural quotation from *Daniel* is obviously related to the passage from *Revelation* at the head of the first movement, which mentions stars being held in the hand of the Son of man. By asking the constellation of Sagittarius to praise the Lord, Messiaen is taking us on a musical journey to the very centre of the heavens, both astronomically and theologically.

The star clusters and nebulae are conveyed by a musical mosaic, contrasting in its segmentation as much with itself as with the homogenous textures of the preceding movement. Rhythmic bell peals, a solo string melody decorated by glistening ostinati, a dusting of sound which emits a burst of energy, a small chorus of birds, a more subdued melody and ‘waterdrops’ nestle alongside each other in an attempt to convey differing types of luminosity. The preoccupation with light creates an analogy with *Configuratum corpori claritatis suae*, the second movement of *La Transfiguration* in which there is a constant motion ‘towards light’.⁷

La Constellation du Sagittaire is in two sections (each containing four strophes) followed by a short coda. The second section is simply a slightly varied repeat of the first:

Figure III:i

The structure of *La Constellation du Sagittaire*



- A = Rhythmic bell peals
- B = String melody
- C = Dusting of sound with burst of energy
- D = Bird chorus
- E = Subdued string melody
- F = waterdrops

The opening bell peals of the first strophe have a rhythm which is a combination of *Candrakalâ* and *Lakskmîça* from Sharngadeva’s listing of *deçi-talas* (example III:11, i & ii). The melodic sequence of the tubular bells is matched by a transposition of the harmonies, which are essentially triadic but masked by added

notes, notably ninths (example III:12). As an opening gesture, the mode 2ⁱ bell sonorities are reminiscent of the call to prayer at the beginning of *Lauds*, the second *tableau* of *Saint François*. Indeed, even though the opening chorale of *Éclairs* is not anchored to the lower register in the manner of those found in the *monumental trinity* works, the bell peals at the beginning of *La Constellation du Sagittaire* prolong the sense of retreading familiar territory created by *Apparition du Christ glorieux*.

Paradoxically, the next strophe demonstrates Messiaen simultaneously recycling old material and constructing an entirely new soundworld. There are three elements:

- a melody for twelve strings, accompanied by bassoons, bass clarinet and horns
- a canon on clusters in different rhythms between, on the one hand, three tubular bells, and glockenspiel, crotales and triangles on the other.
- the song of the Accenteur Alpin on piccolo and two flutes.

The string melody, played in unison octaves, marks the reappearance of one of Messiaen's oldest themes. In *Technique*, Messiaen states that the basis of this theme is a motif written 'in the shadow of the five notes which open Moussorgsky's *Boris Godounov*' (example III:13).⁸ It is also redolent in shape of the beginning of Debussy's *Pelléas*. Messiaen absorbs this formula into his compositional toolkit by changing the final fourth into a tritone, usually by making the first interval a major rather than a minor third. The resulting mode 2 motif is particularly prevalent in works from *La Nativité* to *Visions* inclusive. For instance, in *La vierge et l'enfant*

from *La Nativité* (example III:14) it appears explicitly as the principal melodic idea.⁹ This *Boris* motif also appears as a sudden shaft of light during the angst-ridden *Minuit Pile et Face* from *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Indeed, it even occurs in the midst of Messiaen’s piece for six ondes Martenot, *Fêtes des belles eaux*, written for a *son-et-lumière* display along the Seine during the 1937 Paris Exposition.¹⁰ At other times the *Boris* motif is part of a broader melodic flow, as in *Amen des étoiles de la planète à l’anneau* from *Visions* (example III:15)¹¹ or slightly varied as in the pedal ‘carillon’ later in *La vierge et l’enfant*. Lastly, Messiaen also uses the *Boris* motif, which Paul Griffiths observes has the shape of an ‘M’,¹² as a cadential formula in works such as *Subtilité des Corps glorieux* and *Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes* (example III:16).

From the mid-1940s, the *Boris* motif largely disappears from Messiaen’s music, and it is presumably for this reason that its appearance in *La Constellation du Sagittaire* with identical harmonies to those found in *La vierge et l’enfant* (see example III:14) has, until now, passed without comment (example III:17). Nevertheless, whereas the earlier work is attempting to becalm the listener, the relatively blithe mood of *La Constellation du Sagittaire* suggests constant, gently swirling motion. This is due both to the faster tempo - *Modéré* as opposed to *Lent* - and to the glistening ostinato elements which sparkle around the string melody.

The melody also includes an example of a mode modulating to the same transposition of itself. After the initial melody, starting on A natural, there are four bridging bars in which the four notes foreign to mode 2ⁱ - D natural, F natural, A flat

and B natural - feature prominently (**example III:18**). The whole-tone quality of the final chord of this example corresponds to the whole-tone nature of the cluster canon which decorates the melody.¹³ After this brief excursion out of the prevailing modality, the melody and accompaniment then continue a minor third lower than the original rendition which, due to the diminished chord construction of mode 2, is the same transposition as previously.

As was mentioned earlier, a descant counterpoint is provided by the staccato song of the *Accenteur Alpin* on piccolo and two flutes (**example III:19**). The only previous appearance of the bird in Messiaen’s output is in *Christus Jesus splendor Patris* and *Candor est lucis aeternae*, the third and sixth movements respectively of the first septenary of *La Transfiguration*. It is worth remembering that the first septenary of the oratorio has the concept of ‘light’ as its underlying inspiration. Despite only appearing in monodic form in *La Transfiguration*, this earlier, more angular incarnation of the *Accenteur Alpin* is clearly less diatonic in disposition (**example III:20**).¹⁴ By contrast, its triadic harmonization in *Éclairs*, which gives the impression of parallel movement, is strangely reminiscent of the closing scene of *Der Rosenkavalier*. The nearest timbral equivalent from within Messiaen’s own output would be the *Gerygone*’s song when scored for staccato piccolos in *L’Ange voyageur*, from *Saint François* (**example III:21**) though *Minuit Pile et face* from *Chants de terre* occupies similar harmonic territory.

The chirping of the *Accenteur Alpin* partially overlaps with the harmonic territory of the string melody. The bird's C major triad relates to the first bassoon and horn chord, whilst the enharmonic second inversion E flat minor triad in the piccolo and flutes picks out notes from both the second and third chords of the melody, F sharp major triad, first inversion, and E flat major triad, second inversion, respectively. These chords are, of course, all drawn from the same transposition of mode 2 as the string melody itself, and, incidentally, the melody of the bell peals. However, the sense of polytonality created by the birdsong is amplified with polymodality through the inclusion of notes foreign to mode 2ⁱ, G sharp and D natural, thus signalling the presence of the relatively rare mode 7ⁱⁱ (the transposition which includes all the notes of mode 2ⁱ). This kind of polymodality is redolent of *Minuit Pile et face*¹⁵ which superposes mode 2ⁱⁱ upon mode 7ⁱ. The sense of chromaticism created by the polymodality is actually increased in each case by virtue of the clarity imbued by its triadic disposition.

By scoring the short birdsong passage of the fourth strophe for six flutes, Messiaen creates a timbral association with the *Accenteur Alpin*. This is despite the fact that the songs are different, there are no harmonisations and the birds are independent of each other, singing *hors tempo*. The six birds heard are the *Fauvette Orphée orientale* (Greece), the *Merle à poitrine tachetée* (Kenya), the *Cossyphe choriste* (South Africa), the *Cossyphe du Natal* (South Africa), the *Cossyphe de Ruppell* (Kenya) and the *Troglodyte musicien* (Venezuela) (example III:22). Only two of these have appeared before in Messiaen's music, the *Fauvette Orphée orientale*

in *La Transfiguration* and the *Merle à poitrine tachetée* in *Des canyons*. This is the first inkling that *Éclairs* will explore more exotic ornithological territory than the preceding miniatures.

Returning to the discussion of strophe B from Figure III:i, the third element of this counterpoint of light is an irregular cluster canon. The three sets of tubular bells play a revolving ostinato of three, 3-note clusters. Each cluster produces half of the notes from mode 1 so that all the notes from the whole-tone scale on C natural are heard and the bottom half of the one on D flat (**example III:23i**). This is echoed three semiquavers later by the glockenspiel, crotales and three triangles, which play the same clusters two octaves higher and to a different rhythm (**example III:23ii**). Both rhythms are irregular, creating a sense of random interplay, but they are constructed so that the canon never wanders too far from the starting distance of three semiquavers. In Figure III:ii, the numbers refer to the length in semiquavers of each element of the rhythm and the square brackets indicate groups with the same total duration.

Figure III:ii

	┌──────────┐			┌──────────────────────────────────┐									
tubular bells:	5	6	6	7	5	8	6	5	4	5	7	4	6*
glock, etc.:	5	7	5	8	4	7	5	5	6	5	7	5	2*

* N.B. The final values may be incomplete since the strophe comes to an end with the completion of the string melody.

With its allusions to the Trinity through its utilization of the number three at every opportunity, combined with its scintillating timbre, this irregular canonic ostinato is a clear instance in which the stars take heed of Messiaen's inscription and

«*bénissez le Seigneur*». If it recalls similar decorations in, for instance, *Jardin du sommeil d’amour* from *Turangalila* and *Les ressuscités et le chant de l’étoile Aldebaran* from *Des canyons*, the brisker tempo creates a greater sense of dynamism. Indeed, closer in spirit than these is the 1989 version of *Gravité. L’Emmuré* [sic], the second movement of *Le Visage Nuptial* by Boulez, with its rhythmic interaction of eight spacially separated crotales. It is worth noting that Messiaen heard, and was perhaps influenced by, the new orchestration of *Le Visage Nuptial* in 1989 as it was given its first performances on the same BBC symphony orchestra tour as those of *La ville d’en-haut*. The combination of the string melody, the song of the *Accenteur Alpin* and the cluster ostinato creates one of Messiaen’s most scintillating textures (example III:24). Furthermore, it is one which, despite using well-worn techniques, and even material, also creates an entirely new sonority.

After the melody comes the third and briefest strophe of the movement. In fact, it is barely more than a gesture. The first violins play glissandi in natural harmonics, ‘dusting’ («poudroïement») in the words of Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen.¹⁶ According to Paul Griffiths, these glissandi are ‘marked as a nebula image in the score’,¹⁷ though this is not the case in the facsimile scores loaned to me by United Music Publishers for this thesis.¹⁸ Out of this murmur, the five second violins and three violas creep up mode 6^v, gaining in speed and volume as they go (example III:25). The mode is always heard in its entirety, spread across two and a half octaves, with each instrumentalist starting on a different note and then progressing up the mode.

The principle of starting on each note of the mode at the same time is similar to the device of a melodic canon starting on all the notes of a mode used to depict 'Holy Terror' in *Terribilis est locus iste* from *La Transfiguration*.¹⁹ It also has clear links with *les ténèbres* from *LDSS*. Messiaen creates a deliberately unnerving texture in *Terribilis est locus iste* by beginning each strand of the melodic canon on adjacent notes of the mode. Similarly, in *les ténèbres* [sic] he uses 'whole mode' chords whose extreme dissonance is symbolic of darkness and pain.²⁰ Whereas *les ténèbres* packs all the notes of the mode into a single octave, the spreading of the mode across two and a half octaves in *La Constellation du Sagittaire* creates a markedly different texture of vibrant lucidity.

The second appearance of this rush of energy poses a technical problem for the performers, in that Messiaen takes them off the edge of the fingerboard. The second violin 1 has to play e''''', i.e. four octaves and a major third above middle c. The target given to second violin 2 is not much easier, c''''', whilst second violin 3 has to play g#''''', the last note usually on the fingerboard (example III:26). There is no indication that the notes should be achieved by means of a harmonic, and it should be remembered that Messiaen is not simply asking the performers for an indeterminate squeak, but to move up the specific notes of the mode at this stratospheric register. This is surely a symptom of his being of a well-established, elderly composer who needs not concern himself too much with the practicalities of what he has written! He knows that the work will be performed. He probably will not be around to hear the performers' complaints, and if he is, it is unlikely that they would dare to complain.

The short coda to *La Constellation du Sagittaire* could be characterized as the dying away of the light. The plaintive melody for cellos, with a slight bloom being added by tubular bells, is in mode 6ⁱⁱⁱ, although it is essentially picking out a whole-tone scale through a sequence of tritones a tone apart (**example III:27**). The drooping melody for first violins which ensues begins by drawing upon notes from the two whole-tone scales in alternate registers:

Figure III:iii

Rehearsal figure 19 - first violins

Upper register	F/Eb	Eb/Db				C#/B			D#/B
Lower register		Bb/Gb		E/D			D/C		E/D

Above this, the piccolo, two flutes and glockenspiel add little sparks of light which fill in the total chromatic and create a timbral reminiscence of the *Accenteur Alpin* (**example III:28**). These little pinpricks of light briefly bloom as the strings sink to a second inversion A major triad with added ninth, a chord which is prophetic of the conclusion of *Éclairs* as a whole, and which requires significant chromatic ‘filling-in’ (**example III:29**). The cerulean A major harmony soon fades, and the flickering lights of the flutes and glockenspiel also fizzle out, leaving the near darkness of a quiet whole-tone cluster resonating across the lower register. *La Constellation du Sagittaire* burns brightly, but all too briefly.

Notes

- 1 Inscription in the score before *La Constellation du Sagittaire*.
- 2 Rößler: *Contributions*, p.113-4.
- 3 22 November to 21 December. These dates are different to the astronomical period of Sagittarius due to precession (the gradual variation of the earth’s axis in relation to the ecliptic).
- 4 More specifically, it is located in an intense radio source known as ‘Sagittarius A’.

Notes (continued)

- 5 *Star clusters* and *emission nebulae* to be more specific.
- 6 Booklet to Deutsche Grammophon recording of *Éclairs*, 439 929-2.
- 7 See Christopher Dingle: Olivier Messiaen: *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur. Jésus-Christ - A Provisional Study* (Sheffield, September 1994), Volume I: Text, pp48-50; Volume II: Musical Examples, pp.28-37. (M.Phil thesis.)
- 8 *Technique*, pp.31-33. Messiaen states that it is also found in a Russian song which haunted his youth, «*Point n'était de vent*»
- 9 See, also, *Action de grâces* and *Paysage* from *Poèmes*.
- 10 This is the work which also contains an earlier incarnation of the music for *Louange à l'éternité de Jésus* from the *Quatuor*.
- 11 See, also, *Abime des oiseaux* from the *Quatuor*.
- 12 Paul Griffiths: Olivier Messiaen and the music of time (London, 1985), p.62.
- 13 See below.
- 14 cf the differences between the appearances of the *Cossyphe d'Heuglin* in *Des canyons* and *Un sourire* as discussed in Part II, chapter three.
- 15 Particularly the passage containing the *Boris* theme.
- 16 Booklet to Deutsche Grammophon recording of *Éclairs*, 439 929-2. Messiaen used the same word towards the end of *Le Traquet rieur* from *Catalogue*.
- 17 Griffiths: Late Works, pp.518-9.
- 18 Admittedly, they lack the frontispieces of 'photographs of galaxies and nebulae' also mentioned by Griffiths. *ibid.* p.519.
- 19 See Christopher Dingle: Olivier Messiaen: *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur. Jésus-Christ - A Provisional Study* (Sheffield, September 1994), Volume I: Text, p.82-84; Volume II: Musical Examples, p.108-113. (M.Phil thesis.)
- 20 See Part I, chapter three.

Chapter three

III. *L'Oiseaux-lyre et la Ville-fiancée*

Je vis la Cité Sainte, qui descendait du ciel: elle était belle
comme une fiancée parée pour son Époux.

Revelation 21:2.

C'est la chant de l'Oiseau-Lyre qui symbolise la parure de la
Ville-Fiancée.

Many birds appear in Messiaen's output, especially from *Le merle noir* onwards, but few are deemed worthy to sustain an entire movement unaided. *Le merle noir* is supported by the piano. Each of the pieces in *Catalogue d'oiseaux* features a number of species in addition to the protagonist, not to mention the depictions of the birds' habitats, as is also the case in *La Fauvette des jardins*. Even in *Petites esquisses*, each bird is placed upon a pedestal of abstract chords. In *Saint François*, birds are used as characters in their own right, as leitmotifs, in groups as a chorus and as malleable material, but the nearest that birdsong approaches anything like sustained passages of prominence is the Gerygone, and even, in this case, harmonic support is added by the choir or orchestra. The only piece or movement in Messiaen's output before the composition of *Éclairs* which is dedicated purely to the song of a single bird is the first solo piano movement in *Des canyons* (movement four); *Le cossyphe d'Heuglin*.¹ Even *Le moquer polyglotte*, the ninth movement of *Des canyons* and the second for solo piano, calls on two Australian species for moral support; the *Siffleur Doré* and, ironically, the *Oiseau-lyre superbe*.

It is only with the third movement of *Éclairs* that Messiaen produces a sustained passage of orchestral writing utilizing the song of a single bird; the *Oiseau-lyre superbe*. *L'Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée* is the fruit of a trip made by the composer to the forest of Tidbinbilla, near Canberra, during his eightieth birthday tour of Australia in June 1988. In the preface to the score, Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen recalls:

L'auteur [Messiaen] se trouvait dans cette forêt ensoleillée, aux eucalyptus géants, comme des colonnes de cathédrales, à lumière vibrante, lorsque tout à coup il vit à quelques mètres de lui l'oiseau lever majestueusement ses plumes et former une lyre deux fois plus haute que lui. Ce rituel l'a beaucoup ému et lui a fait penser à la fiancée de l'Apocalypse «qui se pare pour son épouse». La lyre n'est-elle pas aussi l'emblème de la musique?

In other words the *Ville-fiancée* of the title is the new Jerusalem and the movement's unceasing cascade of song reflects the joy inherent in this association. Nevertheless, the jubilation differs from that found in earlier works, such as *Zion Park et la cité céleste*. There is a concentrated burst of emotion similar to the leper's dance in *Saint François* or *Joie du sang des étoiles* from *Turanglila*, but there is also a distinctly humorous tinge to *L'Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée*. In addition to the biblical connotations, Messiaen seems to delight in the comic potential of this most extraordinary of birdsongs as it flits between the sections of the orchestra in complex combinations. This is not merely the benign geniality of *Un sourire*, but, as Paul Griffiths observes, a jocular 'registering of the absurdity of the moment; the absurdity of the high metaphor and of the bird's irrepressible song'.²

The variety in the song of the *Oiseau-lyre superbe* is astonishing, more than justifying its alias of ‘Master mimic’. *L’Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée* is an exuberant *tour de force*, taking the listener on a virtuosic high-speed flight around the orchestra. In fact, a listener who was ignorant of the fact that this movement is a transcription of just one bird might be forgiven for thinking that there is an interplay between a small aviary of different species. The kaleidoscopic complexity is greater than that found in the first two pages of *La bouscarle* in *Catalogue d’oiseaux*, which has five sources for its material. The only orchestral precedent, which is considerably shorter, is the song of the *Solitaire Ardoise* in the ninth movement of *La Transfiguration, Perfecte conscius illius perfectae generationis* (example III:30).

As with much of his birdsong writing, a remarkable feature of *L’Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée* is Messiaen’s ability to create a cogent whole out of a wealth of apparently disparate material. Whilst there is not room in this thesis to analyse this complex movement in the kind of depth which would reveal every nuance of the sophisticated combination of compositional technique and intuition which produces its translucent coherence, it is possible to observe the broad ways in which Messiaen manipulates his resources.

The manuscript score of *L’Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée* runs to 194 bars on fifty-five pages, lasting just under four minutes. The complexity of the music is reflected in the fact that the movement consists of seventy-five cells necessitating no less than sixty-seven changes in tempo after the initial marking of *semiquaver = 200*. In addition, some of the cells can be further broken down into sets of timbres and

motifs, or, to use Messiaen's terminology, neumes. There are seven cell-types, each of which operates in a distinct manner. They are defined principally by tempo, but also by timbre, by rhythm and by melody and harmony and they are arranged as in figure III:iv(a) (see Volume II). The tempo markings of the seven cell-types are as follows:

cell-type	tempo marking	metronome marking
a	Un peu vif	semiquaver = 200
b	Modéré	dotted semiquaver = 132
c	Un peu vif	dotted semiquaver = 144
d	Vif	quaver = 160
e	Modéré	semiquaver = 138
f	Bien modéré	semiquaver = 126
g	Un peu vif	semiquaver = 176

The thirty-five a cells are by far the most dominant, accounting for 104 of the 194 bars in *L'Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée*. However, they are also the most complex cells, being characterized by several timbral neumes and rhythmic patterns, with the music leaping between instrumental groupings. For instance, the a cell which opens the movement consists of four neumes. First of all there is a descending anæpeestic flourish (∪ ∪ —) from the violins and violas in mode 3ⁱ (example III:31i). The second neume is a single chord, the F7/A *typical* chord, but played on the reeds with added suspended cymbal (example III:31ii). The third neume sees the

return of the strings in cretic rhythm (— ∪ —) (example III:31iii) whilst the fourth neume is an anapæstic leap by the xylos onto an E major triad (example III:31iv). Importantly a is different on each of its thirty-five appearances, with at least twenty distinct timbres.³ Indeed, its fragmentary nature is arguably one of the principal elements in creating cogency between the a cells. It is possible nonetheless to observe some broad trends.

As we have seen, the early a cells are constructed from very short, timbrally diverse neumes which can be described rhythmically in terms of Greek metre and which, even if individual chords are complex, have reasonably clear underlying harmonic foundations. However, rehearsal figure eight sees the advent of cells lacking rhythmic or timbral variation and harmonic clarity. They are characterized by streams of five or more demisemiquavers in a row and this development coincides with the introduction of solo strings (example III:32), although it is foreshadowed by a phrase in rehearsal figure seven for piccolos (example III:33). The difference made by these cells dominated by demisemiquavers is displayed in Figure III:v (see Volume II), which gives a rhythmic profile of rehearsal figures five, six and eight.⁴ It can be seen that in rehearsal figures five and six, there is a lively interplay between shorts and longs. This includes elements of rhythmic imitation between cells, most notably with the cretic rhythm in the a cell at the end of rehearsal figure five and the rhythm of g at the opening of rehearsal figure six.⁵ This interplay is in sharp contrast to the flow of demisemiquavers in rehearsal figure eight.

There is a further way in which these cells differ from the other **a** cells. The structure of the other **a** cells, and the movement as a whole, broadly follows a parabolic shape - establishing and moving away from E major, then returning to and dwelling in it. These solo string cells steadily increase in intensity until, in rehearsal figures eighteen and nineteen they form streams of complex harmonies including a sequence of total chromatic chords before reluctantly consenting to an E major triad at the last gasp (example III:34).

Given the distinct nature of these cells within **a** as a whole, it would not be unreasonable to classify them separately as **h** cells, as suggested in figure III:v, despite sharing the tempo marking of **a**. The shaded boxes in figure III:iv(b) (see Volume II) indicate the changes to the distribution of cells that such a differentiation would entail. There are eleven **h** cells lasting a total of forty-one and a half bars, whilst **a** is reduced to twenty-nine cells lasting sixty-two and a half bars. In other words, **h** becomes the second most prevalent cell after **a**, whose influence becomes less disproportionate in relation to the other cells.

Nevertheless, the distinction between **a** and **h** is not as clear-cut as might at first seem to be the case. For example, **a** begins to mimic **h** with a short neume for upper strings whose distinguishing feature is its rhythm, Péon IV (∪ ∪ ∪ —), and which abandons the triadically based harmony in which it is surrounded (example III:35). The punctuation of the solo strings by flutes and clarinets, not to mention the final E major triad, in example III:34 provides another instance of the blurred edges

between **a** and **h**. This would suggest that, even if **h** is not regarded as part of **a**, there is a reconciliation between the two which reveals that the ultimate goal of both is the E major triad.

The pervasive influence of the E major triad is the crucial harmonic element in imbuing *L'Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée* with a sense of integrity. As with *Apparition du Christ glorieux*, the attraction of this harmony seems to be too much for the music to resist, either as an overt chord or hidden within the texture, repeatedly colouring the harmony. For instance, the opening of the work (rehearsal figure 1) demonstrates how the E major triad is established as the harmonic centre of the piece whilst utilizing non-tonal harmony (example III:36). The first neume of the **a** cell which opens the movement starts with the *C7/E typical* chord, whilst each of the three chords which make up the third neume has an E major triad either at the top or the bottom (see examples III:31i and III:31iii). The opening cell concludes with the xylos leaping to an E major triad as the first **b** cell takes over with its exuberant iambic (∪ —) fanfare, which repeatedly lands on an E major triad with the trumpets highlighting the falling sixth from E natural to G sharp.

The E major triad also makes its presence felt during the first appearance of **c** (rehearsal figure 2), which begins in similar fashion to the first **a** section whilst picking up the iambic rhythm of **b** (example III:37). There is a snapping descent in the strings onto an E major triad, mirrored by an ascent onto the same harmony. Sandwiched between these two string leaps is a *renversement transposés* chord in the reeds with B major as its underlying harmony. Finally there are three further iambs in

the winds, starting in the flutes and oboes, then timbrally blossoming to incorporate clarinets, bassoons and trumpets and horns, the latter highlighting a further E major triad at the bottom of the final chord.

It can be seen, then, that the E major triad permeates the texture of the opening of *L'Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée*, featuring in about half of the chords of rehearsal figure 1. Having established a position of pre-eminence for the E major triad, Messiaen now throws it into sharp relief with the introduction of one of the most important structural elements of *L'Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée*, cell **d** (example III:38). As can be seen in figure III:iv(a), **d** occurs six times during the course of the movement, lasting for five bars on each occasion and, uniquely in *L'Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée*, each appearance is identical in every respect except context. Its rapidly repeating xylo notes, total chromatic chord and descending mode 2 violin glissando act as an impervious barrier, remaining immutable to the high spirited timbral gymnastics which regularly surround it and absorbing the considerable energy built up within a movement which could easily become frenetic rather than dazzling. As such, it provides the performers and audience alike with a fixed point amid the flurry of activity. Its lack of any relationship with the E major triad and the harmonic concerns of the movement is essential to this function, with its impassivity to the surrounding harmony serving to increase its prominence. Concurrently, its negation of the E major triad increases the vibrancy of that particular harmonic colour.

This exaggeration of E major through juxtaposition with antithetical material can also be observed in the final iamb of *L'Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée* (example III:39).⁶ The final chord is, of course, the E major triad, but the penultimate chord does not fit into any easy classification. Closer examination reveals that the pitches omitted from this nine note chord are those which form the E major triad. In other words, the function of this chord is to be the negative of the E major triad. It would serve little purpose as a harmony in its own right and is defined by the chord it precedes. It is 'non-E major triad'.

Although the **a** cells provide the majority of the material of *L'Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée* and **d** provides an important aural signpost, it is the **b** cells which provide the clearest harmonic beacons during the course of the movement. As can be seen in bars 3-4 of example III:36, **b** is a distinctive fanfare figure characterized by its repeating iambs landing on the E major triad. Whilst the **d** cells remain resolutely identical throughout the movement, **b** can be regarded as a semi-variable element, instantly recognizable by its iambic rhythm and almost exclusive reliance on winds,⁷ but with mild harmonic deviations from the supremacy of the E major triad. In fact, **b** could almost act as a reduction of the movement as a whole. Example III:40 shows the progression of **b** during the course of *L'Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée*.⁸ The second chord in each pair carries more weight than the first due both to their triadic nature and the iambic rhythm of **b**. As with the movement as a whole, the E major triad prevails. As we have seen, the opening cell approaches the E major triad from what could be termed the minor tritone triad with added tonic; i.e. B flat minor with added E natural. A small development occurs in the third cell with a sixth being

added to the E major triad, whilst the approaching nine note chord is an incomplete negation of its successor omitting E natural, G sharp and C sharp. Nevertheless, it is in rehearsal figures ten and eleven that noticeable challenges to the E major hegemony take place. Starting with the eighth cell (the second of rehearsal figure ten); the cells land not on E major but on a series of harmonies which can be interpreted as partial *typical* chords: A major with added F sharp and F natural, C7 with G sharp, E major with C natural and C7 with G sharp again. In reduction the third of these may not seem to be much of a deviation from the E major triad, but, if seen in full score, it can be seen that prominence is given to the C natural by the first oboe, all of the clarinets and the piccolo trumpet (**example III:41**). Nevertheless, given that the C7 with G sharp chords are partial *C7/E typical* chords, the most prominent departure from E major is the A major chord with added sixths.

From rehearsal figure fourteen until the end of the movement, **b** returns to its opening format of B flat minor with E natural falling onto an unadulterated E major triad. A sense of impending finality is created through the cumulative effect of the five **b** cells heard in rehearsal figures fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, eighteen and twenty, which are identical to the first two appearances of the cell. The sense of homecoming in these last five **b** cells is supported by the third, and final, appearance of **c** immediately after the **b** cell of rehearsal figure fifteen (**example III:42**). It takes the orchestration and iambic rhythm of **b** and approaches the E major triad again from *accords tournant* based on A flat major and E flat major. However, it is ultimately the persistently jubilant **b** cells which underline the radiance of the E major triad in this movement.

It can be seen, then, that the E major triad is the harmonic focus of *L'Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée*. However, there are also two subsidiary sets of harmonic progressions in the e and f cells. There is a similarity of manner and timbre between the eight e cells, each lasting for just one bar, and the six occurrences of f. Both sets of cells consist of relatively slow, tenuto chords played by varying combinations of winds and percussion. Each occurrence of e consists of just one chord played twice, with a predominance of reeds in all but the first cell, and temple blocks underpinning the texture until its last appearance (example III:43). In contrast to the single, repeated harmony of the e cells, the f cells consist of groups of two or three related chords. The reeds are similarly prominent and they are joined by the horns until Messiaen dissects the timbre and registers for the final f cell (example III:44).

With the exception of its fifth and seventh appearances, e alternates harmonies built around the D flat major triad and A flat major triad. It will be remembered from *Apparition du Christ glorieux* that these harmonies are closely related to A major and E major respectively through the augmented triad relationships of mode three and the *typical* chords. Indeed, they are sometimes used as chord substitutions. In this light, the Db7/F *typical* chord of the second neume in the first a cell (see example III:31ii) could, perhaps, be regarded as a substitute for the A major triad. This is supported by the fact that the only b cell which can be said to be comprehensively not part of the E major triad family, the eighth, lands on an A major triad (see example III:40). Returning to the e cells, the alternation between chords based on the D flat major triad and those built around the A flat major triad produces an alternative harmonic

progression across the movement as a whole. Furthermore, it can be interpreted as a substitute alternation of chords built around triads on A and E.

The *f* cells are not quite so straightforward. *Accords tournants* account for three *f* cells, the final two appearances use *renversements transposés*, whilst the cell in rehearsal figure ten is a progression onto a C sharp major triad. The first two sets of *accords tournants*⁹ are related through the augmented triad, being built upon the C major triad and the E major triad. The two *f* cells at the heart of the movement, rehearsal figures ten and thirteen, are based upon the D flat major triad, suggesting a link with the brief movement towards the A major triad in the *b* cells. The *f* cell in rehearsal figure nineteen is a simple set of *renversements transposés*, for once on the same bass note, and progressing from an underlying harmony of A major to E major.

However, the final *f* cell is more problematic. It consists of just two *renversements transposés* chords, one with B flat major as the underlying harmony and the other with G major. The first point is that they are not on the same bass note, so this is not a progression in the manner of the penultimate *f* cell. The second is that Messiaen utilizes extremes of register and timbre, suggesting that its primary function is not harmonic but gestural. In the context of rehearsal figure twenty-one as a whole (example III:45), it reminds the listener of the extraordinary limits of this remarkable bird's song. Furthermore, it is a downwards plunge which is then underlined by the strings. The purpose of this fall from the heights is similar to the non-E major triad which precedes the final chord. The song drops to the low register in order to reinforce the brilliance of the final triumphant iambic leap onto E major.

L'Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée is a transcription of the exceptional song of a remarkable bird and, therefore, it is an extremely complex movement both in terms of its structure and rhythmic, harmonic and timbral material. As a consequence, it also poses an extreme challenge to an orchestra and a conductor. It is redolent in spirit of *Joie du sang des étoiles* from *Turungalila*, not least due to the inclusion of the piccolo trumpet. However, the demands of *L'Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée* are more extreme. Whereas the earlier work is a furious *moto perpetuo* in which the entire orchestra becomes a kind of celestial dynamo in triple time, this dizzying stream of birdsong leaps from section to section and tempo to tempo, demanding the utmost concentration and flexibility from players and conductor alike.

The complexity of *L'Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée* may be attributable to the ebullient diversity of the lyrebird's song, but the composer's unifying hand is also apparent in abundance. It can be seen most clearly in the broad harmonic flow of the movement, in which the E major triad is placed clearly at the forefront of the wealth of complex chords. That pre-eminence does not go entirely unchallenged, not only in the heart of the movement, but also in the subsidiary harmonic progressions. Nonetheless, from rehearsal figure fourteen onwards, the E major triad becomes increasingly prevalent and radiant. In particular, the iambic fanfares of the **b** cells ring out their ineluctable attraction to the E major triad all the more fervently after their brief foray towards A major in the middle of the movement. The return and repetition of **b** in the same form and harmony in which it is heard at the opening of the movement is surely no accident of nature. It is the smoking gun of the compositional processes underpinning an extraordinary transcription.

Notes

- 1 It will be remembered that the *Cossyphe d'Heuglin* is the probable candidate for the 'exotic bird' in *Un sourire*.
- 2 Griffiths: *Late Works*, p.520.
- 3 Depending on the definition of a 'distinct timbre', there are arguably many more than twenty. The following list distinguishes between solo and tutti strings but otherwise treats the string section as a homogenous unit. For instance, it makes no distinction between entries with and without cellos. It omits also the many variants of percussion punctuation.
 - i. woodwind
 - ii. woodwind & brass
 - iii. woodwind with brass/percussion punctuation
 - iv. woodwind, trumpet & strings
 - v. reeds & cymbal
 - vi. reeds with flute punctuation
 - vii. reeds & brass
 - viii. reeds & xylos with brass/flute punctuation
 - ix. tutti wind & strings
 - x. xylos
 - xi. xylos & piccolos
 - xii. xylos & piccolos over held strings
 - xiii. strings
 - xiv. strings & xylos
 - xv. strings & oboe 1 + clarinet 1
 - xvi. solo strings & cymbal
 - xvii. solo strings & solo woodwind
 - xviii. solo strings with woodwind punctuation
 - xix. flutes & piccolos
 - xx. piccolos with woodwind punctuation
- 4 Figure seven is omitted as it contains just one bar of a (see example III:33) and the remainder consists of a d cell, which, as is discussed later in the chapter, stands in opposition to the rhythmic flow of the other cells.
- 5 This is the only instance of g, a fact which underlines the precision with which Messiaen manipulates the tempi in *L'Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée*.
- 6 It can also be heard at the end of rehearsal figures 5 and 19.
- 7 The only exception being bar 10 of figure 6 which is scored for xylos and strings.
- 8 It should be noted that the number of times these iambs are repeated varies. The two bracketed chords are additional harmonies.
- 9 Rehearsal figures 5 and 6.

Chapter four

IV. *Les Élus marqués du sceau*

...jusqu’à ce que nous ayons marqué au front les serviteurs de notre Dieu...

Revelation 7:3.

The seventh chapter of the book of Revelation is part of the section which prepares the way for the end of the world and of Time. It begins:

Next I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the world to keep them from blowing over the land or the sea or any tree. Then I saw another angel rising where the sun rises, carrying the seal of the living God; he called in a powerful voice to the four angels whose duty was to devastate land and sea, ‘Wait before you do any damage on land or at sea or to the trees, until we have put the seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God’.¹

The placing of a seal on the head of the chosen so that they shall not be harmed in the forthcoming destruction is, of course, analogous to the Passover story in which the Israelites put some blood from a sacrificed goat or lamb on the doorpost as a sign to Yahweh not to harm those within.² It is also analogous to the traditions of anointing special people. In Old Testament tradition kings and priests were anointed. In the New Testament, Jesus is anointed at Bethany with purest Nard and this is taken both as a symbol that he is a ‘king’ and, more importantly, as an early preparation of his body for burial.³ In the Christian tradition, people are anointed

priest, prophet and king at baptism. According to Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen, «*Ici, le compositeur s'intéresse exclusivement au sceau s'imprimant sur le front des élus*».⁴

However, Paul Griffiths suggests that the quiet, abstruse nature of the movement may in fact relate to the calm created by the four angels holding back the wind.⁵

There is also an analogy with the theology underpinning the Transfiguration and, hence, Messiaen's oratorio on the subject. The Transfiguration of Christ marked him as being divine, a fact which was then confirmed by the voice from the cloud.⁶ The importance of this event for Christian doctrine is that Christ's divinity reveals a divine potentiality in each of us. This hope and belief is made explicit at several points in Messiaen's oratorio, which draws upon scriptural, theological and liturgical texts, notably in the tenth movement, *Adoptionem filiorum perfectam*. The text for this movement is the *Prayer for the Feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ*, which refers to our adoption into the family of God.⁷ This link with those who are marked with the seal in *Revelation* is particularly pertinent as the rhythmic technique on which *Les Élus* is built is also utilized in *Adoptionem filiorum perfectam; permutations symétriques*.

Messiaen creates a movement in which God's musicians sing over a continuously changing web of sounding-colours, in the manner of *Chronochromie* (example III:46). The songs of eleven birds can be heard over a kaleidoscopic bed of twenty-two strings. The techniques used in *Les Élus marqués du sceau*⁸ are identical

to those first applied in the two *Strophe* sections of *Chronochromie*. There are three distinct strata accompanying the birdsong:

- A. Eight first violins, tubular bells I and three high gongs, playing *accords tournant*.
- B. Seven second violins, tubular bells II and three cymbals, playing *accords à renversements transposés*.
- C. Three, violas, four cellos, tubular bells III and three low gongs playing *accords à résonance contractée*.

As in *Chronochromie*, Messiaen avoids repetition of chords by drawing upon the full range of transpositions for each chord type and placing them on all twelve steps of the chromatic scale.

As has already been mentioned, rhythmic interest is created courtesy of *permutations symétriques*.⁹ Following the practice established in *Chronochromie* and also used in, for instance, *Couleurs* and *Adoptionem filiorum perfectam* from *La Transfiguration*, Messiaen superposes three consecutive permutations from the total sequence of thirty-six. As a consequence, group A has the values of *permutation 16*, group B those of *permutation 17* and group C is allotted *permutation 18*.¹⁰ As Messiaen explains,¹¹ a complete rendition of a permutation takes thirty-three bars of 4/8. This is the length of *Les Élus*.¹²

The polychromatic webs of string chords used in *Les Élus* and the *Strophe* sections of *Chronochromie* are, in fact, mutations of a device used in *Turangalila-symphonie*. The ninth movement, *Turangalila III*, is underpinned by a «*mode rythmique*» based upon a distribution of values from one to seventeen semiquavers between five percussion instruments (example III:47). There is then a systematic exchange and inversion of values between high and low instruments. For instance, whereas in the first rendition the wood block played the series '4, 5, 7, 3, 2, 1, 6, 17, 14' and the tam tam has the values '8, 9, 10, 16, 12, 15', the wood block now plays the tam tam's original '8, 9, 10, 16, 12, 15' whilst the tam tam takes the tambourine's opening '4, 5, 7, 3, 2, 1, 6, 17, 14' as its own. As the movement progresses, additions are made before each value, gradually increasing from one to five semiquavers, with these new series also being exchanged and inverted.

From about figure 5 of the score of *Turangalila III*, five groups of solo strings appear. These are «*la résonance des 5 instruments à percussion*».¹³ Two first violins join the wood block with an ostinato of thirteen chords in mode 3ⁱⁱ, four second violins join the suspended cymbal with an ostinato of ten chords in mode 2ⁱ, three violas join the maracas with an ostinato of nine chords in mode 6ⁱ, two cellos join the *tambourin provençal*¹⁴ with an ostinato of fourteen chords in mode 4^v and two double basses join the tam tam with an ostinato of eight chords in mode 1ⁱ (example III:48).

Whilst there are fewer chords and a smaller number of durations than with the *permutations symétriques*, the mysterious, shimmering texture of this aspect of *Turanglila III* is remarkably similar to the effect created in *Les Élus*. Messiaen's

observations regarding the string chords in *Turangalîla III* could certainly apply to the *Strophes* in *Chronochromie* or to *Les Élus*:

Chaque couleur de mode s'allie à la couleur de timbre et d'attaque de l'instrument à percussion choisi, et l'on entend, non pas deux couleurs, mais une seule couleur nouvelle, résultant de l'alliage, qui renforce les durées et en rend l'audition plus poétique et plus appréciable. L'harmonie est rythmée, le rythme est coloré d'accords, l'ordre quantitatif (durées) et l'ordre phonétique (attaques, timbres, couleurs) sont mis en relief l'un par l'autre, et leur mariage les transforme en une seule chair sonore qui pourrait répondre à des noms composés diversement expressifs : harmonies-attaques, chiffres-couleurs, timbres-durées.¹⁵

In *Les Élus* each grouping of strings, tubular bells and percussion instruments of indeterminate pitch presumably should have the same aspiration of mutual benefit between elements.

However, the aural resemblances between *Turangalîla III* and the *Strophes* from *Chronochromie* and *Les Élus* stem from the fact that, after the initial attack, each chord is sustained principally by the strings. Rather than three aural strata, the ear hears a single, apparently randomly evolving chord complex in thirteen or twenty-two parts. This intense swathe of abstruse colours provides a foil, of course, for timbrally distinct material in the winds. In *Les Élus*, as in *Chronochromie*, it takes the form of a burst from nature, and in this respect there is a link with the opening movement of the *Quatuor, Liturgie de Cristal*. In fact the revolving isorhythms of *Liturgie de cristal* can be regarded as an embryonic form of the *permutations symétriques* movements.

The music in both cases is on two levels. There is a harmonic bed of chords, which move according to independent complex rhythmic procedures. Meanwhile, birds can be heard singing above this with complete indifference to the mysterious events that have been set in motion.

The ten species of bird heard in *Les Élus* are, in order of appearance, the *Brownish Whistler* (Papua New Guinea), *Merle de roche* (Greece), *Cossyphe choriste* (South Africa), *Merle à poitrine tachetée* (Kenya), *Kuangkuit Rimau* (Singapore), *Helmeted Friarbird* (Papua New Guinea), *White-Throated Fantail* (Papua New Guinea), *Pied Butcherbird* (Australia), *White-Throated Gerygone* (Papua New Guinea), *Tawny Breasted Honeyeater* (Papua New Guinea). Only two of these had appeared before in Messiaen's music, the *Merle de roche* in *Catalogue d'oiseaux* and *La Transfiguration*, and the *Merle à poitrine tachetée* in *Des canyons* and, of course, *La Constellation du Sagittaire* from *Éclairs* itself.

The species of the ten birds singing in *Les Élus* provide the only significant contrast from the *Strophe* sections of *Chronochromie*. Whereas the earlier work has an aviary of exclusively French birds¹⁶ the species in *Les Élus* are distinctly exotic. However, the ear does not have the benefit of seeing the names and locations of the birds as written in the score. Nor would anyone without the refined colour associations of the composer be aware of the subtle harmonic/colouristic differences between *Les Élus* and *Chronochromie*. With the exception of the *Hypolaïs icterine* in *Chronochromie* which darts between five instruments, the disposition and instrumentation of the birdsong is very similar in the two works.

In an idiosyncratic talk given at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama as part of their Messiaen festival in January 1999,¹⁷ Harry Halbreich claimed that *Les Élus marqués du sceau* represents ‘something totally new’. This observation is astonishing in its ignorance. In fact, of all the movements in *Éclairs*, *Les Élus* is the least innovative. It is, to all intents and purposes, a variation or re-writing of the *Strophe* sections from *Chronochromie* (example III:49).

In the context of this thesis, *Les Élus* could be regarded as the exception which proves the rule. Nevertheless, whilst it adds absolutely nothing new in terms of technique, style or effect, *Les Élus* is essential to the overall progress of *Éclairs*. It stands in its own right as a mysterious portrayal of the seal placed on the chosen. It is an example of Messiaen evoking a sense of ‘other’ through the use of abstruse and exotic sounding effects. It is doubtful that Paul Griffiths is entirely accurate in suggesting that the movement is calm. On the contrary, if the dynamics are observed correctly, *Les Élus* is vibrant and alive with colour. Nevertheless, the deliberate strangeness of the movement does engender a sense of detachment which acts as a crucial buffer between the exuberance of *L’Oiseau-lyre* and the intense emotions of the central slow movement, *Demeurer dans l’Amour...* In this respect, Messiaen demonstrates that the simplest way to revivify familiar techniques is to place them in an unfamiliar context.

Notes

- 1 Revelation 7:1-3.
- 2 Yahweh passes through the land and strikes down the first born of Egypt, man and beast alike. See Exodus 12:1-14.
- 3 Matthew 26:6-13
- 4 Booklet to Deutsche Grammophon recording of *Éclairs*, 439 929-2.

Notes (continued)

- 5 Griffiths: Late Works, p.520.
- 6 See Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 17.
- 7 The full text of the prayer is: ‘*Deus, qui fidei, sacramenta in Unigeniti tui gloriosa Transfiguratione, patrum testimonio roborasti, et adaptionem filiorum perfectam voce delapsa in nube lucida mirabiliter praesignasti : concede propitius, ut ipsius Regis gloriae nos coheredes efficias, et ejusdem gloriae tribuas esse consortes. Alleluia, Alleluia.*’ (O God, who confirmed the sacraments of faith by the testimony of the fathers [= Moses & Elijah] at the Transfiguration of your only begotten Son and in marvellous fashion signified ahead of time our perfect adoption as sons by the voice that came down with a cloud of light, grant most graciously that you may make us fellow heirs of the King of Glory and allow us to have a share in that Glory. Alleluia, alleluia. - private translation by Paul Parvis.)
- 8 Henceforth referred to as *Les Élus*.
- 9 Traité - Tome III, pp.5-76.
- 10 See Traité - Tome III, pp.26-8 and 50-52. N.B. There is an error in the appearance of *permutation 18* on page 28: the sixth value should be a dotted quaver, not a quaver.
- 11 *ibid.*, p.39.
- 12 The durations are all multiples of a semiquaver.
- 13 Traité - Tome II, p.360.
- 14 N.B. This is a type of drum. It is not a tambourine (*Tambour de basque*).
- 15 Traité - Tome II, p.360.
- 16 2 *Rousserolles Verderolles*, a *Troglodyte*, a *Mésange charbonnière*, a *Sittelle 2 Fauvettes à tête noire* and an *Hypolis ictérine* in *Strophe I*. 2 *Merles noirs*, 2 *Fauvettes des jardins*, a *Rouge-gorge*, a *Rossignol*, a *Gorge-bleue*, a *Fauvette à tête noire*, a *Chardonneret* and an *Hypolaïs ictérine* in *Strophe II*.
- 17 Wednesday 13 January 1999.

Chapter five

V. *Demeurer dans l’Amour...*

Dieu est Amour, et qui demeure dans l’Amour demeure en Dieu et Dieu en lui.

1John 4:16.

We now reach the heart of *Éclairs* in the form of one of Messiaen’s greatest slow movements. *Demeurer dans l’Amour...* is, in the words of Paul Griffiths, the ‘interior conclusion’ of *Éclairs*,¹ and it manages to combine serenity with a sense of yearning. This is reflected in the fact that, in addition to the inscription from the first epistle of John, the composer noted the opening verse of Psalm 42 on his sketches: ‘As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, my God’.²

For the first time since *L’Ascension*, a slow movement is entrusted exclusively to strings. There is no birdsong and no gamelan. In fact there is no filigree at all. *Demeurer dans l’Amour...* is just a broad melody woven by sixteen muted first violins over an iridescent harmonic bed of eighteen solo muted strings.³ Messiaen is unashamedly wearing his heart on his sleeve. Not for the only time in *Éclairs*, there is also an intimacy which is more in keeping with chamber music. Even in a movement reserved for strings alone, the composer uses just half of the sixty-eight instrumentalists that he has allotted to that section of his orchestra.

The movement falls into four periods, the boundaries of which are reinforced by silent pauses in the manner of *Les ressuscités et le chant de l'étoile Aldébaran* from *Des canyons* and *Je dors, mais mon cœur veille* from *Vingt Regards*. Messiaen comments in the score to the latter that «*Les silences y jouent un grand rôle*» are equally apposite in *Demeurer dans l'Amour*. The silences provide an opportunity to reflect on what has just been heard, but they have also an air of expectancy.

The slow melody opens by alternating rising perfect fifths with a falling tritone. It is supported by a D major triad, resting on a middle C pedal note (examples III:50 and III:51).⁴ The second rising perfect fifth nurtures expectations of another tritone descent, but instead the melody continues to climb up to the octave. The G sharp of the melody suggests mode 2ⁱⁱⁱ, an impression that is confirmed by the B natural which nudges the phrase up to an octave above its starting point, and the E flat which simultaneously decorates this gesture on its repeat (bar 8) and commences a chromatic downward motion. This descent simply prepares another tritone fall to the starting note, filling in all the pitches between the high D natural and G sharp with the exception of A natural which can be heard in the accompanying chord.

The phrase concludes with an initially puzzling augmented octave drop from B natural to land on B flat: a note which is foreign to the mode. However, this final sigh has a threefold purpose. First of all, the B flat provides the first intimation that, in addition to being a typical mode 2ⁱⁱⁱ harmony, the chord heard in bars 4 and 8 also has whole-tone leanings. Secondly, by ending the phrase with a foreign note in the

melody, Messiaen paves the way for the abandonment of the mode. Lastly, the fall through an augmented octave provides a bridge to the next phrase, which begins by repeating the gesture with an additional note (figure 2 in the score).

The first six bars of this next phrase outline the series of *accords à renversements transposés* built upon the pedal note of middle C. In fact, for the first three bars the melody simply descends through the three upper notes of each chord until it manages to rise towards a high E natural of bar five.

This E is absent from the supporting harmony, but has two possible links to it. First of all, it will be remembered that the genesis of the *accord à renversements transposés* is a dominant ninth with the 'tonic' in place of the third.⁵ The E natural of the melody can therefore be regarded as providing the third of the chord, thus intimating C major. However, the chord also has a strong impression of the B flat major triad, and E natural is, of course, a tritone away from B flat. Indeed, the phrase droops down via the G sharp/D natural tritone to conclude, like the first, on B flat, supported by a now complete whole-tone cluster.

The first period of *Demeurer dans l'Amour...* closes with a short resumé of what has gone before, initially recalling the falling intervals of the first two *renversements transposés* chords (fig. 3). It then traces a tritone-laden path through the whole-tone harmony, before coming to rest on D natural, supported not by D major, but a second inversion, dominant-seventh chord on F natural - a chord which also falls within mode 2ⁱⁱⁱ. The choice of this chord may seem puzzling. However,

recalling the derivation of the *accords à renversement transposés*, the first chord of figures two and three is in fact a dominant ninth on C, with the tonic in place of the third. The tonic, and, therefore, the resolution of this chord is F, the concluding harmony of both the first period and the movement as a whole. It is, nonetheless, subdued and equivocal, being a second-inversion dominant chord (not forgetting the D natural of the melody) which, in the words of Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen «*semble être une attente intérieure*». ⁶

It is worth emphasizing that the entirety of this first twenty-three bar segment of *Demeurer dans l'Amour...*, lasting about two and a half minutes, levitates over a middle C pedal note. Indeed, until figure two, the bottom three notes of the harmony are static, whilst the fourth only moves by a semitone. Furthermore, it is not until the fourth bar of figure two that any of the bottom four harmony notes moves by more than a semitone.

One consequence of making the harmony hover almost in stasis for so long is that when the tenor register is eventually breached at the start of the second period, it seems curiously exotic (fig. 4). This sense of new aural territory is reinforced by a corresponding change from mode 2ⁱⁱⁱ to mode 2ⁱⁱ, the other transposition containing the D natural/G sharp tritone. The melody still revolves around D natural, and, for the first five bars, the harmony sits on its tritone partner, G sharp, alternating dominant seventh chords a tritone apart, namely those on E (first inversion) and B flat (third inversion).

Whereas the melody of the first period attempts repeatedly to rise up the octave, on this occasion the melody is engaged in reaching down to the octave below. In fact, most of the second and third periods of *Demeurer dans l'Amour...* are spent gently bringing the listener down nearer to earth with almost continuous descending motion. After floating for a few bars on the new, lower pedal of G sharp, the short second period sees Messiaen allowing the music to slip down until the languishing tritones and sagging parallel harmonies land on its lowest point; a root position G major triad unadulterated by added notes. This suggests that the first two periods of *Demeurer dans l'Amour...* form a structural perfect cadence, with the G major triad which concludes the second period providing resolution for the prolonged D major of the opening of the movement.

At the start of the third period (fig. 5), the melody recalls the rising perfect fifth to A natural which began the movement, but now back up at the original register. C natural is briefly restored at the bottom of the harmony, but it now acts as an upper limit for the 'bass' line. The music has been raised up, only so that the sinking motion can continue.

The concluding chord of the first period (fig.3 bar 5) now forms the lower part of the harmony, but the presence of E natural and D flat reveal a modulation to mode 3ⁱⁱ and the F7/A *typical* chord. The harmony drifts sequentially downwards through an octave, remaining staunchly within the mode, whilst the melodic sequence includes the chromaticisms of F sharp and D natural. Figures seven and eight see the harmony take on a more anguished hue, with the juxtaposition of *renversements transposés*

chords, a thickening of the modal harmonies and the appearance of *accords tournants*, whilst the melody is constructed exclusively from tritones. Incidentally, the *renversements transposés* chords which conclude these two brief phrases are in an unusual guise since, rather than the bass note being common, it is the top note which is shared.

Messiaen is now ready to reverse the downward trend, and the third period finishes with a rising up of pitch and dynamic (fig. 9). The melody initially rises from C natural through the whole-tone scale, but approaches the D natural a ninth above from C sharp. Meanwhile, there is a bass sequence of parallel fifths rising through the diminished chord on A flat (G sharp), moving in perfect fourth steps so that the bottom note of one perfect fifth is the top note of the next. It is because of this bass pattern that Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen has suggested that figure nine recalls the passage in *Le Prêche aux oiseaux* from *Saint François* when *François* sings «*Nous monterons les échelles du ciel...*» (example III:52). However, in *Demeurer dans l’Amour...* the sequence ends the phrase and the listener is left hanging in the air by this climax.

Like the first phrase of the melody, the broad motion of the movement will now continue upwards rather than falling back down. Indeed, the remainder of the movement is an expansion of the first period. The opening phrase is now given an exact repeat. Following the substantial climb in register at the end of the third phrase, accompanied by an increase in dynamic, the effect of this repeat is to give the

impression that the movement is drawing back in on itself. The climax to which the end of the third phrase was apparently leading has been frustrated. However, this is simply an example of Messiaen manipulating the expectations and emotions of the listener and increasing the impact of the real climax.

By repeating the entire opening phrase of the movement, Messiaen encourages the listener to assume that the whole of the first period is to be given an exact repeat. In fact, instead of simply reiterating the second phrase, the melody is allowed to break through its octave ceiling and reach for the heights. The opening phrases of figure 2 are treated sequentially in order to provide the harmonic springboard for the melody (fig. 11). The B flat which concludes the first phrase does not provide a link this time with the ensuing melody, but instead provides the bass note for the four *renversements transposés* chords of the second phrase. All four are then repeated on C sharp together with the corresponding melody. After this, the first *renversements transposés* chord rises by step to G sharp (fig.12, bars 5-8).

The melody at this point takes its cue from the opening phrase of the movement, with A natural falling to D natural via, the tritone G sharp. This little falling motif begins not with D natural, as at the opening, but with G natural, turning it into what Messiaen calls a returning chromaticism.⁷ This four note motif is then heard a major third higher, starting on B natural and ending on F sharp. The opening notes are suggestive of the G major triad, which had been the goal of the second period, and which provided the lowest point in the movement. On the other hand, the

final notes of these returning chromaticisms suggest D major. In other words, as the melody approaches its climax, it alludes to two of the principal harmonic centres of the movement.

The two returning chromaticisms encourage the melody to soar so high that the first violins almost disappear off the edge of the fingerboard, reaching G sharp two octaves above the stave (g#'''). This stratospheric note is the cue for the re-establishment of the middle C pedal under the same *renversements transposés* chord which provided the climax to figure 2. Whilst figures 11 and 12 are clearly based on figure 2, the climax here is greater not just in terms of register, but has also raised the pitch from the E natural of the first period.

The climax produces stasis for a while, before the first violins make their way down to a safer register, gingerly at first, and then more boldly, aided by the D natural/G sharp tritone, landing gently on the B flat of the whole-tone cluster. The end of the first period (fig. 3) is repeated verbatim. Then, by way of a codetta, the concluding second-inversion F major harmony is approached again, but from a different angle by means of four new harmonies, whilst the arrival at the final D natural of melody this time occurs by simple descending steps down through the tritone from G sharp (fig. 14).

The first three chords of this codetta are versions of the *accord à résonance contractée*, chord B, on the notes E flat, G natural and D flat. The melody note of the first chord, G sharp, becomes an added note and suggests that the chord could also be

viewed as a combination of two partial whole-tone scales. The choice of the second *accord à résonance contractée* on E flat serves two functions. Firstly, it shares four of the preceding chord's five notes, E flat, F natural, A natural and D natural, omitting only the bottom C natural. Secondly, the triadic element of this particular *accord à résonance contractée* is D major. In other words, this chord contains all the pitches of the first and last accompanying chords in period one with the exception of the C natural pedal note. Furthermore, with the addition of G sharp, it similarly shares four of the five pitches which comprise the second chord in period one, which is also the penultimate chord.

So, in this one chord, Messiaen is combining the principal harmonies of *Demeurer dans l'Amour....* Indeed, it would not be wild speculation to suggest that the impetus for the movement is derived from this single chord. It certainly helps to explain the use of B natural and E flat in bars four and eight of the work. If it is the source of material for period one, then it is also the root of the climax of the movement in figure 12.

It is admittedly difficult to detect any further clear evidence that the first chord of figure 14 is a principal melodic influence. It is also worth remembering that, in addition to becoming part of an *accord à résonance contractée*, the F major based concluding harmony of *Demeurer dans l'Amour...* is incorporated into a *typical* chord at the start of figure 5 and the end of figure 6. Nevertheless, whilst bearing such caveats in mind, it is undeniable that this one chord explains much of the integrity of *Demeurer dans l'Amour....*

The second of the three *résonance contractée* chords in figure 14 is re-configured so that F sharp is at the top. Messiaen also transposes the C sharp up the octave both to fill in the gap between F sharp and A sharp, and to create a link with the last two chords, which are similarly topped by a perfect fourth. Like the first chord, the third chord in figure 14 also shares four pitches with both the opening and concluding chords of the movement. However, it contains neither F sharp nor F natural, so there is no sense of either D major or F major.

Finally, the penultimate chord of the movement turns us to mode 3ⁱ with a chord which contains all five melodic notes from figure 14. As a consequence, it also shares four pitches out of five (D natural, E natural, F sharp and G sharp) with the penultimate chord of the first period. It will also be noted that its extremities resolve onto the final chord, approaching top and bottom from a semitone. Indeed, none of the parts needs to move more than a semitone in easing us onto the final chord.

It can be seen, then, that just a handful of closely related chords and intervals provided Messiaen with the building blocks of *Demeurer dans l'Amour....* Such restricted harmonic movement is remarkable even in Messiaen's music, and it is intended, perhaps, as an allusion to the constancy of God's love. If he had any lingering doubts regarding the quality of his music after *Saint François*, they must surely have been dispelled with the composition of this movement. Analysis inevitably emphasizes the craft of composition. This is an opportune moment to

remember that, in the very best music, the craft is combined with an intangible element of inspiration with the consequence that the sum is greater than parts.

Demeurer dans l'Amour... provides an example of an inspired craftsman at the height of his powers.

Notes

- 1 Griffiths: Late Works, p.520.
- 2 Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen in the booklet to the Deutsche Grammophon recording of *Éclairs*, 439 929-2.
- 3 Six second violins, six violas and six cellos. Messiaen directs that the entire piece should be played *legatissimo, molto vibrato*.
- 4 Example III:50 is of the first page of the full score. Example III:51 is a reduction of the entire movement. The remainder of this chapter refers to rehearsal and bar numbers within example III:51.
- 5 Traité - Tome III, p.86.
- 6 Booklet to the Deutsche Grammophon recording of *Éclairs*, 439 929-2.
- 7 See Part I, chapter I.

Chapter six

VI. *Les Sept Anges aux sept trompettes*

Je vis les sept Anges qui se tiennent devant Dieu; on leur remit sept trompettes.

Revelation 8:2.

BANG! BANG! BANG! Messiaen may wear his heart on his sleeve for *Demeurer dans l'Amour...*, but he displays no sentimentality in dispelling its mood. The enchanting world of floating strings abruptly disappears with the three resounding thuds of the bass drum which initiate the rhythmic processes of *Les Sept Anges aux sept trompettes*.

The title and inscription from Revelation suggest an element of congruence with the *Quatuor*. Indeed, the placement of this bombastic movement after a long string adagio makes the analogy particularly compelling given the comparable position of the formidable *Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes* after the imploring paeon for cello and piano, *Louange à l'éternité de Jésus*. Furthermore, *Les Sept Anges aux sept trompettes*¹ shares the directness of expression found in *Danse de la fureur*, even if it lacks some of the pace and vitality of the earlier work.

In essence, *Les Sept Anges* is what Messiaen would describe as a monody, although the term monophony is more specific.² Monophonies are not a rarity in Messiaen's œuvre. Two organ works, *Les corps glorieux* and *Livre d'orgue* open with monophonies, *Subtilité des corps glorieux* and *Reprises par interversion*

respectively. The *Quatuor* and *Des canyons* contain lengthy, plaintive movements for a solo instrument, *Abîme des oiseaux* and *Appel interstellaire*, and the plainchant inspired *Récit Évangélique* movements in *La Transfiguration* are also essentially monophonies. Messiaen also wrote *Deux monodies en quarts de ton* for ondes Martenot in 1938, and recently the existence of a *Monodie* for organ from 1963 has come to light.³ Nevertheless, whilst all these monophonies have a prevailing air of introspection, *Danse de la fureur* and *Les Sept Anges* are fearsomely gregarious.

It could be argued that *Les Sept Anges* is not a monophony but a monody because the melody is heard over a rhythmic cycle on unpitched instruments. Nevertheless, this is an automatic process which is entirely independent from the pitched instruments. There is only one definite pitch heard at any given point in the movement and, therefore, it is a monophony.

Despite its forceful nature, *Les Sept Anges* is one of the most lucid of all Messiaen's orchestral movements, drawing upon just two musical factors - melody and rhythm. The most important rhythmic aspect of the movement is the simple, but symbolically effective set of *personnages rythmiques* in the percussion section. After the initial trinity of bass drum whacks, three descending notes are played on cymbals, gongs and tam-tams. These are followed by an emphatic semiquaver whip crack. Throughout the movement, the semiquaver of the whip and the three bass drum quavers provide an unchanging cell, lasting seven semiquavers.

The three descending notes which form the first cell of cymbals, gongs and tam-tams each lasts three semiquavers. On next appearance of this cell, a semiquaver has been added to each note so that the three elements of the rhythm each lasts for four semiquavers. By adding (or subtracting) semiquavers to the descending notes of the cymbal, gong and tam-tam cells on each occasion, the durations fluctuate between three and seven semiquavers (example III:53). It can be seen, then, that the percussion section consists of two elements, or *personnages*; the telescopic machinations of the metallic instruments and the immutable whip and bass drum. In addition to the symbolism of the unchanging cell of seven semiquavers, with three bass drum strokes, and the movement between three and seven semiquavers of the three notes of the cell for three cymbals, three gongs and three tam-tams, it is worth noting that the process is halted quasi-arbitrarily at the beginning of the twenty-first (three times seven) cycle.

Whilst this multiple tribute unfolds in the percussion, combining the three of the Trinity with the seven of the Angels in the title, the trumpets are represented by a robust unison theme declaimed by six horns, three trombones and three bassoons (example III:54). It may seem surprising that Messiaen does not use trumpets when the titles specifically refers to seven Angels with seven trumpets. However, the trumpets of the apocalypse are fearsome instruments with awesome effects. As a result of the first trumpet blast, 'hail and fire, mixed with blood, were hurled on the earth: a third of the earth was burnt up, and a third of all trees and every blade of grass was burnt'.⁴ With the second trumpet blast 'a great mountain blazing with fire was hurled into the sea: a third of the sea turned into blood, a third of all living things in

the sea were killed, and a third of all ships destroyed'.⁵ Similarly, the third trumpet causes a huge star, called Wormwood, to fall from the sky onto a third of all the rivers and springs of water, thus tainting a third of all water, whilst the fourth destroys a third of the sun, the moon and the stars.⁶ Messiaen chooses the more cavernous trombones and horns rather than trumpets and uses the bassoons to give the sound a harder edge.

The theme is in five periods,⁷ each of which comprises three phrases. In marked contrast to *Danse de la fureur*, each phrase of *Les Sept Anges* is distinct, with no broad scale repetition of periods, and few direct analogies between phrases. The earlier work is essentially a study in rhythmic variation, with the consequence that the basis of the melodic material remains essentially the same from period to period. Due to constrictions of instrumentation, the 'holy terror' of *Danse de la fureur* is conveyed through rhythm, supported octave displacements. With the large orchestra of *Éclairs* no such timbral restrictions apply. Rhythmic machinations can be left to the percussion. *Les Sept Anges* is a more direct evocation of the timbre of the trumpets of the apocalypse. As a consequence, whilst the melody is presented by the suitably imposing sonority of bassoons, horns and trombones, the rhythm is fluid, but relatively simple.

In addition to the lack of melodic repetition, *Les Sept Anges* has no clear modality or tonality, and the melody does not appear to be built around a chord-type (example III:55a).⁸ Nevertheless, this august monody is clearly based upon D natural with A natural functioning as a dominant. Four of the five periods conclude

with D natural, as do phrases Ii, Iii and IVii. Period IV comes to rest on A natural, whilst phrases Iii, IIIi and Vi close on the same pitch. Although A natural operates as the structural dominant, G sharp is the more significant pitch in terms of cadences featuring as the penultimate note in ten of the fifteen phrases of *Les Sept Anges*. On six occasions it forms part of a progression to D natural,⁹ twice onto A natural¹⁰ and it precedes F natural and G natural once each.¹¹ It can be seen then that the principal pitches of the melody are D natural, G sharp and A natural.

The tritone is the defining interval, particular in terms of cadences. In addition to the six cadences from G sharp to D natural, three further phrases also end with clear tritone cadences; phrase Iii (F sharp/C natural), phrase Vi (E flat/A natural) and phrase Vii (B natural/F natural). There are also at least three less overt tritone cadences, to which can be added a fourth, more arguable instance. The close of phrases IVi and IViii are quite straightforward examples of the cadence being filled-in (bracketed in example III:55a).

The end of phrase IIIi is more interesting and more important. Although it initially appears to be a quasi-leading note progression from G sharp to A natural, this phrase can also be interpreted as a double tritone cadence, with a progression downwards from D natural to G sharp matched by a movement upwards from E flat to A natural (bracketed in example III:55a). This pincer motion at the heart of the movement underlines the dual significance of G sharp and A natural as cadential and structural dominants respectively to D natural.

Finally, the more debatable instance of a tritone cadence occurs in phrase Iii. The repeated progression from D sharp to A natural in bars 2-4 of the phrase can be interpreted as the true cadence of the phrase (bracketed in example III:55a). In this reading, the remainder of the phrase is simply a decorative elongation designed to reinforce the significance of G sharp at this early stage in the proceedings. Support for this can be found in the following phrase, Iiii, which is essentially a repeat of phrase Ii (the only such repetition in the movement), but contains a similar elongation to Iii.

The tritone does not restrict its influence to the cadences of *Les Sept Anges*. For instance, the opening phrase is simply a pair of overlapping rising tritones from C natural to F sharp and from D natural to G sharp, the latter falling back down after what Messiaen calls a short returning chromaticism.¹² However, as the movement progresses, it becomes apparent that the returning chromaticism encircling the final tritone leap is an important cell, a, which underpins the coherence of the melody (example III:56).¹³ The second phrase of period II is simply a double statement of a based on the C natural/F sharp tritone. As can be seen in example III:55b, there is a premonition of the F sharp a cell in Iii. The two a cells of Iiii use six pitches: F natural, F sharp, G natural, B natural, C natural and C sharp. The following phrase starts by filling in one of the chromatic gaps (B flat, A natural and A flat), before cadencing onto D natural with a partial a cell.

The third period opens with another partial a cell, on G natural, before the pincer movement of the double tritone cadence onto G sharp and A natural discussed above. The final phrase, IIIiii, is also built around partial and complete a cells. The first phrase of the fourth period is an elaboration of its opening two notes using overlapping tritones. The last two notes, A flat and G natural, then become the starting notes of the a cells on E flat and D natural, from which the next phrase is formed in its entirety. It will be remembered that the third phrase ends with a filled-in tritone cadence from E flat to A natural. In fact, the entirety of this relatively long phrase is an elaboration of that progression (**example III:57i**). The tritone cadence is part of an a cell, distorted by octave displacement, and with a D flat passing note. After the initial E flat, the first half of the phrase is a whole tone progression from the A natural up to E flat. Each pitch is approached from a seventh below, ultimately resulting in the leap from E natural of bar six to the E flat of bar seven which forms part of the a cell (**example III:57ii**). The progression of rising sevenths is distorted by the reversal of the pitches in bar five which has the dual function of clarifying the a cell and gives the impression of a rising sequence of groups of three notes to a cretic rhythm.¹⁴ This is aided by a G natural passing note inserted between the B flat in bar two and the A natural of bar three.

The A natural/E flat tritone is ultimately combined with the a cell on D natural, and hence the G sharp/D natural tritone, at the end of the movement. Unusually for *Les Sept Anges*, the first two bars of the final phrase are identical to the opening two bars of Iii, but on this occasion bar two is the start of the a cell on A flat. Messiaen uses octave displacement to weaken the tritone onto A flat in bar three,

turning it into a tritone fall onto the D natural at the start of bar four. This also means that the three D naturals heard before the final note are in the same register and are always approached by a tritone from above. In the case of the partial a cell between bars four and six, there is an E flat passing note interspersed before the final D natural so that there are overlapping A natural/E flat and G sharp/D natural tritones. Nevertheless, there is a tangible sense of Messiaen reinforcing the principal cadential progression during this final phrase. The tritones of bars four to six are untangled in the last four bars, which also form an a cell.

It can be seen then that, even though repetitions are rare, much of the melody of *Les Sept Anges* is built from just a few elements. In particular, the way in which the a cell permeates the texture underlines a motivic aspect to Messiaen's composition which is often overlooked. On the broader scale, one puzzle possibly remains. Despite the careful number symbolism in the percussion, there are five rather than seven phrases to the melody. Although Messiaen left no specific elucidation, it seems reasonable to assume that each of the five tri-partite periods of the melody depicts one Angel. The movement would certainly have been too long if the melody incorporated a further two phrases. It seems likely, then, that Messiaen designated the remaining two Angels of the title to the two *personnages* of the percussion section. What cannot be questioned is that, in its own right and within the context of *Éclairs* as a whole, *Les Sept Anges* uses sophisticatedly simple means for maximum juxtapositional effect.

Notes

- 1 Henceforth referred to as *Les sept Anges*.
- 2 Given that a monody can have an accompaniment.
- 3 This was written for a teaching manual, *Nouvelle méthode de clavier* by Noémie Pierront and Jean Bonfils, in 1963 (at which time Messiaen did not have access to his organ due to a major refurbishment). Messiaen made no reference to its existence and it does not appear in any of his official listings of works. Leduc obtained permission to publish *Monodie* separately in 1996, but it did not appear until 1998 and with no explanation regarding its derivation. I brought it to the attention of Gillian Weir who gave the first known public performance on Tuesday 19 May at Westminster Cathedral as part of the Messiaen festival, *The Celestial Banquet*.
- 4 Rev. 8:7.
- 5 Rev. 8:8-9.
- 6 Rev. 8:10-12.
- 7 Corresponding to the rehearsal figures in the score.
- 8 Examples III:55a & b present the melody of *Les sept Anges* divided into periods, which in turn are sub-divided into phrases. Each phrase will henceforth be referred to in terms of period number and phrase number. For instance IVii indicates period IV, phrase ii. The brackets in example III:55a indicate cadential movement. The brackets in example III:55b highlight the principal melodic cell of the movement.
- 9 Ii, Iiii, IIiii, IIIiii, IVii and Viii.
- 10 Iii, IIIi.
- 11 IIIii and IVi respectively.
- 12 See Part I, chapter one.
- 13 I shall distinguish these a cells by the *final* notes. i.e. the cell in Ii formed by the pitches G natural, A natural, G sharp and D natural is the D natural a cell.
- 14 The pitches do not actually form a strict sequence.

Chapter seven

VII. *Et Dieu essuiera toute larme de leurs yeux...*

Et Lui, Dieu-avec-eux, sera leur Dieu. Il essuiera toute larme de leurs yeux. De mort, de pleur, de cri, il n’y en aura plus...

Revelation 21:3-4

Bienheureux ceux qui pleurent, car ils seront consolés!

Matthew 5:5

Les sept Anges rudely interrupts the suspended animation of *Demeurer dans l’Amour....* It is, as Paul Griffiths suggests, a ‘shock’ which heralds a ‘longer second phase in the work’ after the ‘distinct and separate blocks’ of the first four movements.¹ *Les sept Anges*, and retrospectively by definition, *Demeurer dans l’Amour....*, start a series of juxtapositions of mood, general dynamic, timbre and register between the movements. To put it crudely, the even-numbered movements tend to be forceful, mobile and to use the lower register, whilst the odd-numbered movements are assuaging, restful and occupy the middle to higher registers.

After the eschatological bombast of *Les sept Anges* comes the most tender movement of all, *Et Dieu essuiera toute larme de leurs yeux....*² The inscription from Revelation is an allusion to God’s Covenant to be with the people, the ultimate fulfilment of which will come with the end of time. The title itself also occurs earlier in Revelation:

...the lamb who is as the heart of the throne will be their shepherd and will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away all tears from their eyes.³

The images are of caring and intimacy, what Griffiths describes as ‘God stooping down to man’.⁴ *Et Dieu essuiera* shows the comforting side to God after the fearsome spectacle of the Angels of the Apocalypse.

The movement begins with the slightest murmur of high violin trills from A natural to B flat. After allowing time for this hint of sound to enter our consciousness, the woodwind descend from the upper register «*comme une caresse*»,⁵ coming to rest on a second inversion D major triad straddling middle C (example III:58). Described by Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen as «*un thème très pur*»,⁶ it is a series of *renversements transposés*, floating free from their usual common bass note, and *typical* chords in mode 3ⁱ.

Horns take up the concluding D major triad, lifting it to root position, and this gesture is echoed in the flutes before four solo cellos adopt and sustain the chord. This is analogous to the timbral changes applied to the A major chord which supports the song of the *Gerygone* in *L’Ange musicien* from *Saint François*. Indeed, the insertion of *Les sept Anges* between *Demeurer dans l’Amour...* and *Et Dieu essuiera* is the equivalent on a broader, structural plane of the interjections of the yacking *Faucon crécerelle* into the empyrean twinkling of the *Gerygone*.

In *Et Dieu essuiera* the cellos support an amiable xylophone gesture from an *Alouette calandrelle* (example III:59). It is picking out the D major harmony, but using the tritone G sharp rather than the A natural of the accompanying triad. This briefest of movements reaches its most intimate moment with the central *merle noir* on solo flute. Using D major as its cue, this short interlude soon allows A natural to take precedence, before a final flourish first returns us to D major, then concludes with a whole-tone scale (example III:60). The *Alouette calandrelle* returns, this time over trilling mode 3ⁱ chords from three violins and three violas. The opening material is then repeated, with just one expanded woodwind descent down to D major, before the *Alouette calandrelle* sings its «*petite strophe d'espoir*»⁷ one last time.

Paul Griffiths observed that, of all the movements in *Éclairs*, *Et Dieu essuiera* is the one 'least like anything else in Messiaen's music', suggesting that such tenderness had not been heard since *Vingt regards*.⁸ Nevertheless, even *Vingt regards* never sustains the sense of fragility found in *Et Dieu essuiera* throughout an entire movement. I would suggest that it is to the very beginning of Messiaen's career that one must turn for any kind of analogy in the form of *La colombe* from the *Préludes*.

Griffiths' idea mentioned earlier that *Et Dieu essuiera* represents 'God stooping down to man' is not inappropriate, but another interpretation is possible. Namely that humanity has been raised up to intimacy with God. In other words, rather than a view up towards heaven, the piece is written as if we are already in heaven. It is tempting to suggest that, in his early eighties, Messiaen's feet had already left the ground.

Notes

- 1 Griffiths: Late Works, p.521.
- 2 Henceforth referred to as *Et Dieu essuiera*.
- 3 Revelation 7:17.
- 4 Griffiths: Late Works, p.522.
- 5 Messiaen's description in the sketches, as related by Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen in the booklet to the Deutsche Grammophon recording of *Éclairs*, 439 929-2.
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen in the booklet to the Deutsche Grammophon recording of *Éclairs*, 439 929-2.
- 8 Griffiths: Late Works, p.522.

Chapter eight

VIII. *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*

Des rayons jaillissent de ses mains!

Habakkuk 3:4

Dieu appelle les étoiles, elles répondent: nous voici! elles brillent avec joie pour Celui qui les a créées.

Baruch 3:35

Le concert joyeux des étoiles du matin...

Job 38:7

Les cieux racontent la gloire de Dieu

Psalms 19:1

Gloire à Dieu dans les Hauteurs!

Luke 2:14

Movement seven of *Éclairs, Et Dieu essuiera*, symbolizes intimacy between God and humankind. One way in which this intimacy has been manifested is through the figure of Jesus: God made human. It is through Jesus that humanity can interact directly with, and achieve a form of communion with, God. In Luke’s Gospel the news of the birth of Jesus, the humanizing of God, is accompanied by ‘a great throng of the hosts of heaven, praising God with the words “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace for those he favours”’.¹ Similarly, the tenderness of *Et Dieu essuiera* is followed by a movement in which the stars sing the praises of God. *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* is «remplie de la joie des étoiles, de leur rayonnement, de tout ce qui dans la création astrale est mouvement, tournoiement et lumière».²

It is for this moment of exaltation that Messiaen has saved the bass instruments. Until this point, over forty minutes into *Éclairs*, we have not heard the lowest extremities of the orchestra. Indeed, at the end of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*, Messiaen brings together the entire orchestra for the first and only time to declaim «*Gloire à Dieu dans les Hauteurs!*».³ The symbolism of this unique orchestral inclusivity is clear. The entirety of Messiaen’s orchestra represents the whole Universe, the entire ‘Hosts of Heaven’ in singing God’s praise.

Broad Structure

Les Étoiles et la Gloire is the largest movement of *Éclairs*.⁴ The movement is constructed from a series of distinct aural phenomena which give every impression of being unrelated with the signal exception of the regular occurrences of the interlocking tritones of the opening theme (example III:61). *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* is in eight sections, most of which subdivide either into shorter segments or several strata of activity:

Figure III:vi(a)

The Structure of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*

A B C B’ C’ D E F

A = low tritone theme - nebula effect - *Oiseau-Lyre d’Albert*

B = brass canon + percussion ostinati + string chords + *hors tempo Fauvette des jardins*

C = succession of birdsongs

D = low tritone theme/*Brown Oriole*

E = expansion of tritone theme

F = tutti chorale

The subdivisions of the first section, A in Figure III:vi(a), illustrate the seemingly disjunct nature of the material. The section contains three types of music; the low tritone theme, *m*, low trilling string chords evoking *nebulæ*, *n*, and the ebullient song of the *Oiseau-Lyre d’Albert*, *p*. The section simply consists of the tritone theme being juxtaposed first with the nebula effects and then the fanfare-like calls of the *Oiseau-Lyre d’Albert*:

Figure III:vii

Les Étoiles et la Gloire - section A

m *n* *m* *n'* *p* *m* *p'* *m'* *p''*

m = low tritone theme

n = *nebulæ*

p = *Oiseau-Lyre d’Albert*

Much of the remainder of the movement appears to be equally fragmented, particularly, as we shall see, the C sections of Figure III:vi(a). On the surface there is little to contradict the characterization by Boulez already quoted in this thesis that Messiaen ‘doesn’t compose, he juxtaposes’.⁵ Not for the first time in Messiaen’s music, this initial impression is misleading. In addition to the explicit motif of the tritone theme, *m*, *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* is underpinned by several further unifying elements or characteristics which imbue the structure with an unobtrusive coherence.

It should be stressed that the tritone theme, *m*, is simply the most explicit of these cohesive elements which underpin much of the music of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*. Whereas the other unifying elements tend to be hidden within the fabric of the movement, *m* is always placed in the forefront of the texture as a readily apparent

aural signpost for the listener. For this reason it is the most important and it is absent only from the, admittedly lengthy, C sections of the movement. As such, and despite being confined to a single movement,⁶ *m* recalls the symbolic cyclic themes of works from the 1940s. It makes sense, therefore, to begin discussion of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* by examining how *m* fits into the broad structure of the movement.

The first appearance of *m* as the opening gesture of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*, is made all the more distinctive by the exclusive use of the extreme low register, with the ten, hitherto silent, double basses playing *fortissimo* pizzicati, doubled by contra-bass clarinet and coloured by the tam-tams (see example III:61). The next appearance of *m* is as a canon on the brass, forming one level of the four superimposed strata which comprise section B in Figure III:vi(a) (example III:62).

As has already been mentioned, *m* is absent from the two C sections, which provide lengthy birdsong interludes. Whereas the canons of the first B section are in two parts, those of B' are in three parts and are significantly extended. Similarly, the second birdsong interlude, C', is an expansion of the first which includes several additional species.

When *m* finally returns to the proceedings, in sections D and E, it is as an increasingly persistent interruption to one of these birds, the *Brown Oriole*:

Figure III:viii

Les Étoiles et la Gloire - sections D and E

┌		D	┐	┌	E	┐
<i>m</i> '''	v	<i>m</i> '''	v	<i>m</i> '''(x12.5)		

Whereas the brass canons of the B sections took *m* up to the higher registers, section D sees the tritones return menacingly to the extreme bass for *m'''*. This variant of *m* seems to fall back on itself, frustrating the aspiration to reach the heights implicit in the original version of *m* (example III:63). Persistence pays dividends in E as the first half of *m'''* systematically rises by both pitch and register so that it eventually covers six octaves (example III:64). This escalation heralds the momentous concluding ‘chorale’, although this is really a misnomer as it is simply a broad, tutti melody based upon *m* (example III:65).

This brief survey has merely highlighted the readily audible instances of *m*, the principal binding element of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*; the *explicit* aspects of the compositional process. However, as has already been indicated, the movement is more than a sequence of tritones. The influence of the augmented triad is particularly strong, whilst its building block of the major third also features prominently, often as an added interval. These concerns are evident in the principal harmonic centres of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*. E major is the prevailing harmonic focus of the movement, but supported strongly by the two triads built on the other steps of the augmented triad on E; C major and A flat. These two triads are, of course, related to E major through the mode 3ⁱ *typical* chords. The relationships between these elements are of particular importance during the lengthy birdsong interludes of the two C sections.

It can be seen then that the unifying elements fall into two broad categories:

- the various incarnations of the tritone theme.
- motifs and harmonies based around the augmented triad.

In addition there are other motifs or harmonies which, although they are not so pervasive in their influence, can claim to assist in the discreet compositional cohesiveness upon which the broad canvas of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* is built. These shall be identified as we examine the music more closely. However, a substantial digression is necessary before progressing further.

The obfuscated resonance chord

The score labels **n**, the quiet murmuring after the opening statement of **m** in Figure III:vii, as being «*une nébuleuse : nuage de gaz et de poussière*» (example III:66). In her programme note for *Éclairs*, Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen states that this is «*formée par les trilles de cordes graves, sur le deuxième accord à résonance contractée*» [my emphasis].⁷ To illustrate this point, there is a musical example showing the two types of *accords à résonance contractée* (example III:67).⁸ However, these fluttering gestures, which are sensed as much as heard, are not as straightforward as Loriod’s remarks suggest.

Example III:66 shows the first appearance of **n**. It consists of two chords, a principal chord and a supplementary chord formed from the trilling notes. These are then transposed up a major third in the second bar (example III:68). These are not *accords à résonance contractée*, but chords in mode 3ⁱⁱ. In fact, the chords marked **b**⁺

are respectively the A major/D flat major and D flat major/F major *typical* chords. Both chords have an additional note a major third above the usual top note. The *accords à résonance contractée* are, of course, incompatible with mode 3. In pitch class terms, for instance, mode 3 is constructed from regular groups of three chromatic pitches. In contrast, the first *accord à résonance contractée* has a cluster of four chromatically adjacent pitches, whilst the second has five when reduced to a pitch class.

At a cursory glance, the second occurrence of the nebula music,⁹ *n'*, does not appear to contain any *accords à résonance contractée* either (example III:69). Like *n* there are two chords, although in this case each has just six parts. On this occasion, the trilling notes are all a semitone above the principal chord, and therefore create a transposition of that chord (example III:70). None of the chords on their own correspond to recognized Messiaen chord-types. Nor do the combinations of 1 and 2, or 3 and 4 produce anything noteworthy. However, superposing 1 and 3 (or 2 and 4) reveals a version of the elusive second *accord à résonance contractée* (example III:71). This can be seen more clearly if the chord is re-written to resemble the layout of the second chord in example III:67 (example III:72).

The top two notes of example III:71, B natural and A natural, have been removed as they are additions which crown chords 1 and 2 respectively with an extra major third. Adding notes is an uncommon, though not unheard of, practice by Messiaen when using *accords à résonance contractée*. On other occasions when this occurs, it is usually to fulfil a melodic sequence. For instance, in the first movement

of *Turangalîla-symphonie, Introduction*, there is a sequence of eight chords starting two bars before rehearsal figure 8 (example III:73). The third and fourth chords form a pair of *accords à résonance contractée* as do the seventh and eighth chords, whilst the fifth and sixth are *accords à renversements transposés*. The notes G natural and F natural alternate at the top of these chords and continue to do so even though they do not belong to the final two chords. In other words, foreign notes have been added to an established chord-type in order to retain coherence.¹⁰

Returning to the nebula chords in *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*, it seems that n' does indeed contain a version of the second *accord à résonance contractée* as stated by Loriod. It would certainly have been surprising if she were mistaken. It is curious nonetheless that she has drawn attention to the second *accord à résonance contractée* rather than the mode 3ⁱⁱ harmonies of the first nebula chords. It should be remembered that this feature not only warrants a mention in the programme note but also a musical example. This is all the more puzzling given that the *accord à résonance contractée* is heavily disguised in several ways, rendering it aurally unrecognizable as the chord used in earlier works or as the musical example provided by Loriod.

First of all, when the second *accord à résonance contractée* appears in n', it is not heard as an entity in itself and its presence is masked further by the trilling notes. Moreover, there are the added notes which are used despite the lack in the surrounding music of a sequential reason for their inclusion. A further break with earlier practice

is the appearance of the second *accord à résonance contractée* without its partner. It is very rare for either of the *accords à résonance contractée* to be heard in isolation. The only significant occasions in which they are separated are when they form one of the harmonic layers of a sounding-colour passage using *permutations symétriques*, such as *Les Élus* or the *Strophe* sections of *Chronochromie*. When the *accords à résonance contractée* appear elsewhere in Messiaen’s output, it is almost exclusively as a pair of chords. Last of all, the notes of the chord are spread across more than two octaves rather than the usual octave and a half, making the chord distinctly less *contractée* than is normally the case!

It is not known to what extent Loriod’s programme note relies either upon information imparted by Messiaen for such a purpose or upon her decisions regarding the relative import of information gleaned from her own analysis. Either way, it is entirely in keeping with prefaces and programme notes by the composer to draw attention to a relatively minute detail within a large movement.¹¹ The mention of the *accord à résonance contractée* in the programme note to *Éclairs* is surely meaningless to even the most discerning listener, but it does serve a purpose for the analyst. The second passage of nebula music may be a fleeting gesture, but it demonstrates both the freedom with which Messiaen uses established formulas by this stage in his career, and the gulf between his labels and the manner in which he moulds the material which they purport to describe.

Sections A and B

Let us now return to the broader discussion of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*. The nebula gestures are more than isolated musical effects within the context of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*. The appearance of the *typical* mode 3 chord immediately after the opening statement of **m** is particularly significant. Mode 3 is constructed upon the augmented triad and the *typical* chord exploits the harmonic ambiguities that this structure presents. It is worth noting that each of the supplementary chords formed by the trilling notes in **n** has an added major third at the top and the augmented triad on E flat at its heart. The augmented triad on E has already been cited as having particular significance in *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* but, as we shall see, the augmented triad on E flat also has a function within the proceedings. Furthermore, the combination of each **b⁺** *typical* chord with its supplementary chord of trilling notes provides all the pitches of mode 3ⁱⁱ. The added major thirds at the top of the *typical* chords in **n** emphasize the characteristics of the mode and of the *typical* chord. Notice is being served that the tritones of **m** will move under the influence of the major third.

The heavily disguised *accords à résonance contractée* of **n'**, which it will be remembered are also topped by added major thirds, pave the way for later occurrences of these chords. They appear later in section A and also during some of the birdsongs of the **C** sections, notably the *Grey Butcher Bird*. However, the most important appearance of the *accords à résonance contractée* is as the harmonic basis of the **B** sections in which four types of music are superimposed. The focal point of these sections is a brass canon on the tritone theme, **m''**. This is decorated by a carillon on

three sets of tubular bells and a *Fauvette des jardins* on solo *hors tempo* flute, whilst the strings sustain a *pianissimo* chord throughout the section.

The last of these four elements, the *pianissimo* string chord, is a superimposition of both *accords à résonance contractée* with C natural as the bass note - the pitch of Loriod’s musical example in her programme note to *Éclairs*.¹² It is heard uninterrupted throughout the entirety of both B sections, trilled by five violas and a cello, and sustained by twelve violins (example III:74). This combination of *accords à résonance contractée* is also the basis of the ostinato carillon in the three sets of tubular bells. The notes of the top stave of example III:67 are given to tubular bells I, with the glockenspiel providing resonance for each pitch in the form of displaced clusters (example III:75). The two common notes at the bottom of the two *accords à résonance contractée*, in this case C natural and D natural, are given to tubular bells III. The xylorimba adds resonance to this part with, incidentally, all the pitches from the B major scale (example III:76). The remaining notes from example III:67, the upper two notes from the bottom stave for each chord, provide tubular bells II with an E major triad (with added sixth) on which to form its ostinato. The fact that, of the three carillon parts, this is the only one in which the ‘resonance’ is added by an instrument of indeterminate pitch, the temple blocks, suggests that the presence of E major is no coincidence (example III:77).

The E major triad has already been conspicuous in section A. The song of the *Oiseau Lyre d’Albert* as it appears in *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* is one of the most overtly tonal birdsongs to appear in Messiaen’s entire output. It is harmonized by

alternating the E major triad (with added sixth) almost exclusively with other chords based on major triads, whilst timbral exuberance is added by trumpet and three horns. For instance, in its first appearance (example III:78) the first bar is a series of three, first inversion E major triads respectively followed by D major (second inversion, with seventh), E flat major¹³ (first inversion with added seventh) and B flat major (second inversion). By accident or design, these triads utilize all twelve chromatic pitches, despite the passage having the effect of utmost consonance.

The second bar in example III:78 precedes two further chords based on E major with a *renversements transposés* chord on G natural and a first inversion B flat chord which has both major and minor thirds. The latter of these has an obvious relationship with the B flat major chord at the end of bar one of example III:78, and both chords have a tritone relationship with the E major triad. The minor third could be regarded as a simple displacement of the added sixth at the bottom of the previous E major chord onto the top of B flat major.¹⁴ The *renversements transposés* chord in bar two of example III:78 sounds like a first inversion E flat major triad with added sixth and ninth.¹⁵ In this respect, it provides a link with the fourth chord of bar one and could be considered as a triadic extension of the leading note into a leading chord. However, the derivation of the *renversements transposés* chords means that it could claim links with the dominant triad on F natural and also with B flat major harmonies. In the latter case, it would mean that Messiaen is using the *renversements transposés* chord as a discreet means of repeating the B flat harmony of the last chord in bar one. In other words, the last six chords of example III:78 could be viewed simply as alternating E major with harmonies based upon its tritone partner of B flat.

Nevertheless, it is important that the ambiguities of the first and third chords in bar two of example III:78 do not cloud the fact that the song of the *Oiseau Lyre d'Albert* is patently tonal in character and is built upon triadic harmonies.

It can be seen from Figure III:vii that the three calls of the *Oiseau Lyre d'Albert* in section A are separated by two instances of *m*, the tritone theme. The first simply repeats the original gesture, but the second, *m'*, is heard in the tenor register and the theme is now harmonized or, more accurately, accompanied by woodwind chords. Taking their cue from the nebula gestures, these initially have mode 3ⁱ harmonies, including the *b*⁺ *typical* chord, which are followed by a peculiar sequence of *accords à résonance contractée* (example III:79). It should be noted, incidentally, that mode 3ⁱ is one of the two transpositions which contains the E major triad. The other is mode 3ⁱⁱ; the transposition used for the first nebula chords.

The reason for giving the *accords à résonance contractée* in example III:79 the epithet 'peculiar' is illustrated by example III:80. Each bar has the pair of *accords à résonance contractée* at a different pitch. However, Messiaen has placed the bottom two notes of the first chord a tone lower than usual. It will be remembered that, in derivation at least, the top five notes of the first chord are an appoggiatura to the top five notes of the second chord. It can be seen from example III:80 that there is an embryonic whole-tone sequence in the bass which rises up a major third by steps of a tone, then falls by a tritone. In addition to the top five notes, Messiaen has turned the bottom two notes into appoggiaturas in order to create this brief sequence. As

with the second set of nebula chords, *n'*, the *accords à résonance contractée* have been distorted or disguised.

It will have been noted that, along with the change in register, the tritone theme has been transposed from a starting note of B natural to G natural in example III:79. In other words, it is starting one step, a major third, lower down the augmented triad. It might be expected, then, that the canons of the two **B** sections would start a further step down the augmented triad on E flat. The starting pitch of the first canonic entry is E flat in both cases. As the canons unfold, *m* simultaneously occurs at several pitches and in a higher register than previously.

Sections D and E

The eventual recurrence of *m* in the extreme bass register in section **D** also has a starting note of E flat (see example III:63). Indeed, due to the similarity in register and orchestration, it is the opening of the **D** section rather than the brass canons of **B** which can be regarded as providing the true completion of the progression of the tritone theme through the augmented triad. By its interaction with the interval of a major third, the tritone theme traverses all twelve chromatic pitches - B, F, E, Bb - G, C#, C, F# - Eb, A, G#, D. In the meantime, the canons of the **B** sections have taken the starting notes of the tritone theme through the entire chromatic complement. All twelve pitches, and hence all of creation, are being utilized to praise God.¹⁶

Section **D** not only completes the sequence of the tritone theme through the augmented triad, but, as mentioned earlier, it also heralds the increase in dynamic and broadening of register to encompass doublings across six octaves of Section **E**. At the same time the theme rises in pitch, eventually being returned to the original starting note of B natural. With the concluding 'chorale', the rationale behind these changes in pitch will become clearer. Nevertheless, before examining the chorale it would be beneficial to look more deeply at the wealth of birdsong contained within the two **C** sections of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*.

Birdsong - the C sections

As elsewhere in Messiaen's music after about 1950, there appears to be a clear demarcation in *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* between the 'music', to put it crudely, and the birdsong interludes. That certainly tends to be the perception in analyses of Messiaen's music. Entire swathes of music tend to be reduced to a listing of species. However, as Messiaen would have been the first to point out, the term 'birdsong' covers an enormous variety of material. The **C** sections of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* are no exception. Indeed, Messiaen seems determined to give some indication of the full gamut of possibilities thrown up by his feathered protagonists. Broadly speaking, these lengthy ornithological passages start with songs which have clear harmonic associations, and gradually move towards songs and calls which are harmonically ambiguous, aharmonic or even little more than a noise (see **Figure III:ix** - in Volume II). As we shall see, these sections also serve a function within the development of the movement as a whole.

Despite being the most overtly triadic, the exuberant chirpings of the *Oiseau Lyre d'Albert* in section A are by no means the only birdsong passages in the movement which lean towards E major and associated triads. The *Eastern Whip Bird*, part of **r** in figure III:ix, is also built upon E major harmonies (example III:81a). It is basically a series of *accords à renversements transposés* which resolve onto the E major triad by means of a chromatic cluster. It should be noted that the first and last *renversements transposés* chords are from the same family. This is despite a difference in the top or 'melody' note. The chord used is particularly apposite to the harmonic concerns of both the movement and *Éclairs* as a whole. The underlying harmony¹⁷ is of a first inversion A major triad with added sixth and ninth, but, remembering the derivation of the *renversements transposés* chords, it is also a dominant ninth on B natural with the 'tonic', E natural, in place of the third. In other words, it is a chord which straddles principal harmonic centres of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* and *Éclairs*. This relationship is reinforced by the antepenultimate chord of the sequence (marked * in example III:81), in which the horns highlight its underlying A major triad (with added ninth). As we shall see, the final chord of *Le Christ, lumière du Paradis*, and hence *Éclairs* as a whole, is A major with an added ninth.

An incidental feature of the *Eastern Butcher Bird's* song is that the melody note of the second *renversements transposés* chord in example III:81 is foreign to the chord, being an added major third above the true top note. The second and third chords are from the same family of *accords à renversements transposés*,¹⁸ whilst the first is actually from the grouping starting on C sharp rather than B natural. In other

words, Messiaen is arranging chords or adding notes to them in order to maintain horizontal (or melodic) integrity. It is surely not just fortuitous that in so doing, the added major third features once again in this movement.

There is a reminder of these harmonies in the second half of the song of the last constituent of **u** in figure III:ix(b), the *Brown Shrike Thrush*. It starts with the A major/F major *typical chord*, proceeds to the E major/C major *typical chord* by means of *accords à renversements transposés* and mode 7ⁱ chords, and concludes on the same *renversements transposés* chord which began the song of the *Eastern Whip Bird* (example III:82).

On each appearance of the *Eastern Whip Bird*, the bravura of its concluding E major flourish is simultaneously countered by a quiet, seemingly unrelated sustained chord from the horns and trombones over which a solitary flute gives voice to the *Fauvette à tête noire* (example III:81b). The song is short, but it provides a brief reminiscence of the moment in *Et Dieu essuiera* when the orchestra falls silent to listen to a *merle noir* on solo flute. The song of the *Fauvette à tête noire* does not suggest any meaningful connection with the unifying elements of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*, but the quiet chords do suggest a link. In fact, it is one chord heard four times, once for each appearance of the *Fauvette à tête noire*, and rising a semitone in pitch on each occasion. The chord is a combination of a second inversion major triad and an augmented triad. Alternatively, it can be described as a second inversion major triad with added major third. The chord can also be viewed as a partial *typical chord*.

Due to the stepwise chromatic motion, the four augmented triads are heard and, as a consequence, the full chromatic complement of pitches. The first chord contains the C major triad and, particularly if viewed as a partial *typical* chord, suggests the E major triad. The rise through four chromatic steps infers that if there were to be a fifth chord, it would inevitably return to the augmented triad of the first chord (E natural/G sharp/C natural), combined this time with the E major triad. It could be said that with each chromatic rise, the chord is taken further from its ‘home’ position. With its fourth appearance, it has become as ‘remote’ from the original augmented triad as possible, yet makes its return inevitable.

It can be seen from figure III:ix that the *Fauvette à tête noire*, together with its supporting chord, is always followed by the song of the *Mallee Ringneck*, q, and the same birdsong precedes the *Eastern Whip Bird*. It is a consonant and lucid call, with an underlying harmony of C major, whose triad provides the outer extremities of the final chord and is at the heart of the preceding two chords (example III:83). The upper line of the first violins might seem to detract from the idea of C major, but this can be interpreted simply as being a resonance line. The effect gives no suggestion of dissonance and with its scoring for upper strings, concentrating on a combination of perfect fourths and perfect fifths, it is reminiscent of early Copland.¹⁹ The *Mallee Ringneck* could be regarded almost as a unifying element in its own right due to the distinctive nature of its song and the frequency with which it is heard at the start of both C sections. It should be pointed out that figure III:ix is a little misleading because the call of the *Mallee Ringneck* is played twice in the first two appearances of q in both C and C’. In other words, the call is heard a total of ten times. The *Mallee*

Ringneck is certainly an extremely unusual sonority for Messiaen and it provides a marked contrast with other birdsong textures in *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*. Indeed, it is difficult to find anything comparable in *Éclairs* as a whole, or even Messiaen's entire output.

With the song of the *Hooded Butcher Bird*, the first part of s in figure III:ix, the influence of the unifying elements starts to weaken. Nonetheless, the first chord of its song, which is identical on both of its appearances, includes the combination of second inversion C major triad with augmented triad on C. This is also a feature of the sixth chord which is a slight variation of the opening harmony (example III:84). The E major triad also makes an appearance at the end of the song as the strongest triadic element within a chord which also suggests B major and, arguably, G major. The sense of C major, E major or the augmented triad is less overt than in the songs of the *Eastern Whip Bird* and the *Mallee Ringneck*, or in the chords underpinning the *Fauvette à tête noire*. Nevertheless, these elements are still having an influence on the harmonic flow.

On the surface, it would seem that the converse is true of the *Shama* (the second part of s) It is one of the birds whose songs are 'harmonically' constructed almost exclusively from the angular intervals of sevenths, ninths, seconds and tritones (example III:85). This would seem to be less fertile territory for firm links with other material in the movement. The tritones could be interpreted as an allusion to m, particularly in the xylophone and marimba in the last two bars of example III:85.²⁰ Nonetheless, the prevalence of this interval throughout Messiaen's music makes it

likely that this is simply a coincidence. Much more remarkable is that, in the middle of both of its passages, the *Shama* emits a sudden, completely unexpected, short phrase which starts and ends with the E major triad (example III:86). Furthermore, there is a premonition of the occurrence of E major in example III:86 in the marimba during the last two bars of example III:85. The semiquavers pick out the notes of the E major triad, whilst the preceding demisemiquavers approach from a tritone away, picking out the B flat major triad. None of the rest of the song of the *Shama* has even a hint of triadic harmony, so it is simply untenable to suggest that the appearance and choice of E major is a coincidence. Messiaen is hiding a small, almost imperceptible, harmonic flag within the most atonal, even ‘aharmonic’ element of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*.

Whilst the *Shama* smuggles a covert harmonic link into the song which seems to take us furthest from the unifying elements of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*, the *Pied Butcher Bird* (t in figure III:ix(a)) explores more remote harmonic territory whilst sounding closer in spirit to the *Eastern Whip Bird* due to the prevalence of *renversements transposés* chords and *typical* chords (example III:87). As in the song of the *Eastern Whip Bird*, the horns periodically highlight triads underpinning the chords, such as D major and G major in bar three of example III:87. If there are links, they are beginning to get tenuous. G major is the dominant of C major, but it should be remembered that the latter is the lesser partner of E major in the movement as a whole. The A flat major triad also creeps in and has a relationship with C major and E major by virtue of the augmented triad. However, the sense of exploring relatively ‘remote’ harmonic territory is reinforced by the inclusion of harmonies such as the

first chord in bar two, which is another appearance of the *Fauvette à tête noire* chord, but this time with a second inversion G flat major triad and the augmented triad of G flat, B flat and D natural. In other words, having built much of section C on a particular harmonic colouring, Messiaen uses the same materials to move away from it.

As we have already seen, the two C sections are separated by an expanded return of the brass canon on the tritone theme (section B' in figure III:vi(a)). Similarly, the second C section is also expanded. As can be seen from figure III:ix(b), after the *Shama* there are seven birds rather than the solitary *Pied Butcher Bird* of the first C section. The first of these birds, the *Grey Butcher Bird*, has an acidic song which, for the most part, confines itself to the same intervallic choice of tritones, ninths, sevenths and seconds as the *Shama* (example III:88). Nevertheless, the song repeatedly lands on chords with prominent C major triads. Some are *renversements transposés* chords (see chords marked * in example III:88). Others provide a link back to the second nebula chords, n', and the trilling string chords which underpin the B sections in the form of the second *accord à résonance contractée* on D flat (see chords marked † in example III:88). For once in this movement, the latter is preceded by the first *accord à résonance contractée*. It will be noted that the first of the *renversements transposés* chords is preceded by a pair of *accords à résonance contractée*, this time on A natural, and that Messiaen places the A flat major triad, the augmented partner of C natural and E natural, at the top of the second chord.

The *accords à résonance contractée* are more significant than the *renversements transposés* chords in the *Grey Butcher Bird* as they are the basis of its periodic cadence figure. Example III:89 gives the *accord à résonance contractée*, chord B, as it is configured in the song of the *Grey Butcher Bird*. It can be seen that the C major triad, first inversion, has been placed unequivocally at the top of the chord. The sixth and ninth, A natural and D natural, are placed just below the triad and the two resonance notes, D flat and E flat, are at the very bottom of the chord. In other words, Messiaen has expanded his *accords à résonance contractée* so that the triad can ring out clearly and unambiguously at the top.

With the *Helmeted Friarbird*, the second bird of **u** in figure III:ix(b), there is a return to the timbre of the *Shama*, though this time Messiaen adds temple blocks to the three xylos and three sets of tubular bells. Like the *Shama*, the song of the *Helmeted Friarbird* draws upon what Boulez has described as ‘the more anarchic intervals’,²¹ but unlike the *Shama* it contains no discernible links with any of the movement’s unifying elements. It is in three sections constructed from the alternation of short phrases with equally brief answering phrases, giving the form:

a b a b a c d c d c e f e

The last element of **u** in figure III:ix(b), the *Brown Shrike Thrush* has already been mentioned in relation to the *Eastern Whip Bird*. Nevertheless, it is worth reiterating that the relatively long crescendo chord in its penultimate bar is the C major/E major *typical* chord (see example III:82). As at the end of the first **C** section, the harmonic movement is now broadly moving away from the unifying elements. In

contrast to the *Grey Butcher Bird*, with its periodic cadences onto harmonies centred around C major and A flat major, the impression now is of the C major/E major *typical* chords resolving onto both of the ensuing chords (*renversements transposés* chords with G major and A major triadic elements respectively).

The next bird in Section C', the *Brown Oriole*, starts its song by repeating the two concluding chords of the *Brown Shrike Thrush* (see example III:82), with the oboes picking out the G major and A major triads (example III:90). It then proceeds to explore more remote harmonies inspired by the augmented triad relationships between the unifying elements. The first two *renversements transposés* chords (G major and A major triads) are followed by a third built on E flat major, related to G major through the augmented triad. In the fourth chord, Messiaen completes the set of augmented triad relationships with the B major/E flat major *typical* chord. It is also worth remembering that E flat major has a tritone relationship with A major. The fifth chord combines A major with its augmented partner of F major by means of another *typical* chord. The second bar of example III:90 begins by repeating the 'G major' *renversements transposés* chord followed by the B major/E flat major *typical* chord, and the song ends by completing the augmented relationships of A major through the D flat major/F major *typical* chord. Indeed, of the nine chords that comprise the *Brown Oriole's* first outing in the movement, only the last chord in the first bar (chord six), the B flat major/D major *typical* chord, does not have some kind of augmented relationship with first two chords of the song. It could, perhaps, be regarded as a bridging chord. The fifth chord of bar one, the F major/A major *typical* chord, has a double dominant relationship with chord six, the top part of which (D major) has a

dominant relationship with the bottom part of the first chord of bar two (G major). This is not to suggest that Messiaen was necessarily thinking in terms of dominant relationships, although they are a frequent feature of his analyses, but that these relationships may explain why the sixth chord of bar one sounded right to him despite stepping outside of the surrounding harmonic interrelationships.

Another feature of example III:90 that should be mentioned is the quiet chromatic string glissando beneath the birdsong, not least because it does not feature in the two subsequent appearances of the *Brown Oriole*. It is a total chromatic cluster spanning a tenth. It starts with a top note of A flat, and slides down a thirteenth so that the top note is now C natural. These are the first and last notes of the top line of the birdsong. Furthermore, by virtue of spanning a tenth, the bottom note of the glissando slides from E natural to A flat. In other words, the C natural/E natural/A flat augmented triad is defining the limits of the glissando even though this fact would scarcely be noticed even by the most discerning of ears. The relationship between the top note of the glissando and the top line of the birdsong leads to another observation, which is that every alternate pitch of the top line of the *Brown Oriole* belongs to the C natural/E natural/A flat augmented triad. Whilst Messiaen is taking the harmony away from the influence of this particular augmented triad, it is still imperceptibly influencing the music.

The timbral effect of the remaining three species of bird in Section C' could, to varying degrees, be described as their most prominent attribute. Certainly the rapidly repeating xylo notes of the *Lewin's Honeyeater*, supported by trilling

chromatic string clusters, triangle, cymbal and wind machine (Éoliphone), are little more than a brief noise (example III:91). Nevertheless, two features are worth mentioning. Two solo violins and a solo cello use harmonics to reinforce the pitch of the xylophone, B natural. This is the pitch at which the tritone theme, *m*, appears at the start of the movement and the pitch at which it reappears in modified form at the start of the final chorale. In addition, the only pitch omitted by the eight trilling violins is G sharp, which is part of the principal augmented triad and, ultimately, the concluding pitch of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*.

The *Laughing Kookaburra*, *x* in figure III:ix(b), is pervaded by tritones and seconds (example III:92). Most of the song has four parts, although at times it has just three or two parts, but it is rare for all of the parts to change simultaneously. This produces a curious overlapping effect which is reinforced by the pitched aspect of the song moving through eleven instruments, often with tapered entries. Through this scoring for trumpets and horns, it creates a timbral link with the brass canons of the *B* sections, the workings of which produce similar clashes through different methods. It could be said that the *Laughing Kookaburra* prepares the way for the imminent return of *m*, following another burst from *Lewin's Honeyeater* and the brief call of the *Noisy Pitta*, which consists of two rapid flourishes in the wind leading to a full chromatic cluster sliding down in the upper strings.

Overview of the C sections

Taken as a whole, the two lengthy birdsong episodes of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* can be said to start broadly within the sphere of the augmented triad on E and the major triads on each of its constituent pitches. They gradually move away towards more distant harmonies or even aharmonic birdsongs, although there are still occasional traces of the unifying elements. This is summarized, albeit crudely, in **figure III:x** (see Volume II). It will be noted that the move away from the unifying elements tends to correspond to the concurrent move towards less harmonic birdsongs. There are, of course, passages within the principal birdsong sections, **C**, which do not contain any tangible links, be they explicit or covert, with the framework of unifying elements.²² The tritone theme, the augmented triad and its related triads are simply not present in any meaningful way. Whilst many aspects of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* are linked despite appearing to be juxtapositions, these non-related passages are compositional as well as aural juxtapositions. The harmonic processes of the **C** sections are less precise than in Messiaen's non-birdsong writing, such as the ebb and flow of a chorale passage, but there is enough evidence to support the idea of a harmonic undercurrent to successive birdsongs.

Messiaen's colour associations suggest a useful analogy, for the **C** sections could be thought of as starting with a discernible predominance of one area of the spectrum, such as reds, oranges and purples. Gradually the incidence of complementary and contrasting colours increases, but there are still periodic splashes and specklings of red and its associated colours.

Section F

Much of the discussion of birdsong, if not the movement as a whole, has concentrated on the harmonic rather than melodic aspects of the music. However, as has already been mentioned, the concluding ‘chorale’ is simply a broad, tutti melody. Nevertheless, the harmonic preoccupations of earlier sections do not just evaporate.

Example III:93 provides the entire melody of this concluding section, **F**. It falls into four periods, the first, second and fourth of which begin with a clear variant of **m**, commencing each time on its original starting pitch of B natural. The third period of the chorale ends on B flat, preceded by E natural and B natural. In other words, it is a version of **m** starting on B natural and with the F natural omitted. Nonetheless, the second and fourth periods, and hence the movement, conclude on A flat.

The logic behind this concluding pitch may at first be puzzling. It is, of course, part of both the E major triad and the augmented triad on E, being a major third above E natural. Nonetheless, this would be tenuous without any link to **m** at its original pitch, even though B natural (the original starting pitch of **m**) is also part of the E major triad.

The augmented triad on E natural certainly has a tangible influence. The first period of the chorale concludes on C natural, approached from E natural. The second period closes on A flat, preceded by E natural and C natural and the chorale ends with a progression from C natural to A flat. Furthermore, the first phrase of the first period closes on E natural (bar three in example III:93). The same is true of the final period of the chorale as it is derived from the first. Indeed, the first period of the chorale is

essentially just the variant of the tritone theme followed by C natural, with bar four simply providing decoration. At the end of the chorale, Messiaen repeats this decorative figure from bar four in order to set up the concluding cadence.

There is a second way in which the augmented triad is influential on the concluding pitch of the chorale. Example III:94i shows *m* as it appears in the chorale and examples III:94ii and III:94iii show this variant of *m* starting on the other steps of the augmented triad, G natural and E flat.²³ In this version of *m*, it can be seen that A flat, approached from its tritone partner of D natural, becomes the inevitable consequence of starting on B natural and then progressing through the augmented triad.

The final period of the chorale starts with the variant of *m* at its original pitch of B natural and, as a consequence, the first phrase ends on E natural. The melody then moves to D natural, via the decorative figure from the first period of the chorale, starting on B natural, the first note of the chorale. The final phrase is effectively a double cadence (see example III:93). On the broad scale, the falling D natural-A flat tritone mentioned earlier spans the last four bars. Indeed, the final period of the chorale could be viewed as a vast elongation of the truncated version of *m* which concludes the third period, but starting a tone lower so that it produces the pitches A natural, D natural and A flat. This would certainly help to explain why the chorale variant of *m* is preceded by A natural at the start of the first, second and fourth periods. Returning to the end of the chorale, although there is a broad tritone cadence across the final four bars, the concluding interval is actually a major third, from C

natural to A flat. This double cadence at the end of the chorale is extended by the insertion of the version of the chorale variant of *m* which concludes with C natural. In other words, the last period of the chorale reconciles the tritone and the major third, the tritone theme and the augmented triad.

Overview of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*

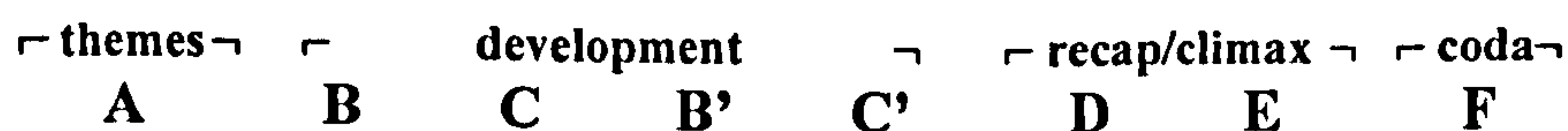
Viewing the chorale, and hence the entire movement, as an exploration of the tension between the tritone and the augmented triad opens the door to a modal interpretation. The presence of various transpositions of mode 3 has already been noted, particularly with regard to the first set of nebula chords (*n* in figure III:vii), *m'*, and the many typical chords found within the *C* sections. Most prevalent, though, is mode 3ⁱ, the associated augmented triad on E natural, and the triads of E major, C major and A flat major. Mode 3 is, of course, one of Messiaen's two most favoured modes. The other, mode 2, can be viewed as the basis of the tritone theme. Whilst mode 3 in *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* tends to be governed by the augmented triad on E, mode 2 operates under the auspices of the augmented triad on E flat. In this interpretation, the first appearance of *m*, starting on B natural, is in mode 2ⁱⁱ, *m'* with its starting pitch of G natural is in mode 2ⁱ and when *m* starts on E flat it is in mode 2ⁱⁱⁱ. In addition to *m* producing all twelve chromatic pitches, it also uses all three transpositions of mode 2. In other words, *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* exploits the harmonic and intervallic tension between mode 2 and mode 3.

The question remains of how the unifying elements influence the progress of the movement as a whole, particularly with reference to the **C** sections. In other words, given that the birdsong sections seem to be more than juxtapositional interludes, what is their function within the structure of *Les étoiles et la Gloire*? To answer this question, it would be useful to re-examine Figure III:vi. The **A** section repeatedly states the main tritone theme of the movement, **m**. The *Oiseau Lyre d'Albert* can be viewed as a second theme which introduces E major as an important harmony and, more importantly, the idea of birdsong as a contrast to the almost clinical tritone theme. The section also introduces the major third as an important interval. The **B** and **C** sections respectively explore more fully the potential of **m** and birdsong. The former concentrates on tritones, whilst the latter is more concerned with augmented and major triads. Section **D** returns to a simple alternation of **m** and a solitary birdsong, the *Brown Oriole*, and sections **E** and **F** expand **m** once more and then combine it with its apparent antithesis, the augmented triad.

In short, the movement consists of an introduction of themes and ideas, development of material, recapitulation with climax, and a coda consisting of a peroration on the principal elements:

Figure III:vi(b)

The Structure of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*



A closer look at sections **D** and **E** adds further credence to this interpretation. To regard section **D** as a separate entity is slightly misleading, for it is really just the

overlap between the end of section C' and the beginning of section E. Nevertheless, it does mark a recapitulation of section A in that it consists of statements of *m* alternating with bursts of birdsong. This impression is reinforced by a return to the instruments of the opening, albeit supplemented by bass clarinet, three bassoons and the cellos. It is true that *m* starts on E flat rather than the B natural of the beginning of the movement implied by the term recapitulation. Nevertheless, *m* gradually works its way back to its original starting pitch of B natural during the course of sections D and E. Similarly, whilst the *Brown Oriole* is initially underpinned by the same G major and A major harmonies as its appearance in section C', it uses its two statements in section D to wend its way back to harmonies related to the augmented triad on E, ending with the A flat major/C major *typical* chord (examples III:95 and III:96).

Nevertheless, whilst the final period of the concluding chorale starts with a variant of *m* at its original pitch, *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* effectively ends at the farthest point from the opening. In other words, the movement is a broad progression, incorporating development *en route*. The concluding pitch of A flat is effectively inevitable given that the first statement of *m* starts on B natural. It is a conclusion which reconciles, indeed combines, the tritone and the augmented triad in its final cadential phrase. The principal harmony of the movement is clearly E major, but, in keeping with the journey that *m* undertakes, the influence of this harmony gradually declines. The augmented triad ultimately proves to be more influential and, the conclusion moves beyond overt harmonic considerations. We shall discuss further the harmonic and melodic unifying elements of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* and their wider

implications within *Éclairs* in a later chapter. For the moment, it suffices to observe that material is manipulated and developed on several levels within the movement as a whole. The tritone theme is audibly developed, but the other unifying elements are perhaps more significant in creating an understated coherence.

Les Étoiles et la Gloire is indeed a movement of juxtapositions and disparate features. It juxtaposes extremes of orchestral register, within the movement and in relation to *Éclairs* as a whole. It juxtaposes different timbres, placed next to each other, as in sections A and C, or one on top of the other as in the B sections. It juxtaposes melody and harmony, the many different kinds of birdsong, introversion and exuberance, light and darkness. It juxtaposes tritones and major thirds.

However, despite the surface dissimilarity, the contrasts between the many elements of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* often mask deeper relationships. Paradoxically, the many juxtapositions, both real and apparent, are crucial to Messiaen’s intention of displaying homogeneity. By creating a framework of apparently fragmented material, and the tensions which that provides, Messiaen increases the impact of bringing together the disparate voices of his creation to sing God’s praises; «*Les cieux racontent la gloire de Dieu*».

Notes

- 1 *Luke* 2:13-14.
- 2 Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen in the booklet to the Deutsche Grammophon recording of *Éclairs*, 439-929-2.
- 3 With the exception of three instrumentalists: crotales, contra-bass tuba and contra-bassoon. The tenth movement, *Le Chemin de l’Invisible*, uses as many instrumentalists, but not with the same homogeneity.

Notes (continued)

- 4 *Demeurer dans l'Amour...* has a longer duration, but this is due to its tempo. The number of pages required for each movement in the manuscript score provides a crude, but effective comparison. Whereas *Demeurer dans l'Amour* has twenty-five pages, *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* requires ninety-four. The next longest movement by this imperfect yardstick is *L'Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée* with fifty-five pages, whilst the shortest movement is *Et Dieu essuiera* with just eleven.
- 5 Pierre Boulez: Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship, translation by Stephen Walsh, (Oxford, 1991), p.49.
- 6 As an explicit motif - see chapter twelve.
- 7 Booklet to the JADE recording of *Éclairs*, JAD C 099.
- 8 This musical example was also provided in the programme booklet for the first performance of *Éclairs*.
- 9 It is not marked as such in the score, but it is clearly related by virtue of orchestration, register, context and effect..
- 10 It will be noted that the bottom note of the final chord, A flat, is a tone lower than it should be for an *accord à résonance contractée*. This is to provide a link with the solo cello which follows, alternating the notes G sharp and C natural.
- 11 See, for instance, Messiaen's programme note for *Adoptionem filiorum perfectam* in which he draws attention to an incomplete *permutations symétrique* passage lasting a mere eleven seconds in a lengthy movement. Furthermore, Messiaen makes no attempt to explain the technique.
- 12 With middle C as the bass note, this could be a simple coincidence. However, this is not the pitch of Messiaen's quotation of the *accords à résonance contractée* during his analysis of *Chronochromie* in *Traité III*, pp.87-88, nor is it the pitch at which Loriod explains the chords in her essay on the composer's piano music in Catherine Massip (ed.): Portrait(s) d'Olivier Messiaen (Paris, 1996), p.105.
- 13 Enharmonic D sharp.
- 14 It is also worth noting that the four notes of this penultimate chord in example 78 form a skeleton of the B flat/F sharp *typical* chord.
- 15 Following Messiaen's own description of the aural qualities of these chords. See Part I, chapter one.
- 16 There is, incidentally, a subtle link between the B sections and Section D as the rhythm of the latter is borrowed from the ostinato figure played by a combination of tubular bells II and temple blocks (see example III:77).
- 17 i.e. the bottom five notes of the chord.
- 18 i.e. the groups of *renversements transposés* chords formed on the same bass note.
- 19 It is tempting to think that Messiaen may have had Copland in mind, given the latter's death in 1990 and the fact that Messiaen spent time with Copland at Tanglewood.
- 20 Two bars before rehearsal figure 18.
- 21 Interview in 'Messiaen at 80': programme broadcast by BBC2 on 10 December 1988.
- 22 It is inevitable that there are links which have slipped through the net of this study.
- 23 Approached from a tone below.

Chapter nine

IX. *Plusieurs oiseaux des arbres de Vie*

L'arbre de Vie représente l'Humanité du Verbe.

Dom J. de Monléon

Les élus cueilleront les fruits de cet arbre merveilleux, et ils chanteront dans ses branches, comme des oiseaux.

Dom J. de Monléon: *le sens mystique de l'Apocalypse*

Birdsong permeates *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*, with no less than fifteen species being called upon to represent the heavens singing the praises of God. It might seem strange, then, that Messiaen turns again to birdsong in order to create a change of mood after the jubilant bombast of the longest movement in *Éclairs*. Three factors mark out *Plusieurs oiseaux des arbres de Vie*¹ both from *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* and from *Éclairs* as a whole. The first, and most obvious, is that *Plusieurs oiseaux* consists of just birdsong supported by nothing more elaborate than the tintinnabulation of a triangle and a small cymbal which are trilled throughout. Secondly, *Plusieurs oiseaux* is constructed purely from the melodic strands of the birds' songs, with no particular attempt being made to capture the timbre of each species through harmonization. Last of all, whereas each bird in *Les Etoiles et la Gloire* is heard in isolation, singing in the spotlight for a few bars, *Plusieurs oiseaux* is a jumbled superimposition of twenty-five songs with up to seventeen species being heard at a time.

In one sense, the spectacular celestial dawn-chorus of *Plusieurs oiseaux* acts as an ornithological counterbalance to the virtuosic transcription required for the antics of the single species heard in *L’Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée*. However, in terms of mood, *Plusieurs oiseaux* is closer in spirit to *Les élus*, which is the only other movement in *Éclairs* to superimpose more than a couple of birdsongs. It is also a logical progression from the *hors tempo* birdsong passages in *Un vitrail*, in which the notion of abandoning conducted time was first mooted. Like *Les élus*, *Plusieurs oiseaux* is too complex to ‘follow’ in the normal sense of concert listening. Rather, it creates a luminous impression of the eternal, not through stasis, but by utilizing a constantly moving web of sound. The listener is not so much engaged in the progress of the movement as dazzled by it.

Even when armed with a score, it is almost impossible to follow *Plusieurs oiseaux* due to the complexity of the writing and the complete absence of barlines. It is a spectacular development of the *hors tempo* technique developed in *Le prêche aux oiseaux* from *Saint François* which dispenses entirely with barlines. **Example III:97i** provides the first two pages of the manuscript score, whilst **example III:97ii** gives the first three pages of the engraved score.² It can be seen that, in addition to the intrinsic complexity of the music, the manuscript score is incredibly difficult to read.³

As with other complex passages involving many birdsongs, the analyst is faced with questions of lucidity and integrity. Alexander Goehr is typically succinct in explaining the problem in relation to *Oiseaux exotiques*:

Why in all those dawn choruses do they sound so marvellous? I know lots of people who jumble complicated lines against each other, and it sounds like mud. But why does this sound translucent? Is there a modal system operating in it? Is it just that he painstakingly wrote note after note and tested everything with his ear?⁴

The problem of understanding how Messiaen achieved such translucent results is even greater in *Plusieurs oiseaux* due to the complete absence of barlines. The entire movement uses the *hors tempo* technique, which means that Messiaen could not have been sure exactly which notes would be heard together. In addition, piccolo 1 and E flat clarinet 1 are required to play several passages of indeterminate pitch.⁵ Added to this is the wealth of tempo and dynamic markings which ensures that the position of each birdsong is in a continual state of flux in relation to the texture a whole.

Several possibilities can be discounted at the outset. The first is that there is some kind of modal organization. None of the birdsongs in *Plusieurs oiseaux* can be described convincingly in modal terms, either individually or collectively.⁶ A related possibility is that the songs draw their pitches from harmonic patterns, but none of the pitch patterns corresponds to any of Messiaen's standard chord-types. All twelve pitches are used liberally during the course of *Plusieurs oiseaux* making anything as straightforward as creating coherence through simple modal or harmonic means an impossibility.

Another organizational possibility, though one which would not explain the resulting aural effect, is that Messiaen manipulates his material in terms of species or geographical location. The precedent for this would be *Candor est lucis aeternae* from *La Transfiguration*. This apparently complex movement is actually in a simple binary form in which the boundaries are marked out by the geographical derivation of the birdsongs being employed.⁷ In *Plusieurs oiseaux*, there are thirteen birds from Singapore, seven from Papua New-Guinea, two from New Zealand, and just one each from India, Greece and Australia (see Table III:ii - Volume II). However, the distribution of species in the score does not suggest any clear structural patterns.

Despite the lack of any discernible governing structure explaining the distribution of material, examination of the songs does reveal circumstantial evidence for a possible theory to explain why, in Goehr’s terminology, *Plusieurs oiseaux* does not sound like mud. The key is not to take each song as an entity, but to examine pitches to which it is taken by the momentum of its song and which notes feature prominently. This is more clear in some songs than in others and it should be stated at the outset that these prominences do not result in an audible harmonic colour. There is no readily discernible harmony. The suggestion is that certain notes occur more frequently at the ends of songs or at prominent points within them. Since there is constant movement, the majority of a phrase will be perceived more as a shape than a series of pitches. However, the highpoints and ends of phrases will register nearer the surface of the texture. These notes have the effect of a subliminal message for the listener, hidden within the tangled web of sound and behind the surface distractions such as the indeterminately high-pitched screeching of E flat clarinet 1.

As one of the first songs heard in *Plusieurs oiseaux*, the *Murai Mata Putih* provides a relatively prominent example. From example III:98 it can be seen that the song repeatedly rises to E natural, meaning that this pitch is heard chiming out from clarinet 1 throughout the first eight pages of the movement and also on its return for four pages a little later on. A subsidiary observation is that the iambs of the song always land on one of three pitches; E natural, A flat and B natural. These are, of course, the notes of the E major triad, and, during the course of *Plusieurs oiseaux*, about half of the birds give prominence to one or more of the three pitches of the E major triad. Several birds also highlight the notes A natural and/or C sharp.

After its initial quiet E flat, the *Black Crested Bulbul* (piccolo 1) is repeatedly drawn, *fortissimo* to an accented G sharp (example III:99). The second bird assigned to piccolo 1, the *Large Scimitar Babbler*, consists of flourishes around notes from the C major and E major triads, especially E natural (example III:100). After its initial F sharp iambs, the *Riroriro* (piccolo 2) is a relatively meandering song until it latches hold of high A naturals, followed by a brief perch on E natural at the end of its phrases (example III:101). The *Sultan Tit* (piccolo 3) picks up the F sharp iambs of the *Riroriro*, before oscillating on the C sharp/G natural tritone (example III:102). The brief appearance of the *Burung Takar Bukit* (piccolo 3) approaches A natural from its tritone, D sharp, and, using the greek rhythm Epitrite III (— — ∪ —) creates a returning chromaticism aided by G sharp and A sharp (example III:103). The *Murai Rimba Bukit* (flute 3) consists of ever more elaborate flourishes up to B natural (example III:104). The *Burung Gembala Palanduk* (flute 4) starts with small scale chromatic musings around A natural and introduces an iambic snap from B

natural onto C sharp (example III:105i). This iamb is later developed, along with a similar snap from G sharp to F sharp, whilst the chromatic 'musings' are varied so that they reach a persistent, repeating E natural (example III:105ii). More straightforward is the *Mohoua à tête jaune* (Eb clarinet 2) which repeatedly lands on A flat (example III:106). The second bird assigned to E flat clarinet 2, the *Brownish Whistler*, has similar traits, landing on E natural and G sharp (example III:107).

The *White Throated Fantail* (clarinet 1), like the other bird given to clarinet 1, *Murai Mata Putih*, has a tendency to finish its phrases with a reasonably emphatic E natural (example III:108). In addition to its prominent cretic C sharp/G natural opening tritone, it is given a distinctive colour by the whole-tone nature of many of its scalar passages (see brackets in example III:108). B natural features prominently as the ceiling of the quirky song of the *Silver-Eared Mesia*, which looks like it is attempting, but failing, to sing in E major (example III:109), whilst B natural and E natural dominate the short call of the *Golden Monarch* (example III:110). Finally, the segmented song of the *Dark-Throated Oriole* is attracted to B natural and G sharp. Towards the end of the movement⁸ this becomes a positively triumphant declaration of the E major triad sung *fortefortissimo* (example III:111).

It should be emphasized again that this litany of examples is not intended to suggest that there is any overt sense of E major or A major. It will have been noted from the examples that there is plenty of material which has nothing to do with either of these triads and, therefore, that the vast bulk of the soundworld of *Plusieurs oiseaux* is, for want of better terms, atonal or non-tonal or fully chromatic. In

addition, there are several songs, such as the *Shama* (flute 1) and the *Merle de Roche* (flute 2), which fly through the pitches without suggesting a significant preference for any of them.

Nevertheless, whilst the evidence does not suggest that *Plusieurs oiseaux* is built with the E major and A major triads in mind, the way in which the notes of these triads are intermittently emphasized does suggest that they may be partially responsible for the translucence of the movement. Particularly noteworthy is the way in which, between pages 118 and 122 of the engraved score, E major almost bubbles to the surface of the texture through a combination of the *Murai Mata Putih*, the third segment of the *Burung Gembala Palanduk* and the *Dark-Throated Oriole*.

In response to the inscription from the Dom J. de Monléon which precedes *Plusieurs oiseaux* in the score of *Éclairs*, Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen asks:

Quoi de plus séduisant pour un Compositeur-Ornithologue que d'imaginer la Vie éternelle comme un arbre infini représent le Christ, avec toutes les âmes élues comme des oiseaux chantant dans ses branches et cueillant des fruits suaves ?⁹

It would certainly have been remarkable if Messiaen had not been inspired by Monléon's mystical imagery. The resulting movement is both extremely complex and beautifully translucent. This chapter has suggested one possible way in which Messiaen achieves the desired effect. One aspect of his ability to create a movement which, far from sounding harsh, is jubilantly colourful. It is certainly not the only

element. Much more work needs to be done on Messiaen's birdsong writing to understand why it does not sound like a cluster when all the pitches are sounding simultaneously and why it does not sound cluttered when there are so many different lines. It is possible that some clues will be given when the sketches eventually become available. It is also possible that when the second volume of *Tome V* of *Traité* is published¹⁰ that the key to such questions will be revealed. The evidence thus far suggests that the likelihood of any such revelations is extremely small. Messiaen's inspiration for *Plusieurs oiseaux* was mystical. It seems that the compositional secrets which underpin this ornithological portrait will remain mysterious for the foreseeable future.

Notes

- 1 Henceforth referred to as *Plusieurs oiseaux*.
- 2 The manuscript score of *Plusieurs oiseaux* has twelve pages, numbered 1-12. The engraved score has 24 pages, numbered 103-126. References to the score in this chapter are to the engraved score.
- 3 It should be remembered that all performances of *Éclairs* before 1999 would have used the manuscript score.
- 4 Interview conducted for this thesis at Cambridge on 4 July 1996.
- 5 Piccolo 1 is instructed to play as high as possible (*les plus aigus possibles*). E flat clarinet 1 is instructed to play with teeth against the reed (*jouer avec les dents sur l'anche*). In both instances the parts omit note heads, but a rough shape is given by the stems.
- 6 Two exceptions might be countenanced. The first is the *White Throated Fantail* (clarinet 1), which has whole-tone characteristics and concludes its song with a descent through mode 6⁵. However, neither modality is firmly established. The second is the *Grey Checked Bulbul* (piccolo 2) which confines itself to notes from mode 3¹, though this is inconclusive as the song uses just six pitches.
- 7 For a more detailed examination of *Candor est lucis aeternae*, see Dingle: Olivier Messiaen: *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur, Jésus-Christ* - A Provisional Study (M.Phil thesis. University of Sheffield, September 1994), pp.51 ff.
- 8 Pages 120 and 122 of the engraved score.
- 9 Preface to the score.
- 10 At the time of writing, its publication is imminent. i.e. sometime in the next two or three years!

Chapter ten

X. *Le Chemin de l’Invisible*

Thomas lui dit: Seigneur, nous ne savons pas où tu vas,
Comment en connaissons-nous le chemin? Jésus lui
répondit: Je suis la Voie, la Vérité et la Vie. Nul ne va au
Père que par moi.

John 14:5-6.

Messiaen did not like writing about painful subjects. His difficulty, fear even, of writing the stigmata scene in *Saint François* was mentioned earlier in this thesis. Nevertheless, for a composer who is, rightly, singled out in this century for being able to write positive works full of hope and joy, there is a considerable number of depictions of suffering from throughout his career. Amongst the early works there are extremely troubled sections in *Cloches d’angoisse et larmes d’adieu* from the *Préludes*, the *Diptyque*, *Les offrandes oubliées* and *Le tombeau resplendissant*. Each of the large religious cycles of the late 1930s and the 1940s has an angst ridden movement; *Minuit pile et face* in *Chants de terre et de ciel*, *Combat de la mort et de la Vie* in *Les corps glorieux*, *Amen de l’agonie de Jésus* and, arguably, *Amen du jugement* from *Visions de l’Amen*, and *Regard de l’onction terrible* from *Vingt regards*. It might be thought that the nature works of the 1950s might be an exception, but the nightmarish scenario of *La chouette hulotte* is one of Messiaen’s most unsettling pieces. Finally, the *monumental trinity* works each have a movement depicting what Messiaen terms ‘holy terror’; *Terribilis est locus iste* in *La Transfiguration*, *Cedar Breaks et le don de crainte* in *Des canyons*, *Les Stigmates* in *Saint François*, and *les ténèbres* in *LDSS*.

This musical litany of suffering underlines the fact that Messiaen understood fully that his depictions of the afterlife and of heavenly grace would have a much greater impact when thrown into relief by their opposites. This type of juxtaposition is as crucial to Messiaen's art on the large scale as it is when increasing the luminescence of the song of the *Gerygone* in *L'Ange musicien* by interrupting it with the harsh yakking of the *Faucon crécerelle*. *Éclairs* is no exception and, in *Le Chemin de l'Invisible*,¹ Messiaen not only meditates on the difficulty of the journey to the afterlife, but also prepares the way for the final movement by creating as loud and harsh a noise as possible. Crucially, in contrast both to the dazzling escapism of *Plusieurs oiseaux* and to the peaceful tranquility of the final movement, there is, in Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen's words, «*aucun repos dans cette pièce*».²

Le Chemin is a harsh, restless movement in which Messiaen flexes his orchestral muscles for one last time. It begins and ends dramatically with a chord seemingly ripped from the heart of the orchestra, followed by a cavernous low C natural from instruments of the extreme bass (example III:112).³ The gesture is reminiscent of the 'theme of decision' from *Saint François*, but the effect in *Le Chemin* is both more painful and more shocking due to the dissonant nature of the chord and its context within the otherwise unquestioning spirit of *Éclairs*.⁴

If the opening gesture of *Le Chemin* is a brutal wake-up call to remind us of the difficulty of the path to eternal life, the other elements of this deliberately disjunct movement are equally strident. The introduction is completed by a string dash up to a total chromatic chord, aided by harsh woodwind and xylos, followed by a stern

descending tritone figure from the winds. The main horn theme, which becomes decorated by clusters, is dominated by jagged rising and falling tritones, whilst it is interspersed with passages of hammering strings. Although the abrasive strength of these principal elements ensures the coherence of *Le Chemin*, it can be seen from **figure III:xi** (see Volume II) that Messiaen suggests fragmentation in this relatively short movement by refusing to allow his materials to settle.

The horn theme (**d** in figure III:xi) underpins the movement, but it is split into two sections. The first half is presented initially by the six horns in unison, and this questioning fragment is then repeated by the trumpets with woodwind clusters. The second half of the theme is given identical treatment (**examples III:113i & ii and III:114i & ii**). Interspersed with these four fragments of the theme are passages for hammering strings reminiscent of the extended string passages in the *Pièce* (**e** in figure III:xi) (**example III:115**). Once it has eventually been given in its entirety, the theme is then developed. The slight rhythmic kick which concludes both phrases provides the impetus for a rise in pitch (**example III:116**), with urgency soon being added by a classic example of what Messiaen terms «*développement par élimination*» (**example III:117**). Throughout this passage, the acidic woodwind harmonies remain, whilst the violins and cellos give a distilled version of the string hammering (**example III:118**).

The movement thus far can be summarized as introduction, statement of the theme and development of the theme. Messiaen now returns to, and expands the rising string motif and the winds' descending tritone figure from the introductory

music (**b** and **c** in figure III:xi). The second of these consists of a simple alternation of *renversements transposés* chords and *typical* chords, with each pair of chords sharing a triad. For instance, the first chord in the first appearance of **c** (rehearsal figure three) is a *renversements transposés* chord with an underlying C major triad, whilst the second chord is the *Ab7/C typical* chord (example III:119). However, the emphasis in these passages is not on the triadic basis of the harmony, but on the descending tritones of the upper line, punched out by the trumpet in D. Indeed, it is likely that the precise series of chords has been chosen primarily so that the melody line concludes with a C natural to provide a link with the C naturals of the opening. The *crescendo* trill under the last chord from the cymbal, gong and tamtam seems designed to provide a counterbalance for the cavernous C natural of the bass instruments in **a**. It is omitted when **c** returns in slightly expanded form in the middle of the movement. However, these metal percussion trills reappear in the coda, which simply presents the elements of the introduction in a different order. On this occasion, the *crescendo* underneath the final chord of **c** is a preparation for the wrenched chord and thunderous low C natural.

The other element of the introduction and coda is an eight-part string chord which, after a rapid chromatic rise, is turned into a total chromatic chord by the rasping combination of piccolos, oboes and xylos leaping sevenths and ninths in the upper register (example III:120). This eight note string chord (example III:121) is a common basis of total chromatic chords in Messiaen's music, particularly when a strident effect is required.⁵ Nevertheless, the manner in which the total chromatic is completed in example III:121 is especially piercing.

The same chord is the basis of the middle section of the movement (A' in figure III:xi). After **b** and **c** have been heard in slightly expanded form, there is a brief passage of cluster glissandi from the strings before the eight-part chord again rises chromatically. However, rather than the usual completion by piccolos, oboes and xylophones, the chord is heard eight times over in four banks of trilling strings (example III:122).⁶ Above this rich texture, there is an alternation of the xylos feigning to complete the total chromatic⁷ and descending staccato woodwind chords in mode 4^v.

A' is an expansion of material from the introduction, so it is hardly surprising that it is effectively a preparation for the only complete statement of the theme in the entire movement. This is decorated by an elaborate carillon of whole-tone clusters in the flutes and glockenspiel, with added chromatic spice being added by the clarinets, whilst the strings follow the cue of the woodwind off the beat recalling the final statement of the chorale in *Un vitrail* (example III:123). This grand unfolding of the principal theme is immediately capped by a lengthy passage of hammering strings. After the quasi-*maestoso* of the decorated theme, this semiquaver *moto perpetuo* raises the tempo towards the coda. A quirky snippet of the *Pied Butcherbird*, the only bird to sing in *Le Chemin*, maintains the tense increase in momentum (example III:124). Finally, the first half of the theme returns, its spirit of questioning more urgent as the rhythm becomes impatient semiquavers (example III:125). The movement ends where it started, with the same plunge to the depths.

Messiaen did not like writing about painful subjects. *Le Chemin* symbolizes the difficulty of living a good life. It is essentially about the difficulty of life. Messiaen chose not to dwell on the many challenges which he faced, be they personal, artistic or spiritual. For this reason, it is often forgotten that he experienced his fair share of genuine tragedies to add to the problems of being a religious artist in a nihilistic age. Messiaen was well-acquainted with the human condition. He did not need to write music to experience it. It is almost a cliché to state that his message was one of peace, hope and joy. However, this most optimistic of composers knew that the ultimate serenity of his message is all the more powerful for acknowledging the turbulence from which it promises respite.

Notes

- 1 Henceforth referred to as *Le Chemin*.
- 2 Preface to the score.
- 3 It is, incidentally, for these two low C naturals, one at each end of the movement, that the double bassoon and the double-bass tuba have waited throughout *Éclairs*. They do not even feature in *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*. The effect is extremely powerful, but, even by Messiaen's standards, this is an extreme example of uncompromising insistence on the exact sonority required.
- 4 Given that Messiaen suffered from crippling back pain in the last year of his life (Hill: Interview with Yvonne Loriod, p.302), it is tempting to suggest an analogy with the screeching violins in Bartók's *Concerto for orchestra* which, it has been suggested, are linked to the pain of the composer's leukaemia.
- 5 See, for instance, the *Pièce*, rehearsal figure 3, chord 4 - Part II, chapter four, example II:49.
- 6 Strictly speaking it is heard at six pitches as the trilling notes of the first violins are identical to the primary chord of the violas and the trilling notes of the second violins are identical to the primary chord of the cellos. However, they are heard at different registers.
- 7 All twelve pitches are, of course, already being played by the strings.

Chapter eleven

XI. *Le Christ, lumière du Paradis*

La ville n’a pas besoin de soleil: la gloire de Dieu l’illumine
et son flambeau est l’Agneau.

Les serviteurs du Christ verront sa face, son nom sera sur
leurs fronts, et Dieu jettera de la lumière sur eux!

Revelation 21:23; 22:4-5.

«C’est l’arrivée, le Bonheur, le Paradis, la Lumière qui est le Christ et qui éclaire l’Éternité.»¹ The struggle of *Le chemin*, indeed the dialogue of the entirety of *Éclairs* reaps its reward of eternal life and life in the presence of Christ. In *Le Christ, lumière du Paradis*² we have reached our destination, although, as Paul Griffiths points out ‘this is not properly an arrival when heaven has already been glimpsed so much along the way’.³ *Le Chemin* appears to end in desolation, literally at its lowest point, apparently without having got anywhere. The symbolism appears to be that the destination is ultimately with us all along. *Éclairs* opens and closes with meditations on Christ, the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega.⁴ The work begins and ends in Christ, everything within it is in Christ and, hence, the difficult spiritual journey of *Le chemin* begins and ends in Christ. In the words of Yvonne Loriold-Messiaen, «*Cette dernière est l’aboutissement de toute la vie*».⁵

The opening meditation of *Éclairs* is a slow movement for the winds. The closing meditation is a slow movement for strings, imbued with discreet luminescence from three triangles which trill throughout at a barely audible *ppp*. This subtle

tintinnabulation is sensed rather than consciously heard, creating an aural halo around the strings. Despite its instrumentation, the homogenous movement of *Le Christ* is closer in temperament to *Apparition du Christ glorieux* than *Demeurer dans l’Amour*. In contrast to the fifth movement, *Le Christ* makes no bid to enter the stratosphere, restricting its range to about one and a half octaves.⁶ Nevertheless, it is resolutely high in register, making it tempting to suggest that this wordless chorale for strings is intended as a representation of heavenly voices. *Le Christ* is an evocation of the eternal, a suspension of the audience’s temporal sensibilities, ‘the extension on to our timescale of an instant’.⁷

Le Christ consists quite simply of three unfoldings of a slow, harmonised melody in four phrases. In contrast to *Demeurer dans l’Amour...*, there are no silent pauses demarcating the structure of *Le Christ*. There is just the harmonious continuum of eternity. The first two phrases remain unchanged on all three appearances. Furthermore, the second phrase is an almost exact repeat of the first. The third phrase is not altered when first it returns, but is then expanded in its third outing, whilst the fourth phrase is progressively elongated with each successive unfolding of the melody.

Figure III:xii

The Structure of *Le Christ, lumière du Paradis*

A A' B C A A' B C' A A' B' C''

On a structural level, Messiaen is patently economic with his resources.

The movement effectively begins in silence, as the opening E major triad with seventh and ninth, makes a long crescendo from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo* (examples III:126 & 127).⁸ Melodically, the first phrase outlines a decorated tritone progression from E natural to B flat. However, the supplication of the opening E major triad is answered by the A major triads in which the phrase and the movement are so firmly grounded. The opening chord is followed by four *renversements transposés* chords which, by virtue of their underlying triads, take the harmony through the augmented triad on E (C major and A flat major), drop a tritone onto D major before reaching A major. Messiaen whimsically plays on the tritone relationship in the next two chords as a plain A major triad underpins the D sharp of the melody and an E flat triad nestles under A natural. Then, with the final two chords, we return to the A major triad, unadulterated by added notes on the weaker semiquaver of the penultimate chord, and, finally, as the basis of a *renversement transposés* chord.

It can be seen, then, that whilst the melody of this opening phrase is essentially an expansion of a tritone cadence, the fundamental harmonic progression is a perfect cadence. In other words, the phrase is built upon the two most important progressions in Messiaen's musical language. The harmony also utilizes a tritone cadence, a plagal cadence and augmented triad relationships. The opening phrase of *Le Christ* could be regarded, therefore, as a succinct combination of Messiaen's favoured harmonic and melodic progressions.

It seems also that Messiaen is playing a refined technical game in which the underlying harmony, particularly the A major triad, is contradicted by the melody.

Whilst the melody traces out the notes of the A major triad in bar two, the underlying harmony is A major, A flat major and D major. There are four chords built upon the A major triad in the next three bars. However, the only one in which the melody note is part of the triad is the second chord of bar four, which is on a shorter, and hence weaker beat.

As has already been mentioned, the second phrase is an almost exact repeat of the first. The only differences are that the opening E major triad is omitted, and the phrase is capped by an extra little tritone lilt in the melody, whilst the underlying harmony is a progression from D major to A major (**example III:128**). In fact, these extra two *renversements transposés* chords are a reminder of the first progression onto A major in the third and fourth chords of the phrase.⁹

After an initial rising tritone, the melody of the third phrase briefly undertakes an overlapping stepwise figure (**example III:129**). When the phrase returns for the second time, rehearsal figure twelve, this stepwise motion is expanded (**example III:130**). In contrast to the *renversements transposés* chords which close the first two phrases, the third phrase concludes on each appearance with an explicit A major triad. Indeed, the phrase ends with a transparent perfect cadence.

The fourth phrase begins life as a short fragment based on rising and falling tritones (**example III:131**). Harmonically, It opens with the two mode 3ⁱⁱ augmented partners of the A major triad by means of the Db7/F *typical* chord and, like phrase three, the final chord is A major with an added sixth. It is through the fourth phrase

that *Le Christ* gains much of its substance as this five note returning chromaticism motif is expanded dramatically on both of its subsequent appearances. **Example III:132** gives the melody of all three appearances of the phrase. Whereas its first appearance starts on C natural, dropping a tritone from the F sharp which concludes phrase three, the second and third versions precede the original returning chromaticism motif (a) with its inversion, transposed up to the melodic ceiling of A natural (a⁻¹). Messiaen then turns the final drooping tritone into a short chromatic sequence.

The final E natural of rehearsal figure eight appears to signal the end of the phrase, breaking the sequence of descending tritones. The next step in the sequence would have been a tritone falling from E flat to A natural, thereby completing the progression of the phrase down through an octave from its starting point. At first glance, rehearsal figure nine appears to be a new departure. Indeed, the first interval is a perfect fifth - a distinctly exotic feature in this context. However, it concludes with the A natural which should have been the logical conclusion to the second phrase four. Furthermore, it is this A natural which is harmonized with an A major triad, with added sixth, rather than the final E natural of rehearsal figure eight, which is supported by an E major triad with added seventh and ninth. The E major triad is an allusion to the opening of phrase one, a point underlined by crescendo markings.

Rehearsal figure nine is an elongation of the end of the tritone sequence, with the melody replacing the falling E flat/A natural tritone with the constituents of the A major triad, with added sixth. In this context, the penultimate B flat is a chromaticism

which creates integrity through its tritone relationship with preceding E natural. Alternatively, the first bar of rehearsal figure nine and the last two notes of rehearsal figure eight could be placed in parentheses (**example III:133**). In this reading, an E flat has been omitted before the final A natural.

Rehearsal figure nine appears initially to be harmonically abstruse (**example III:134**), but every chord can be linked to the A major triad. The first two chords simply combine the A major triad with diminished chords, a fact which is more apparent if they are re-written (**example III:135**).¹⁰ The next two chords are a pair of *accords à résonance contractée* with an underlying D flat major triad. As has been discussed in relation to *Apparition du Christ glorieux*, D flat major often seems to be used as a chord substitution for A major due to the augmented relationships of mode 3 and the *typical* chords. To sum up, the second version of phrase four can be regarded then as a sequence based initially upon the entirety of the first phrase four, then on the final falling tritone with an elaboration at the end on the perfect cadence from E major to A major which underpins the entire movement.

The third version of phrase four takes the expansions of the second version a step further. There are three versions of the original phrase built on returning chromaticisms (rehearsal figure fourteen) and the chromatic sequence of falling tritones itself descends through a tritone from E natural to B flat (rehearsal figure fifteen). Whereas rehearsal figure eight ends with E natural dropping through an octave via B flat, rehearsal figure fourteen has it rising. This creates an even stronger allusion to the opening of phrase one than occurs at the end of rehearsal figure eight

because the E major triad, with added seventh and ninth, is now at the same register as the opening. Messiaen underlines this relationship by placing the E major triad at the start of rehearsal figure fifteen rather than the end of rehearsal figure fourteen. In other words, he is hinting that the movement may embark on another cycle of phrases. In the event, rehearsal figure fifteen simply combines the first version of phrase four with the sequence at rehearsal figure nine.

However, Messiaen has one last trick up his sleeve, and he plays it with the inimitable smile to which he refers in the preface to *Un sourire*. The combination of the two phrases in rehearsal figure fifteen hinges on the C sharp at the beginning of bar four. Messiaen harmonizes this with the A major triad, with added sixth, which ended the first version of phrase four, rather than the combined A major triad with diminished chord that opens rehearsal figure nine. The subliminal implication of choosing a transparent A major triad is that the end of the movement is approaching. Having already heard the sequence from bar four onwards in rehearsal figure nine, we know the outcome. However, rather than an A major triad, the phrase ends with a D major triad, with added sixth. In other words, Messiaen has created the equivalent of an interrupted cadence (**example III:136**).

As with a more traditional interrupted cadence, the surprise to the ear is only part of its function. It also serves to delay, and thus to intensify the effect of, the final chord. In the case of *Le Christ*, the vivacity of the final chord is increased by more than the temporal dislocation. The A major triad is such a pervasive force in *Le*

Christ that the ear becomes accustomed to it. By inserting D major, Messiaen essentially clears the aural palette so that the allure of the final A major chord is not dimmed by familiarity.

As if to underline that it is simply an interrupted cadence, there are just four chords after the unexpected D major triad (example III:137). The penultimate chord is a cluster, burying A major at its heart. It is a contraction of the music, a final drawing in of breath, before the strings open out onto the final translucent A major triad. In contrast to previous A major triads in the movement, it is adorned not with an added sixth, but with an added ninth. This subtle difference, which stems perhaps from the underlying added note chords of the *renversements transposés* chords which are heard at the end of the first two phrases, is especially sublime. Messiaen's remarkable achievement is that this last chord simultaneously continues the apparent suspension of the temporal and provides a sense of finality.

The end of *Le Christ* and, hence, *Éclairs* is unusual in Messiaen's output. To end a movement an added ninth chord is uncommon. To end a work with one is unprecedented. Furthermore, the final chord is marked *piano*, and the composer then inserts a diminuendo to *ppp*. Not since *Catalogue d'oiseaux* had a large scale work ended quietly. The nearest equivalent in the *monumental trinity* works is the end of *Zion Park et la cité céleste* in *Des canyons*, in which the strings continue playing the resplendent A major chord after the wind.¹¹ However, in *Zion Park* the strings

maintain a resolute *fortissimo* and, as with the other *monumental trinity* works, the intention is to overwhelm the listener. In contrast, *Éclairs* finds Messiaen harnessing the power of understatement.

There is no exact precedent for a large work by Messiaen to end in this way. Comparisons have inevitably been made with earlier works which are certainly pertinent in terms of the broad architecture of *Éclairs*, but no other final movement shares the characteristics of *Le Christ*. For instance, *L'Ascension* and *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* both share details of structure and subject matter with *Éclairs*. *L'Ascension* opens with a slow chorale for winds meditating on the figure of Christ and closes with a slow meditation for strings also centred on Christ. The *Quatuor* shares the eschatological themes of *Éclairs* and has two slow string movements, the first being followed by an evocation of the trumpets of the angels of the apocalypse. However, in both cases, although the final movement is a slow meditation for strings, the momentum is upwards, a yearning towards heaven. There is no such movement towards the heavens in *Le Christ*. *Harawi* and *Catalogue d'oiseaux* end quietly, but the mood is one of despondency and desolation. Like *Le Christ*, the final chorale of *La Transfiguration* maintains a consistency of register, but it ends in an overwhelming blaze of glory.

Despite using some of his most prevalent techniques, Messiaen creates something new in *Le Christ*. The spirit is of the inimitable smile of *Un sourire*, the

tenderness of *Et Dieu essuiera*. It is totally serene. We are not striving upwards towards heaven. We are already there. In the words of Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen:¹²

La page est tournée, la terre est loin, le temps est aboli, c'est un présent de bonheur qui ne finira plus. L'Amour infini du Christ dans l'âme qui le contemple...

Notes

- 1 Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen: Preface to the score.
- 2 Henceforth referred to as *Le Christ*.
- 3 Griffiths: Last Works, p.524.
- 4 This formula is often used by the church, most notably in the opening invocations of the Easter vigil during the blessing of the Pascal candle in which the celebrant says 'Christ yesterday and today, the beginning and the end, Alpha, and Omega; all time belongs to him, and all the ages; to him be glory and power, through every age for ever. Amen.' The Sunday Missal (Westminster: Collins Liturgical, 1984), pp.280-1.
- 5 Preface to the score.
- 6 The limits of the melody are e" to a"".
- 7 Griffiths: Last Works, p.525.
- 8 Example III:126 provides the opening of the movement in full score and example III:127 gives the whole of rehearsal figure 1 in reduction.
- 9 The fourth and fifth chords of phrase one.
- 10 It is worth remembering, yet again, that Messiaen composed at the piano. It is far more natural to play these two chords as written in example III:135 than example III:134.
- 11 An effect which was possibly inspired by the end of the ballet version of Ravel's *Ma Mère l'Oye* in which the final chord is also longer in the strings than the wind (although not all conductors notice this subtlety!).
- 12 Preface to the score.

Chapter twelve

Éclairs sur l'Au-Delà...

Fundamental harmonic structure, development of themes and overview.

Each of the movements of *Éclairs* has thus far been regarded as a self-contained unit. A few inter-movement observations have been made, but these have been restricted largely to the broad ways in which consecutive movements impact on one another: the juxtapositions which heighten the intended effect of the movements in question. The fourth chapter, *Les Élus marqués du sceau*, notes that, whilst it is the least original movement in *Éclairs*, it provides a crucial period of detachment between *L'Oiseau-Lyre et la Ville-Fiancée* and *Demeurer dans l'Amour...* Chapter six observes that Messiaen has no qualms about dispelling the magical world created in *Demeurer dans l'Amour...*, and chapter eight charts the striking entry of the bass instruments in *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* well over half way into the work. These juxtapositional interrelationships are an important element of the surface texture of *Éclairs*. Their simplicity is part of their power, a crucial factor in Messiaen's ability to manipulate the emotions of the listener. They are essential to understanding Messiaen's music and should not be dismissed lightly.

Nevertheless, there is a perception that, beyond surface juxtapositions, or relationships, Messiaen's music is little more than an assemblage of unconnected chunks. There may be a theme that runs through a movement, such as the horn theme

in *Le Chemin*, which reappears from time to time to provide a movement with a certain, rather obvious integrity. Repetition of ideas is a mainstay of Messiaen's music and these themes tend to be kept at or near the surface of activity. Any alteration of a theme seems to be done under the spotlight. As a consequence, discussion often begins and ends with the apparent lack of subtlety in the manner in which Messiaen treats his themes, which can be characterized more generously as a concern to provide his audience with clear aural signposts. Furthermore, because they can be readily identified at one level, it is assumed that they are not used for a more sophisticated function at a deeper level. Jann Pasler's dismissive remark that there is no 'attempt to integrate these themes' [the characters' leitmotifs in *Saint François*]¹ is symptomatic of the assumptions which have become accepted currency regarding Messiaen's music.

The examination of the movements as individual entities has revealed some of the other levels at which this music works. For instance, there is a complex harmonic scheme behind *L'Oiseau-Lyre et la Ville-Fiancée*, nearly all of the material in *Demeurer dans l'Amour...* is derived from a single chord which only appears complete towards the end of the movement and the melody of *Les Sept Anges* is dominated by one cell. On the one hand there are the strongly integrated harmonies of the chorales which open and close the work, and on the other there is the chimeric harmonic suggestion of *Plusieurs oiseaux*. Most sophisticated of all are the complex interrelationships which occur in *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*, juxtaposing and, eventually, reconciling the tritones of the foreground theme with the major third and augmented triad which pervade the background. Various subtleties have been observed within

the individual movements of *Éclairs*, often revealing them to be more closely integrated than received wisdom would suggest to be the case. It is now time to take a step back and make some observations regarding the relationships between these apparently isolated 'lightning flashes'.

It will come as little surprise that the eleven movements of *Éclairs* actually follow a clear harmonic pattern. The principal harmonic centres of seven of the movements are reasonably clear. Three movements are in E major; *Apparition du Christ glorieux*, *L'Oiseau-Lyre et la Ville Fiancée* and *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*. Three are built on either D natural or the D major triad; *Demeurer dans l'Amour...* and *Et Dieu essuiera* are built on the D major triad, whilst the pitch centre of the melody of *Les Sept Anges* is D natural. Finally, *Le Christ* is in A major.

With this information the fundamental structure of *Éclairs* becomes clear. It opens in E major, moves to D major and then back to E major before ending in A major. Indeed, on an even more fundamental level, *Éclairs* could be viewed simply as being a gigantic perfect cadence from *Apparition du Christ glorieux* to *Le Christ*. The opening movement is resolutely attracted to the E major triad, always with an added seventh, sometimes with an added ninth. The A major triad with added ninth which ends the entire work answers the E major triad with added seventh and ninth at the end of *Apparition du Christ glorieux*. Furthermore, *Le Christ* is itself a progression from an E major triad with added seventh and ninth to A major with added ninth. In other words, the final movement is a reminder, in microcosm, of the harmonic concerns of *Éclairs* at the broadest level.

Ultimately the fundamental harmonic structure of *Éclairs* is intended to be symbolic. The work opens and closes with meditations on the figure of Christ. The first movement is for winds, the last is for strings with subtlest intimation of percussion. The first movement is in E major, the last is in A major. The first movement occupies the red part of the spectrum, whilst the last is blue. The movements are clearly related, yet disparate and the implication is clear. Christ is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega, E major and A major, wind instruments and strings, red and blue.

In this context of the broad harmonic progressions of *Éclairs*, other matters assume greater clarity. *Le Constellation du Sagittaire* is a harmonically ambiguous movement, but, at the end, it unexpectedly settles on a low A major triad with added ninth before the light dies out to a whole tone chord.² This can be seen both as providing a provisional answer to the E major of *Apparition du Christ glorieux* and a foretaste of the ultimate harmonic goal of *Éclairs*. Similarly, the fundamental harmonic structure supports the assertion that movement nine, *Plusieurs oiseaux* is underpinned, however loosely, by E major as that harmony has been re-established in the previous movement and opens *Le Christ*.

It can be seen then that at one level *Éclairs* can be reduced to a simple, triadic, chord progression (Figure III:xiii). The only two movements which do not have a clear function in this fundamental structure are *Les Élus* and *Le Chemin*. Neither one has a clear harmonic focus. In *Les Élus* this is because it is intended as a kind of

diffraction of white light, a dazzling display of all possible colours. The opposite is true in *Le Chemin*, which is a harsh episode. In both cases, they preceded lengthy slow movements for strings and they are essential for clearing the aural palette.

This broad harmonic process helps to explain how Messiaen controls the architectural superstructure of large scale works. It is often not appreciated that, in addition to challenging musicians, and especially composers, to re-evaluate concepts of metre and time at the equivalent of quantum level by manipulating individual units or cells, Messiaen also theorized about the 'rhythm' of a work. This emphasis on the pacing of the large scale structure, in terms of harmony as well as tempo, is attested to by his students.³ Harmonic blueprints such as the one outlined in figure III:xiii are not uncommon in Messiaen's music - they underpin all of the large cycles - but they are often overlooked when it is discussed.

Les Sept Anges is a development of material from the previous movement. Starting on C natural, the pedal note from the opening of the fifth movement, *Les Sept Anges* traces out the initial harmonies of *Demeurer dans l'Amour...* (example III:138). This melody can also be viewed as an expansion of the opening melodic fragment of *Demeurer dans l'Amour...*. Indeed, the A natural, G sharp, D natural progression is the embryo for the returning chromaticism with tritone which forms the principal melodic cell (a) of *Les Sept Anges* (example III:139).⁴ Furthermore, the specific returning chromaticism which is heard at the opening of *Les Sept Anges*, appears during the build up to the climax of *Demeurer dans l'Amour...* (example

III:140). In chapter five, it was observed that this, too, was a development from the opening phrase of the movement, which itself was derived from the first chord of the coda (example III:141).

In addition to the melodic links, the pitch centre of *Les Sept Anges* is D natural, providing a clear link with the D major triad which underpins so much of the previous movement. Furthermore, it will be remembered that *Les Sept Anges* has a structural dominant of A natural, but a cadential dominant of G sharp. In other words, the three defining pitches of the sixth movement are also taken from the opening melodic fragment of *Demeurer dans l'Amour...*. The source of the love of the fifth movement and the source of the awesome power displayed in the sixth movement are one and the same.

It can be seen then that there is a sophisticated set of interrelationships between the fifth and sixth movements of *Éclairs* built upon D major tonality and the G sharp/D natural tritone. However, they also have profound significance for the eighth movement. Example III:142 shows the opening phrase of the final chorale of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*. The phrase is, in fact, a variant of the returning chromaticism melodic cell (a) from *Les Sept Anges*. The falling tritone has been displaced by an octave, and the consequent diminished octave leap between B natural and B flat has been staggered with the insertion of F natural. This is the same as a', the variant of the melodic cell with which *Les Sept Anges* ends (example III:143). In other words, the melody of the chorale is developed directly from the melody of *Les Sept Anges*.

This relationship also has significance for the end of the chorale (example III:144). It will be remembered from chapter eight that in *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* Messiaen reconciles the tritone with the major third. The end of the chorale is effectively a double cadence. The chorale ends on A flat approached from C natural, which completing a descending augmented triad begun with the prominent E natural in bar three. There is also a tritone cadence spanning the last four bars from D natural to A flat, completing a partial statement of the main theme of the movement begun with the opening A natural of this final period.

The main theme of the chorale is a variant of the principal tritone theme, *m*, of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* (example III:145). Chapter eight demonstrated that the concluding pitch of the movement, A flat, was inevitable due to the interaction of the theme with the augmented triad. Taking the chorale variant of the theme through an augmented cycle starting with the pitch which opened the movement, B natural, results in A flat (example III:146). However, chapter eight left unexplained the need for the tritone theme to be varied in the chorale. Why does the second tritone need to fall, or, more pertinent, why does Messiaen want to end with a tritone progression from D natural to A flat rather than one from A flat to D natural?

It can be seen now that the 'original' version of the tritone theme is, in fact, the variant of the chorale version of the tritone theme, which is itself developed from a motif in *Les Sept Anges* (example III:147). In other words, it seems that Messiaen started *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* with the chorale and, from that, worked his theme

backwards to the form found at the beginning of the movement. *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* follows three movements underpinned by D major or the pitch D natural. Furthermore, the G sharp/D natural tritone is prominent in all three movements.⁵ *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* restores the E major triad as the principal harmony to set up a broad scale perfect cadence. In this context, the inversion of the G sharp/D natural tritone in the concluding chorale reclaims the interval for E major harmonies rather than the D major modality of the preceding movements.

According to this theory, Messiaen began *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* with the returning chromaticism motif, *a*, from *Les Sept Anges* and the variant from the end of that movement, *a'*. He also wished the movement at its conclusion to invert the G sharp/D natural tritone in conjunction with the return to E major harmonies after three movements based in D major. Having established the requirements and raw material for the conclusion of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire*, Messiaen then varies *a'* so that it ends on D natural and then takes it through an augmented cycle to find his starting point. With the version of *a'* which opens the movement, implies a conclusion on D natural (**example III:148**). In terms of the tritone theme, the movement opens in the same harmonic arena as the previous three movements, albeit abstrusely.

One consequence of these machinations is that *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* emerges as a developmental movement, not merely in terms of its own material, but within the structure of *Éclairs* as a whole. It develops both its own themes and the harmony and themes of the preceding movements. This suggests an analogy with

Développement de l'amour, the eighth movement of *Turangalîla* which develops the principal themes and harmonic concerns of the symphony in readiness for the conclusion.

Returning to *Éclairs*, the influence of *a* can also be detected in the final two movements. The horn theme in *Le Chemin* opens with a partial inversion of *a* (example III:149). Furthermore, the prominence of the G sharp/D natural tritone is a symbolic reminder of the concerns of the middle movements in a movement which is re-examining the path to salvation. Finally, *a* is of crucial importance to the melody of *Le Christ*. The cadences at the end of the first two phrases⁶ use an inversion of *a'*, the variant of the cell which forms the basis of the chorale in *Les Étoiles et la gloire* (example III:150). Even more significant is that the original version of *a* provides the material for the fourth phrase (example III:151). It is this phrase, and hence *a*, which is developed dramatically on its two subsequent appearances (example III:152). This expansion is responsible for much of the substance of *Le Christ*. It is reasonable to assert, therefore, that the melody of *Le Christ* is based largely upon *a* and its variants.

It could be argued that the interrelationships based upon *a* and the tritone are simply a coincidence or, more accurately, an inevitable by-product of the pervasive nature of the tritone in Messiaen's music. Indeed, returning chromaticisms can be found in, amongst others, *Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste* from the *Préludes*, the violin melody of *Les offrandes oubliées*, the piano part of *Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps* and *Louange à l'Immortalité de Jésus* from

the *Quatuor*.⁷ However, in *Éclairs*, *a* is the result of a clear line of development from *Demeurer dans l'Amour...* to *Les Sept Anges*, and is itself developed in *Les Sept Anges*, *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* and *Le Christ*. In other words, there is a form of linear motivic development underpinning a significant amount of material in *Éclairs*.

There is one further piece of evidence which shifts the balance of probability in favour of this theory. It has already been mentioned in this thesis that, as far as we know, Messiaen's final years were the only period in his life when he worked upon more than one work at a time. During the course of writing *Éclairs*, the composer received, and completed, the commissions for *Un sourire* and the *Pièce*. On the surface, *Un sourire* has the greater affinity with *Éclairs*, sharing the cerulean harmonic goal of A major and the bass-free levitating world of the string movements. However, the uncompromising nugget of the *Pièce* is dominated by the returning chromaticism *a* as it first appears in *Éclairs*, starting on G natural and landing on D natural (example III:153). In addition, it will be recalled from Part II of this thesis that this motif is developed within the *Pièce* in an almost Beethovenian manner.⁸ The presence of *a* in the *Pièce* at the same pitch as in *Les Sept Anges* suggests that work on the two pieces occurred in close proximity.

The suggestion that Messiaen's music contains any element of linear motivic and harmonic development would be dismissed as ludicrous in some quarters and provoke charges of heresy in others. Nevertheless, the evolution of *a* from the fifth movement of *Éclairs* onwards, combined with the progress of the fundamental harmonic structure, surely helps to explain the sense of integrity and coherence

between the apparent juxtapositions of these sharply contrasting 'lightning flashes'. It helps to explain, in part, why there is an air of inevitability to *Le Christ* and why its final chord does not come across as a randomly picked harmony. In short, this harmonic and motivic development helps to explain how and why Messiaen's music works.

There is, of course, much more to *Éclairs* than a melodic cell and a simple harmonic progression. There are other motivic relationships providing links between movements. Two relatively prominent examples are the 'Boris' melody in *La Constellation du Sagittaire* which is trailed in the melody of *Apparition du Christ glorieux* (example III:154), and the way in which the E major iambic fanfare figure of the *Oiseau-lyre superbe* in *Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée* is echoed by the *Oiseau-Lyre d'Albert* in *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* (example III:155). There are, doubtless, myriad other factors which help to prevent the juxtaposed movements of *Éclairs* producing a jumbled whole, and it is worth repeating that this thesis is intended to be a beginning, not an end.

Éclairs could be analysed as an atonal work, it could be examined in terms of pitch classes. Different aspects would be revealed and alternative conclusions reached. Messiaen would surely have placed greater emphasis on colour. The interrelationships outlined above suggest one way to begin to understand *Éclairs*. More importantly, perhaps, they reveal hitherto unexplored facets to Messiaen's

music. Aspects which, it seems, had almost been wilfully overlooked because they do not fit snugly with the idea of Messiaen as a composer of 'static' blocks, a juxtaposer of chunks of unrelated material in which the temporal sequence of events is irrelevant.

The logic of such a position is that the movements of *Éclairs* could be performed in any order without serious detriment to the overall effect. It would be possible to cite the juxtapositional relationships between movements as a reason against any re-ordering. However, the fundamental harmonic structure and the motivic relationships between movements add much greater weight to the argument that *Éclairs* should be heard as an entity in the order prescribed by the composer.

Messiaen's music does develop. It has to develop because it is concerned not only with the eternal, but also with the relationship between humanity and the divine. It is a fallacy to suggest that representations of stasis are, by definition, incompatible with progression. Messiaen's music meditates upon the mysteries of a faith in a God who is outside of, or beyond Time, and yet who is capable of acting within Time. It is a paradox which, inevitably, lies beyond logic. It is a mark of Messiaen's skill that his music can create simultaneous impressions of stasis and movement as part of his evocation of the interaction between humanity and the divine.

The appearance and development of the motif from the fifth movement onwards corresponds with a shift in emphasis within *Éclairs* itself. Until this point, the movements have been centred solely on the divine: the glorious Christ, the centre of the galaxy and the celestial city. The chosen of *Les Élus* arguably start a shift

towards the human perspective. *Demeurer dans l'Amour...* represents interaction between humanity and the divine. It is written from the perspective of humanity yearning for God. This is balanced by God reaching down to humanity in *Et Dieu essuiera* following the terrifying events of the apocalypse wreaked upon mortals in the sixth movement. The final movement represents the eventual communion between humanity and the divine in A major. The divine reaches down a fifth from the dominant of E major, whilst humanity is raised up a fifth from the subdominant of D major. In this context, the unexpected D major triad towards the end of *Le Christ* represents the incorporation of humanity in the body of Christ, which had existed always.

As with all of Messiaen's important works, *Éclairs* makes an impact on believers and non-believers alike. Many of its listeners will judge it upon its intrinsic musical worth, even if such a term might have been anathema to Messiaen, rather than the success or otherwise of its theology. As Roger Nichols noted in discussing the British première, *Éclairs* 'was greeted with widespread approval and joy, as well as with a huge ovation in the hall itself'.⁹ This reaction has been repeated across Europe, it also marked the release of the first two recordings of the work¹⁰ and it could be witnessed most recently at the performance by the BBCSO under Andrew Davis at Westminster Cathedral as part of the BBC Messiaen festival in January 1999.¹¹ Nichols also observes that *Éclairs* 'has a directness, a clarity and above all a romantic glow which had, perhaps, been lacking in the works since the opera *Saint François d'Assise*.'¹² In other words, *Éclairs* represents Messiaen at the height of his powers enjoying a compositional Indian summer.

The self-doubt which can be detected in some of the miniatures cannot be detected in *Éclairs*. The scale of the work, with its duration of seventy minutes and huge orchestra, can be cited as the primary evidence of a confident composer. Then there is the audacity of requesting instruments only to keep them silent for most of the work. This is most notable with the ten double basses, but the double bassoon and the double-bass tuba should not be forgotten either. To the certain exasperation of orchestral managers, the brief passages which Messiaen writes for these instruments precludes any doubling. Then there is the bravura of the music itself. Messiaen sends the violins to the very edge of the fingerboard, cruelly dispels the sublime mood of *Demeurer dans l'Amour...* with the bass drum crashes of *Les Sept Anges*, and uncharacteristically ends the work in calm tranquility rather than overwhelming triumph. He taxes the conductor to the limit through the myriad changes of tempo and time signature in *Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée* on the one hand, and through the complete absence of bar-lines in *Plusieurs oiseaux* on the other.

In addition to marking a return to confidence, *Éclairs* also marks a departure from the monumentalism which had marked all the largescale works from *La Transfiguration* onwards. It is worth repeating that Messiaen had become known as a composer of gigantic canvasses and, as was discussed in Part II of this thesis, *Un vitrail et des oiseaux* and *La ville d'en-haut* did little to dispel this impression. Consequently, when it transpired that he was writing an eleven-movement piece for very large orchestra lasting about seventy-five minutes,¹³ the presumption was of a colossal sequel to *Turangalîla* which would take on board the multifarious developments of the intervening forty years.

In fact, the enduring impression left by *Éclairs* is perceptibly different from that given in the preceding works. This is not a matter of a vast overhaul of ideas of techniques. Messiaen had been criticized during the previous two decades for the constancy of fundamental aspects of his language, particularly due to the process of monumental consolidation begun by *La Transfiguration*. By the time that *Éclairs* received its première, the faith which Messiaen had kept with certain techniques, principles and sources of inspiration were regarded as a reason for admiration rather than castigation.¹⁴

Nonetheless, within this constancy, *Éclairs* does represent a shift of emphasis. The soundworld has been refined and changed. This is due, in part, to the subtle evolution in the utilization of existing techniques, such as the freedom with which Messiaen deploys the *accords à renversements transposés* and the *accords à résonance contractée*. Chord-types which had hitherto appeared in groups of two, three or four, now take on an individual identity. This had occurred for decades in the birdsong writing, but it took much longer to filter through to the rest of the musical texture. Nonetheless, these changes are at the microscopic level. Such changes are relatively imperceptible given the depth and breadth of Messiaen's musical vision.

On a slightly larger level, the composer compartmentalizes his orchestra to greater extent than ever before. Only at the end of *Les Étoiles et la gloire* and in the wrenched chords at the beginning and end of *Le Chemin* is there any sense of tutti in terms of both orchestra and register. For much of the time, barely one third of the orchestra can be heard. This imbues *Éclairs* with the demeanour of chamber music

which just happens to require more than a hundred highly accomplished musicians to perform it. Furthermore, *Éclairs* is characterized by its refusal to venture below the tenor register. This not only underpins the levitating nature of the string movements, but also contributes to the luminosity of, for instance, *Le Constellation du Sagittaire*. He also introduces two ground-breaking birdsong movements. The first, the dazzling showpiece of *Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée*, is the only movement which draws its material exclusively from the song of just one bird. The second is a remarkable development in *hors tempo* technique, dispensing entirely with the need for the conductor to beat time.

However, *Éclairs* also marks a departure from earlier works at a macrocosmic level. Several Messiaen works begin slowly, notably *Visions*, *Vingt regards* and *La Transfiguration*, but the unperturbed nature of *Apparition du Christ glorieux*, with its refusal to grab attention or even to climax with much of a crescendo, is distinctly unusual. The middle of the work is dominated by the intimacy of *Demeurer dans l'Amour...* and *Et Dieu essuiera*. Far from diminishing this impression, the bombast of *Les Sept Anges* actually heightens it in much the same manner as the yakking of the *Faucon crécerelle* provides a foil for the empyrean twinkling of the *Gerygone* in *L'Ange musicien* from *Saint François*. It is not until the end of *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* that we hear the awesome orchestral power which is so often displayed in the *monumental trinity* works. By this point, the impression of greater intimacy has already been lodged firmly within the listener's mind. Apart from the eighth and tenth movements, the music barely ventures below the tenor register, thus creating the impression that Messiaen's feet are no longer touching the ground. The tenth

movement also has an affinity with the *monumental trinity* works, recalling the turbulence of *Terribilis locus iste* from *La Transfiguration*. Earlier works would have suggested that this movement would simply be the prelude to a spectacular conclusion designed to whip the audience into a frenzy. *Le Christ* is another slow movement for strings. Like the first movement, it is essentially devoid of climax. It ends quietly, and all but fades into silence.

It might seem naive to place such emphasis on this understated conclusion. Nevertheless, it does appear to be representative of a spirit which pervades the work as a whole. It is analogous to the concluding movement of Mahler's Ninth symphony. It would have been possible, until quite far into the movement, for Mahler to engineer an emphatic ending in the manner of the Third symphony, in which the message is essentially the same. Instead, he does the opposite and allows the movement to die away in acceptance rather than triumph. The conclusion of Mahler's Ninth symphony in many ways defines the way in which it is regarded. *Éclairs* is defined by the three slow movements which form its structural backbone, with the non-triumphalist, uncomplicated manner in which it ends being of paramount importance to the manner in which it is received.

The understatement of *Le Christ* is symbolic of the restraint shown in the work as a whole. It is a quasi-classical economy of resources¹⁵ which is characterized by the fact that *Le Christ*, like *Demeurer dans l'Amour...*, only utilizes thirty-four instrumentalists out of a possible string complement of sixty-eight. In addition, the

absence of the basses is more apparent in these movements and, hence, underlines the reluctance of the work as a whole to venture below the tenor register. Nor should it be forgotten that, before *Éclairs*, Messiaen had not written a movement for unadorned strings since *L'Ascension* nearly sixty years earlier. In these two great Adagios the composer is unashamedly wearing his heart on his sleeve. There is no birdsong and no gamelan. In fact there is no filigree at all. There is simply a broad melody woven by first violins over an iridescent harmonic bed.

In the slow movements of *Turangalîla* and *Des canyons* it is the piano which leads the decoration of the strings. The significance of the absence of a part for piano in *Éclairs*, which effectively means a part for Yvonne Loriod, should not be underestimated. The piano had, understandably, become a near constant in Messiaen's orchestral writing, a fact confirmed by *Un vitrail* and *La ville d'en-haut*. Paul Crossley is typically forthright on the issue:

...one of the things that's remarkable about it [*Éclairs*], that makes it sound fresh is, for once, at last, the damn courage not to use this blasted piano everywhere. Either joining the material together ... or... that immense cluster harmony half the time, never less than eight note chords, which can be very wearing after a while. Generally from forte to fortissimo level.¹⁶

The piano is omitted also from *Un sourire*, possibly because Yvonne Loriod would be playing a Mozart piano concerto in the same concert as the première. It is possible that the commission for *Éclairs* had specified a work without soloist, although

Messiaen could have included the piano as part of his orchestra. Whatever the reason, it is a major element in distinguishing the soundworld of *Éclairs* from other works by Messiaen. This is most obvious in the slow movements for strings, but it may also help to explain, in part, the chamber-like spirit of *Éclairs*. The absence of a soloist means that there is greater emphasis, real or perceived, on dialogue within the orchestra, rather than between the orchestra and the piano. The limelight is placed firmly on the orchestra.

Inevitably, there are comparisons not only with works from thirty years before, but sixty years. Indeed, *Éclairs* recaptures some of the 'special poignancy and tenderness' identified by George Benjamin in the pre-war works.¹⁷ At first glance the opening chorale of *Éclairs* seems similar to that which opens *L'Ascension*, and a structure containing two slow string movements seems to be analogous to the *Quartet for the end of time*, especially when the fifth movement is followed by a rhythmic depiction of the seven angels and trumpets from *Revelation*. It is tempting, and, perhaps, valuable to regard *Éclairs* as a deliberate re-working of some of the theological ideas from *L'Ascension* and the *Quatuor* with the benefit of several decades further reflection. Indeed, it could be argued that *Éclairs* is an orchestral realization of the subject matter of the *Quatuor*. A general difference should nevertheless be cited. The earlier works are imbued with a sense of reaching upwards, of striving heavenwards. With the exception of the stratospheric heights attained by the violins in *Demeurer dans l'Amour...*, *Éclairs* has few such yearnings. There is an underlying implication that the destination has already been reached. Whereas the

Quartet is a profession of faith by a young man in the face of adversity, the impression given by *Éclairs* is of an old man who has fulfilled his task and ambitions and is at peace with the world.

We are fortunate indeed that the old man in question lost none of his phenomenal capabilities, but rather was able to provide a tantalizing glimpse of another aspect of his remarkable personality. *Éclairs* can confidently be proclaimed as one of Messiaen's finest works and it contains many examples of his genius. There are many big gestures, many beautiful moments, many instances of joy, of tenderness and intimacy, the whole combining to create an enduring impression of light and peace. Just as the *Le Christ* is indicative of the spirit of the work as a whole, the shimmering luminosity imbued upon this image of perpetuity by the the almost imperceptible trilling of three triangles stands as one subtle example of Messiaen's genius in *Éclairs*. There is innovation, but, equally impressive, is the continuity of ideas and principles gathered from throughout his long career. As Roger Nichols observes:

...it's mildly amusing to hear him juxtaposing pure triads and the impurest of dissonances, as he's been doing for at least 50 years, and to realise that by following his instincts he's now bang up to date!¹⁸

More important, perhaps, is the fact that, like Messiaen's description of Mozart's music,¹⁹ and in marked contrast to many of his contemporaries, *Éclairs* makes us smile.

Notes

- 1 Jann Pasler: 'St. Francis at the Opéra' in Musical Times, vol.125 (1984), p.151.
- 2 See Part III, chapter two.
- 3 See, for instance, Jean Boivin's article on Messiaen's teaching in Siglind Bruhn: Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1998), pp.15-16.
- 4 See Part III, chapter six.
- 5 Whilst it is not as pervasive in *Et Dieu essuiera* as the previous two movements, it is the first interval of the descending woodwind chords which opens the movement.
- 6 It will be remembered that the first two phrases of *Le Christ* are almost identical.
- 7 See Part I, chapter one.
- 8 See Part II, chapter four.
- 9 Roger Nichols: 'Messiaen: *Eclairs sur l'au-delà*' in Musical Times, vol.cxxxv (February, 1994), p.116.
- 10 Orchestre National de la Radio Polonaise, Katowice - Antoni Wit, JADE, catalogue number JAD C 099, and Orchestre de l'Opéra Bastille - Myung-Whun Chung, Deutsche Grammophon, catalogue number 439 929-2.
- 11 It was also included in the 1999 Proms season and it is to be performed in Birmingham and London by the CBSO under Sir Simon Rattle during March 2000 as part of the Towards the Millennium series. Rattle cites *Éclairs* as a choice in the 'Music that changed me' feature of the 2000 issue of BBC Music Magazine:

I think that audiences will be incredibly moved by Messiaen's *Éclairs sur l'au-delà*... ..I first heard it in a performance in Salzburg with the Philharmonia conducted by Kent Nagano. I was sitting in the second row. After 20 minutes I was simply overcome with tears. I sobbed through the rest of the piece.

BBC Music Magazine, volume 8, number 7 (March 2000), p.138.
- 12 Roger Nichols: op.cit., p.117.
- 13 News of the proportions of *Éclairs* began to filter out during 1990. See the photocopy of a letter from the composer to Jane Williams (promotions manager of UMP at the time) in appendix six.
- 14 I do not believe that this can be attributed entirely to a desire to avoid speaking ill of the dead.
- 15 Though never, ever neoclassical!
- 16 Paul Crossley: Interview - see appendix five, page 371.
- 17 George Benjamin: Interview - see appendix four, page 358.
- 18 Roger Nichols: op.cit., p.116.
- 19 In the preface to *Un sourire*.

Postscript

Death and New Works

Olivier Eugène Prosper Charles Messiaen died after an operation during the night of 27 to 28 April 1992. It is a sign of his stature that, as well as dominating the obituary pages, news of his death was carried on the front pages of several British newspapers.¹ His life and work were commemorated on 14 May with a Mass and concert at Sainte Trinité. However, Messiaen's funeral was held not in Paris but in Petichet, amongst his beloved mountains and within sight of the scenery which had inspired many works.²

At the time of Messiaen's death, *Éclairs* had not yet been performed. The posthumous first performances of this last masterpiece inevitably acted as memorial concerts for the world at large. At both the World and UK premières of *Éclairs* the audience observed a long, respectful silence after the final chord of *Le Christ, lumière du Paradis*, before breaking into enthusiastic applause. *Éclairs* seemed to provide a profoundly apposite conclusion to the long career of the *Maître*.

As it turned out, the conclusion to Messiaen's career was not quite so neat. He had been wrong in presuming that *Saint François* would be his last work and that death would follow soon after. Messiaen did not have any mystical intimation of death. Having struggled to compose for several years in the wake of the opera, it seems that, as he entered his eighties, Messiaen was composing very freely. Despite

travelling the world to attend hundreds of rehearsals, recording sessions and concerts, despite failing eyesight, despite increasingly frequent periods of ill health, Messiaen's last years were tremendously fruitful. Between 1987 and his death in April 1992, he composed *La ville d'en-haut*, *Un sourire*, the *Pièce* and, of course, *Éclairs*. He revised *Turangalîla* and oversaw the publication of *Saint François, Livre du Saint Sacrement* and *Petites esquisses d'oiseaux*³ and revised (again) the enormous *Traité de rythme, de couleur et d'ornithologie*, giving Yvonne Loriod a precise plan for its publication.⁴ In addition to all this activity, it emerged early in 1994 that, whilst he was still working on *Éclairs*, he had started another work; *Concert à quatre*.

This quadruple concerto is written for five musicians whom Messiaen admired greatly: the flautist Catherine Cantin (who had impressed him during performances of *Saint François*), Heinz Holliger, Mstislav Rostropovich, the conductor Myung-Whun Chung and, of course, Yvonne Loriod. *Concert à quatre* was left incomplete by Messiaen, being found by Loriod several months after his death. After consulting George Benjamin and Heinz Holliger, she decided to complete it. Her explanation of what was required warrants repeating at length:

L'œuvre devait comporter cinq mouvements. Quatre seulement ont été composés, car en 1990-91, Messiaen travaillait beaucoup, devant terminer les *Éclairs* sur l'Aut-delà..., ...Il faut en outre savoir qu'Olivier Messiaen a écrit la musique des quatre mouvements en spécifiant qu'il y aurait un morceau «Hors Tempo», et un 5^{ème} mouvement qui serait «une fugue à 4 sujets». [!] Les Hors Tempo, Yvonne Messiaen les a assemblés et placés dans le 4^{ème} mouvement avant la reprise du dernier refrain, en guise de cadence : ce

sont tous des chants d'oiseaux notés par Messiaen dans la nature. Pour ce qui est de l'orchestration, les 2^{ème} et 3^{ème} morceaux et la première partie du n° 1 étaient orchestrés. Yvonne Messiaen a terminé l'orchestration de la deuxième partie du premier morceau, et orchestré tout le quatrième morceau, d'après les indications de l'Auteur, qui notait simplement : «Bois, cuivres». Quant à la copie de la partition d'orchestre seul le court troisième morceau Cadenza était prêt. La copie, travail facile qui ne demandait que respect et minutie, a donc été faite pour les numéros 1, 2, 4, par Yvonne Messiaen.⁵

Despite the evident wish of Yvonne Messiaen-Loriod to be as transparent as possible regarding the completion of *Concert a quatre*, it would be extremely dangerous to draw any conclusions from this work regarding specifics of compositional technique. As Loriod's comments make plain, had Messiaen completed the work, it would have been very different from the piece we know now. There would have been at least one and possibly several more movements. Details of orchestration and, hence, timbre would have been different. The «*Hors Tempo*» passages would have been constructed differently. Although it seems that much of the work was complete in draft, it would be foolhardy to draw too many conclusions about Messiaen's thoughts and intentions before seeing the sketches.⁶ This is not to doubt Loriod's veracity or to question the quality of her completion. Rather, it is simply a case of academic prudence in the face of uncertain facts. As a consequence, rather than provide a detailed analysis, discussion of *Concert à quatre* will be confined to only the broadest of observations regarding verifiable facts and their consequences for the other works of Messiaen's final years.

The first point to be made is regarding the genre. Despite including the piano as a solo instrument in ten orchestral works, Messiaen had never written a 'concerto' as such. As recently as 1986, he had stated bluntly that «...*je ne crois pas à la «forme concerto»*,⁷ going on to cite Mozart's piano concertos as the only masterpieces, with one or two «*beaux passages*» in the Schumann concerto, the Franck *Variations symphoniques* and in the concertos of Prokofiev.⁸ Nonetheless, it should be remembered that Messiaen had made similar remarks regarding opera and the symphony, and yet he composed works which he named as such.

More significant, perhaps, is that not only is *Concert à quatre* an abstract work - a rarity in his output - but, with the possible exception of *Chronochromie*, it is also the longest piece in which there is no specific subject matter.⁹ There are no poetic prefaces to any of the movements assigning direct religious or ornithological connotations to the work.¹⁰ This suggests that the abstraction of the *Pièce*, which was written at about the same time, was not a whim but part of a more considered compositional decision. Indeed, *Un sourire*, which depicts a sentiment rather than meditating on a passage from scripture or portraying a natural phenomenon, can be seen in this context as commencing a tendency towards greater abstraction. Given that *Un sourire*, the *Pièce* and the *Concert à quatre* were composed concurrently with *Éclairs*, it is possible that Messiaen wished to avoid muddying the water by working simultaneously on two or more depictional works.¹¹

Although the spirit of *Concert à quatre* is markedly less reverential than *Éclairs*, it does share some pertinent features with the larger work. Not least of these is that the elderly composer had clearly been contemplating the works of his youth. In addition to stylistic evidence,¹² such as passages composed in a very clear modality or tonality, there are also two instances of material from the 1930s being re-used. The most obvious of these is the second movement, *Vocalise*, which is an orchestration of the *Vocalise-Étude*, a vocal study written in 1935. Messiaen's orchestration is a masterpiece of restraint. The vocal line is split between flute and oboe, with occasional interjections from the cello, whilst the original piano part is kept essentially unchanged. To this, Messiaen simply adds a bed of strings and, on the return of the theme, a descant is heard in the form of a *merle de roche* on céleste (example III:156). The second instance of recycled material is in the fourth movement, *Rondeau*. The principal theme ends with an occurrence of the *Boris* motif, not only recalling its prevalent use in works of the 1930s, but also providing a direct link with *Constellation du Sagittaire* from *Éclairs* (example III:157).

A further link between *Concert à quatre* and *Éclairs* is provided by the tonal goal of A, a characteristic which is also shared with *Un sourire*. Whilst caution must be observed - Messiaen's completed harmonic scheme might have thrown up some surprises¹³ - the A major or the pitch of A natural are significant factors in *Concert à quatre*. The first movement consists of a broad unfolding of material, ending emphatically on a low C natural in a gesture reminiscent of the wrenched chord which opens and closes *Le chemin de l'invisible* from *Éclairs*. The entirety is then repeated, but with modifications so that it ends a minor third lower on A natural (example

III:158). The *Vocalise* is in undiluted modal A major, and the last movement is also in A. The intentions and effect of *Un sourire*, *Éclairs* and *Concert à quatre* may be diverse, but this confluence of tonality cannot be fortuitous. When it is remembered that A major is associated by Messiaen with empyrean bliss, it is not surprising that his final works should be dominated by this cerulean key.

It seems, then, that echoes of his youth and contemplation of the life to come provide the background to some of Messiaen's compositional choices in these pieces. Just as significant, though, is that the pedagogue who had nurtured successive generations of *avant garde* appears to have been influenced by Classical models.

Loriod's programme note opens:

L'œuvre a été conçue en 1990, à la fois comme une
révérence admirative à Mozart, Scarlatti, Rameau...¹⁴

Even more remarkable is that, according to Loriod's analysis (which is «*tirée des notes de l'auteur lui-même*»), the opening theme of the first movement, *Entrée*, «*courbe inspirée de l'air de Suzanne des Noces de Figaro de Mozart*». Messiaen had completed the Mozart tribute, *Un sourire*, shortly before *Concert à quatre*, his analyses of Mozart's piano concertos were being published as a small book,¹⁵ and the Mozart bicentenary looming. This particularly favoured composer of Messiaen's was obviously very much in his thoughts.¹⁶

Furthermore, it would seem that the influence of Classical ideals is an increasingly prevalent trait of the post-*Saint François* works. The following exchange between Messiaen and Claude Samuel from 1986 is especially pertinent:

O.M. Harmoniquement, la pièce [*Les ressuscités et le chant de l'étoile Aldébaran*¹⁷] tourne autour de la majeur, tonalité qui correspond, pour moi, à la couleur bleue. J'ai l'impression que cette pièce est réussie car elle est à la fois très moderne et d'un caractère très charmeur. Et vous savez comme moi que, généralement, la musique moderne...

C.S. ...n'est pas jolie.

O.M. Elle est agressive, intellectuelle, intéressante, passionnante mais elle n'est pas jolie.

C.S. Et vous écrivez sans complexes de la musique « jolie ».

O.M. Je pense qu'il faut revenir au charme, à la suavité, ou tout simplement à ce qui sonne bien. La musique de Mozart est simple, granche, très élaborée dans son accentuation, mais le résultat est beau et personne ne songe à le lui reprocher.¹⁸

It should be noted, incidentally, that the piece which provoked these comments, *Les ressuscités et le chant de l'étoile Aldébaran*, is in the same key as *Un sourire, Éclairs* and *Concert à quatre*; A major. The same year as he made these comments, 1986, Messiaen produced a pastiche entitled *Chant dans le style Mozart* in response to a request for a test piece for the Conservatoire. This piece was not intended to be included as part of his œuvre. It was written at a time of crisis, when Messiaen's self-esteem was still low. That Messiaen composed a pastiche rather than an 'original' work, as he had done on previous occasions for the Conservatoire, is an indication of

his compositional lack of confidence. It also provides an indication of the composer's musical preoccupations at the time. In addition to the acknowledged inspiration of Mozart in the final works, there is enough evidence in the post-*Saint François* period to suggest that the *Chant dans le style Mozart* is indicative not only of compositional crisis, but also that one part of Messiaen's solution to finding a way forward involved looking to the past.

After twenty years composing the enormous monuments of *La Transfiguration*, the *Méditations*, *Des canyons* and *Saint François*, Messiaen pared down his music. Just as he had done after *Turangalîla*, he returned to first principles in order to rebuild his language. However, whereas in 1949 he was emphasizing all that was progressive in his music, in 1985 he was selecting the elements with which he was most familiar. Gradually he broadened his compositional horizons to include more exotic elements. The negative process of restriction, which was not necessarily a conscious undertaking, endured in the form of the more positive tendency of restraint.

There are four easily identifiable ways in which this restraint is evident in Messiaen's final works. The first is that, in marked contrast to the *monumental trinity* works, there is a distinct absence of bass and extreme bass textures. In *Petites esquisses*, the pianist rarely needs to venture more than an octave below middle C. Despite sounding like shavings from the workbench of the *monumental trinity* works, Messiaen refrains from earthing the chorales of *Un vitrail* and *La ville* with tubas and

bass trombone glowering below the stave in the manner of *La Transfiguration*. By far the lowest note of *Un sourire* is A natural a minor tenth below middle C, and this is not heard until the final, root position A major chord. Then there is Messiaen's rationing of bass instruments in *Éclairs*. The double basses do not enter until the eighth movement whilst the double bassoon and the double-bass tuba have to wait until *Le Chemin de l'Invisible*, and then play just two notes.

The second example of restraint is Messiaen's rationing of his favoured instrument, the piano. His wife may have coaxed him to write *Petites esquisses* for her, and, as with all other orchestral piano parts, she was the intended soloist for *Un vitrail* and *La ville*. In this context, the decision not to include a piano solo in either *Un sourire* or *Éclairs* shows remarkable self-control. This omission could be attributed to conditions of the commissions, but, even if this were the case, Messiaen's stature was such that it would be hard to impose such a restriction on him. He was certainly not short of potential commissions and was capable both of modifying the original conditions¹⁹ and of turning down requests for new works. In other words, Messiaen positively decided to omit the piano from these works.

The third clear way in which Messiaen displays restraint is in his utilization of the orchestra in *Éclairs*. As was noted in the introduction to Part III, the work requires the largest orchestra ever requested by the composer. Whilst this does not suggest restraint, especially in terms of orchestral budgets, Messiaen rarely uses more than about a third of the 128 players at any one time. Similarly, whilst he shows little restraint in exploiting the technical possibilities of the instruments at his disposal,

such as the stratospheric top note in *Demeurer dans l'amour...*, the effect is always integral to the desired mood. Messiaen unleashes the full power of his orchestra but rarely in *Éclairs*, preferring instead to convey intimacy.

Finally, there are the conclusions to *Éclairs*, *Un sourire* and, to a lesser extent, *La ville*. As was discussed in chapters eleven and twelve of Part III, the understated way in which *Éclairs* ends is unprecedented in a large orchestral work and is in marked contrast to the overwhelming conclusions to the *monumental trinity* works. *Un sourire* ends in remarkably similar fashion, a quiet string chord, not to mention the same key, A major. The end of *La ville* is more sturdy, but, as was observed in Part II, chapter two, far from overwhelming the listener, what appears to be the principal chord, aided by tam tam, fades away to leave the carillon resolutely chiming away.

These four indications of restraint point to one important way in which the music of Messiaen's final years changed from that which went before. The *monumental trinity* works aim to overwhelm the listener with the richness and power of God's creation. These are vast monuments, hewn from Granite and built upon mountains. By contrast, the work's of Messiaen's final years seem to convey the intimacy of God's love. *Éclairs* is concerned not so much with building a monument to God, as providing a portrayal of existence with God. There are, of course, tender moments in the *monumental trinity* works, particularly *Saint François*, but the enduring impression is of the grandiosity of these works. The opposite is true in *Éclairs*, for whilst there are bombastic passages or movements, the abiding impression is of intimacy and tenderness. Messiaen seems to feel very little need to flex his

orchestral muscles. Indeed, the whole seems to be governed by an almost Classical emphasis on clarity and restraint.

During the course of examining the music of these late works, we have also seen that Messiaen allowed himself much greater freedom with his own harmonic language. Chord-types which had hitherto been governed, and even defined, by clear rules were liberated from their original relationships. As a consequence, *accords à résonance contractée* and *renversements transposés* chords appear frequently as isolated entities whereas they previously occurred as pairs or groups of chords. In the case of the latter, this makes a nonsense of their name, the full version of which is *accords à renversements transposés sur la même note de basse*. The whole concept of transposing the inversions of the original chord relies upon several chords being presented on a single bass note. If the chords appear either in isolation or with different pitches as the bass note, then they cannot be transposed inversions and the relationship which provides their name is broken. It will be remembered that Messiaen had used these chords more freely in his birdsong writing and for passages of *permutations symétriques* since the 1950s. Nevertheless, in relation to the latter, he stated:

...j'ai gardé en plusieurs endroits, le principe de la même note de basse qui est une des caractéristiques des couleurs changeantes et de l'irisation de cet accord.²⁰

The liberalisation of this relationship with «*la même note de basse*» in the works covered in this thesis suggests that Messiaen may have been thinking about his own

harmony in a different way. The evidence from the disparate analyses suggests that Messiaen was more directly concerned with the triadic aspect of these chord-types. It is certainly the case that the harmonic structure both of individual movements and of *Éclairs* as a whole is governed by chords derived from tonality. Indeed, despite the protestations of George Benjamin,²¹ it is not too fanciful to assert that the basis of Messiaen's harmony in these works is a kind of modified tonality. All the chords in **example III:159** are standard Messiaen harmonies from this period. Each can be discussed in terms of the names and functions described by the composer. However, it is simply dogmatic to suggest that only the first couple of chords should be treated as 'E major' and that the others are entirely distinct harmonies.

In terms, then, of the specifics of harmony, this thesis has two principal conclusions. Firstly, that there was a liberalisation of Messiaen's own methods in his final works. Just as the examples of restraint provide evidence of a new approach in terms of compositional macrostructure, the liberalisation of Messiaen's harmony is indicative of concurrent small scale technical developments. In other words, it supports the contention that Messiaen's music underwent a discernible change in his final years.

Secondly, that the influence of major and augmented triads can be found at every harmonic level. The extent to which works from earlier periods, particularly the 1950s and 1960s, rely upon triadically derived harmony can only be determined from further research. Previous discussion of Messiaen's music, not least by the composer himself, has tended to classify chords as being either a triad or one of his invented

chord-types. This thesis has shown that this is often misleading. The relationship between Messiaen's chord-types and tonally derived triads is not mutually exclusive. For instance, when discussing *renversements transposés* chords, it is usually beneficial to know the nature of the underlying triad. Indeed, we have seen how Messiaen uses the ambiguities of the triadic and non-triadic parts of the chord to great effect in the chorales of *Un vitrail* and *La ville*, not to mention the broad unfurling of *Le Christ, lumière du Paradis*.

On the broad scale, we have also seen how the apparently isolated chunks of *Éclairs* are linked to the fundamental harmonic structure. Even more remarkable is that this works in tandem with the motivic development which occurs in the fifth, sixth, eighth and eleventh movements and which is echoed in the *Pièce*. If the prevailing mood of restraint and understatement suggests Mozart, the manipulation of this brief fragment so that it forms the basis of the chorale in *Les Étoiles et la Gloire* and of the whole of *Le Christ, lumière du Paradis* is almost Beethovenian in nature. However, as with the observations about the triadic underpinning of the harmony, much more research is needed on earlier works before it can be ascertained whether this discreet process is typical of Messiaen or a development of his final years.

When Messiaen completed *Saint François* he was mentally and physically exhausted. The opera was intended to be his last work. The summation and crowning achievement of his career. Messiaen thought that he had fulfilled his vocation as a religious composer and he was ready for retirement and what he thought was the imminent prospect of death. The enormous organ cycle *Livre du Saint Sacrement*

may have been composed shortly after *Saint François*, but this was a companion piece for the opera, both in terms of theology and in that it provided a summa of the composer's works for organ.

Coaxed at first by Yvonne Loriod, and then by Pierre Boulez, Messiaen began to compose a series of miniatures, but was doubtful of their worth. Indeed, there seemed to be a palpable sense of tying-up the compositional loose ends left by the opera. Nevertheless, Messiaen was gradually regaining confidence and with these miniatures he was also laying the foundations for his final masterpiece, *Éclairs sur l'au-delà*.... In addition to a lack of bass textures, there are several prominent links between the miniatures and *Éclairs*. The *hors tempo* birdsong passages in *Un vitrail* could be regarded as a sketch for *Plusieurs oiseaux des arbres de Vie*. The final chorale of *Un vitrail*, with its offbeat carillon, is prophetic of the main unfolding of the theme in *Le chemin de l'Invisible*. The chorale of *La ville* could be the starting point for *Apparition du Christ glorieux*.... The string writing of *Un sourire* suggests the soundworld of *Demeurer dans l'amour* and *Le Christ, lumière du Paradis*, whilst the string writing in the *Pièce* appears to be the starting point for the hammering string passages in *Le Chemin de l'Invisible*. Finally, there is the motivic link between the *Pièce* and several movements from *Éclairs*.

In 1988 Messiaen traversed the globe attending the hundreds of concerts in honour of his eightieth birthday. The experience of hearing so much of his own output within so short a timescale appears, despite increasing frailty, to have refreshed his compositional outlook. When it emerged that he was composing an eleven

movement work for the 150th anniversary of the NYPO, expectations were raised of another colossal monument in the manner of *La Transfiguration*, or even *Saint François*. In fact, when *Éclairs sur l'au-délà...* was finally performed, just over six months after the composer's death, the most striking characteristic was its restraint, reminding us that Messiaen's music is instantly recognizable but never predictable. In contrast to *Des canyons*, in which he had created an enormous aural portrait despite having fewer than forty players at his disposal, *Éclairs* frequently sounds like chamber music which just happens to require an orchestra of 128 to perform it. The most successful purveyor of musical overstatement since Wagner became in the Indian summer of his final years a master of delectable understatement.

Messiaen did not view death as an end but a beginning. If Messiaen's final works, particularly *Éclairs*, are concerned with the afterlife, it is because this was a lifelong concern. With the signal exception of the 1950s, had Messiaen died at just about any point in his career a contemplation of eternal life would have been among his final works. The thesis began by considering briefly the attitudes to the final works of Lili Boulanger, Mahler, Mozart and Beethoven, all of whom died prematurely. In contrast to these composers, Messiaen lived longer than he expected. Whilst there is much about his final works which suggests an elderly composer there is also much that is fresh. *Saint François* was intended to be his final work. The spirit of *Éclairs* comes not from an intimation of impending death, but from an unexpected extension of life. A life which Messiaen expected to continue long after death.

Notes

- 1 This fact is all the more remarkable given that a major 'homegrown' artist, Francis Bacon, died on the same day.
- 2 Information from Olivier Messiaen homme de foi - Regard sur son œuvre d'orgue (Paris: Trinité Média Communications, 1995), p.15. Père Gaillard, the curate of Petichet presided at the funeral mass.
- 3 Messiaen was assiduous in proof-reading scores. For *Saint François* he insisted on a minimum period of three months to check each *tableau*. Private communication from Jean Leduc.
- 4 Presumably realizing that he would wish to add to it until the day he died.
- 5 Programme note by Yvonne Messiaen-Loriod for the world première at the Opéra Bastille, Paris: 26 September 1994.
- 6 It is probably too much to expect Leduc to follow the example of Faber's score of Derek Cooke's 'performing version' of Mahler's Tenth symphony in which we are shown a tidy version of the material with which Cooke was working.
- 7 Messiaen: Musique et couleur, p.125.
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 The other abstract works are: *Thème et variations*; *Fantaisie burlesque*; *Vocalise-Étude*; *Rondeau*; *Cantéyodjayâ*; *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*; *Neumes rythmiques*; *Pièce pour piano et quatuor cordes*. *Pièce pour le tombeau de Paul Dukas* could arguably be added to this list. Despite the apparently abstract collective title, most of the movements in *Livre d'orgue* have clear religious/theological subjects. The movements in *Chronochromie* are abstract, but almost every passage can allude to some kind of natural phenomenon such as rocks, streams and, of course, birds.
- 10 A caveat should be made that Messiaen might have assigned, for instance, scriptural prefaces at a later stage in the composition. Nevertheless, from the little that is known of his compositional processes, it seems that the subject matter of any movement was usually clear before the business of writing down the notes began and that this would be noted on the manuscript.
- 11 It should be remembered that there is no clear evidence that Messiaen previously worked on more than one composition at a time.
- 12 From his comments in the interview in appendix five (page 372), it can be presumed that Paul Crossley would probably place the *Concert à quatre* in the same stylistic basket as *Fantaisie burlesque* rather than Messiaen's early masterpieces.
- 13 Although seemingly inevitable in the context of the whole, it should be remembered that A major is not confirmed as the harmonic goal of *Éclairs* until the last movement.
- 14 Programme note by Yvonne Messiaen-Loriod for the world première at the Opéra Bastille, Paris: 26 September 1994.
- 15 Olivier Messiaen: Les 22 Concertos Pour Piano de Mozart (Paris: Librairie Segnier, 1990).
- 16 Messiaen was perusing Figaro when Peter Hill had lunch with him in April 1991 - private communication from Peter Hill.
- 17 Movement eight of *Des canyons*.
- 18 Messiaen: Musique et couleur, p.189.
- 19 As he did with *Couleurs*, which was commissioned originally for three trombones and three xylophones and with the *Pièce* (none of the other works for Alfred Schlee's 90th birthday included a piano, being for combinations drawn from string quartet).
- 20 Traité - Tome III, p. 87.
- 21 See interview in Appendix four, page 357.

List of works

Chronological List of Published Works

The following list is intended only as a guide. For a more comprehensive catalogue of works, see Nigel Simeone: Olivier Messiaen: A Bibliographical Catalogue of Messiaen's Works (Tutzing: Verlegt bei Hans Schneider, 1998). The figures in the right-hand column refer to Simeone's numbering. Further details of the principal works discussed in this thesis, including full instrumentation, are provided in Appendix one.

1928	Le banquet céleste	organ	I/1
1928-9	8 Préludes	piano	I/2
1930	Diptyque	organ	I/3
	3 Mélodies	voice + piano	I/4
	Les offrandes oubliées	orchestra	I/5a
	La mort du nombre	sop, ten, vn + pno	I/6
1931	Le tombeau resplendissant	orchestra	I/7
	Apparition de l'église éternelle	organ	I/8
1932	Hymne au Saint Sacrement	orchestra	I/9
	Thème et variations	violin + piano	I/10
	Fantaisie burlesque	piano	I/11
1932-3	L'Ascension	orchestra	I/12a
1933-4	L'Ascension	organ	I/12b
1935	La Nativité du Seigneur	organ	I/14
	Vocalise-Étude	soprano + piano	I/15
	Pièce pour le tombeau de Paul Dukas	piano	I/16
1936	Poèmes pour Mi	soprano + piano	I/17a
1937	Poèmes pour Mi	soprano + orchestra	I/17b
	O sacrum convivium	SATB choir	I/18
1938	Chants de terre et de ciel	soprano + piano	I/19
1939	Les corps glorieux	organ	I/20
1940-1	Quatuor pour la fin du temps	vn, cl, vc + piano	I/22
1943	Rondeau	piano	I/24
1943	Visions de l'Amen	2 pianos	I/25
1943-4	Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine	womens voices, pno, onde + orch.	I/26
1944	Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus	piano	I/27
1945	Harawi	soprano + piano	I/28
	Chant des déportés	sopranos, tenors + orch.	I/60

1946-8	Turangalîla-symphonie	pno, onde + orch.	I/29
1948	Cantéyodjayâ	piano	I/30
	Cinq rechants	12 voices	I/31
1949-50	Quatre études de rythme: Ile de feu I (1950); Mode de valeurs et d'intensités (1949); Neumes rythmiques (1949); Ile de feu II (1950)	piano	I/34; I/32; I/33; I/35
1949-50	Messe de la Pentecôte	organ	I/36
1951	Le merle noir	flute + piano	I/37
1951	Livre d'orgue	organ	I/38
1953	Réveil des oiseaux	pno solo + orchestra	I/40
1955-6	Oiseaux exotiques	pno solo + orchestra	I/41
1956-8	Catalogue d'oiseaux	piano	I/42
1959-60	Chronochromie	orchestra	I/43
1960	Verset pour la fête de la dedicace	organ	I/44
1962	Sept Haïkaï	pno solo + orchestra	I/45
1963	Couleurs de la cité céleste	pno solo + orchestra	I/46
1964	Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum	orchestra	I/47
1965-9	La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur, Jésus- Christ	7 instrumental soloists, large choir & orchestra	I/48
1969	Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité	organ	I/49
1970	La fauvette des jardins	piano	I/50
1971-4	Des canyons aux étoiles	pno, hn + orchestra	I/51
1975-83	Saint François d'Assise (scènes Françiscaines)	opera	I/52
1984	Livre du Saint Sacrement	organ	I/53
1985	Petites esquisses d'oiseaux	piano	I/54
1986	Un vitrail et des oiseaux	pno solo + orchestra	I/55
1987	La ville d'en-haut	pno solo + orchestra	I/56
1989	Un sourire	orchestra	I/57
1991	Pièce	pno + string quartet	I/58
1987-91	Éclairs sur l'au-delà...	large orchestra	I/61
1990-92	Concert à quatre	fl, ob, vc, pno + orchestra	I/62

Glossary

This glossary lists only terms specific to this thesis and shortened names of works by Messiaen. It is not intended to provide a list of Messiaen's own specialist terms, which are dealt with more than adequately in his own writings and those of others.

Chants de terre	Chants de terre et de ciel
<u>Contributions</u>	See Rößler
Couleurs	Couleurs de la cité céleste
Des canyons	Des canyons aux étoiles
Éclairs	Éclairs sur l'au-delà...
Et exspecto	Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum
La Nativité	La Nativité du Seigneur
La Transfiguration	La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur, Jésus-Christ
La ville	La ville d'en-haut
LDSS	Livre du Saint Sacrement
Méditations	Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité
Mode de valeurs	Mode de valeurs et d'intensités
Monumental trinity	Collective name for <i>La Transfiguration</i> , <i>Des canyons</i> and <i>Saint François</i> . <i>Méditations</i> and <i>LDSS</i> can also be added to this group. See Part I, chapter one, page 18.
Petites esquisses	Petites esquisses d'oiseaux
Pièce	Pièce pour piano et quatuor à cordes
Poèmes	Poèmes pour Mi
Quatuor	Quatuor pour la fin du temps
Rößler: <u>Contributions</u>	Almut Rößler: <u>Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen</u> , English translation by Barbara Dagg and Nancy Poland (Duisberg: Gilles and Francke, 1986).
Saint François	Saint François d'Assise (scènes Franciscaïnes)
<u>Technique</u>	Messiaen, Olivier: <u>Technique de mon langage musical</u> , (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1944; English translation: John Satterfield, Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1957). Volume I: Text; Volume II: Musical Examples.
Total chromatic chords	Chords containing all twelve pitches.
<u>Traité</u>	Messiaen, Olivier: <u>Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie (1949-1992)</u> (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, <i>Tome I</i> published in 1994).

Trois petites liturgies	Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine
Turungalîla	Turungalîla-symphonie
Typical chord	Prevalent chord derived from mode three - see Part I, chapter one, pages 27-28.
Un vitrail	Un vitrail et des oiseaux
Vingt regards	Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus
Visions	Visions de l'Amen

Designation of Notes by Letters



c''' to c''''



c'' to b''



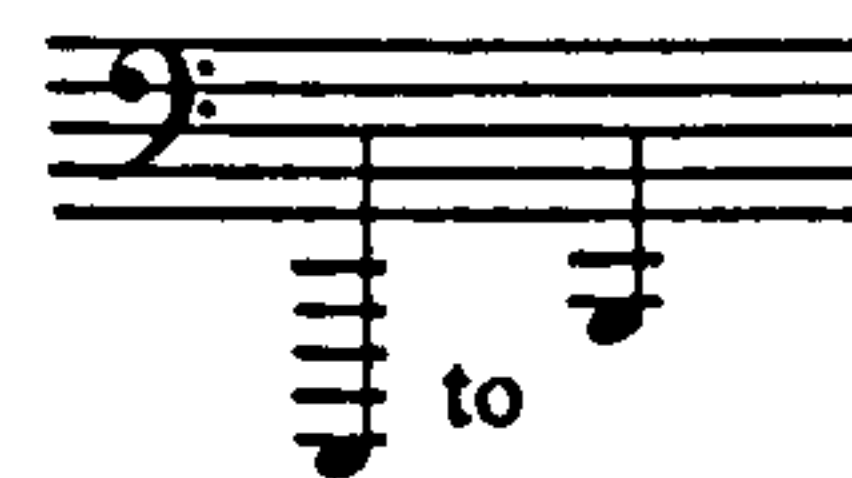
c' to b'



c to b



C to B



C, to B,

Appendices

Appendix one

Instrumentation of Messiaen's final works

Saint François d'Assise

(scènes franciscaines)

opera in three Acts and eight tableaux

ACT I

Tableau 1: La Croix Tableau 2: Lauds Tableau 3: Le baiser au lépreux

ACT II

Tableau 4: L'Ange voyageur Tableau 5: L'Ange musicien Tableau 6: Le Prêche aux
oiseaux

ACT III

Tableau 7: Les stigmates Tableau 8: La mort et la nouvelle vie

Composed: 1975-9 Orchestrated: 1979-83

Publisher: Leduc - full score, libretto

Solo Roles:

Saint François (bar)	Frère Léon (bar)	L'Ange (s)
Le Lépreux (t)	Frère Massée (t)	Frère Elie (t)
Frère Bernard (b)	Frère Sylvestre (b)	Frère Rufin (b)

Woodwind:

3 piccolos	3 flutes	1 alto flute in G
3 oboes	1 cor anglais	
2 small clarinets (Eb)	3 clarinets (Bb)	1 bass clarinet (Bb)
1 contrabass clarinet (Bb)		
3 bassoons	1 double-bassoon	

Claviers:

1 xylophone	1 xylorimba	1 marimba
1 glockenspiel	1 vibraphone	

Brass:

1 trumpet in D	3 trumpets	
6 horns in F		
3 trombones		
2 tubas	1 contrabass tuba	

Ondes:

3 Ondes Martenot, placed in different positions to create a sense of space. The first is in a stage box to the left of the conductor on the side of the first violins. The second Ondes Martenot is in a stage box to the right of the conductor on the side of the cellos. The third is in the orchestra pit in front of the conductor.

Chorus:

Mixed chorus of 150 people on stage;

15 first sopranos	15 second sopranos	15 mezzos,
15 first contraltos	15 second contraltos	
15 first tenors	15 second tenors	15 baritones
15 first basses	15 second basses	

Strings:

16 first violins	16 second violins	14 violas
12 cellos	10 double-basses (5 string)	

Percussion:

I: tubular bells 1 side drum	first claves	wind machine
II: first triangle very small cymbal	second claves small cymbal	temple block suspended cymbal
III: second triangle whip glass chimes tambourine	third claves pair of maracas shell chimes 3 gongs (high, medium, & low)	wood block guiro wood chimes
IV: third triangle large suspended cymbal	fourth claves suspended cymbal	set of crotales 3 tam tams
V: tubular bells 2 bass drum.	fifth claves	geophone

Livre du Saint Sacrement
for organ

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Adoro te | 2. La source de Vie | 3. Le Dieu caché |
| 4. Acte de Foi | 5. Puer natus est nobis | 6. La manne et le Pain de Vie |
| 7. Les ressuscités et la lumière de Vie | | 8. Institution de l'Eucharistie |
| 9. les ténèbres | 10. La Résurrection du Christ | |
| 11. L'apparition du Christ ressuscité à Marie-Madeleine | 12. La Transsubstantiation | |
| 13. Les deux murailles d'eau | 14. Prière avant la communion | |
| 15. La joie de la grâce | 16. Prière après la communion | |
| 17. La Présence multipliée | 18. Offrande et Alleluia final | |

Composed: 1984
Publisher: Leduc

Petites esquisses d'oiseaux
for piano

1. Le Rouge-gorge
4. La Grive musicien

2. Le Merle noir
5. Le Rouge-gorge

3. Le Rouge-gorge
6. L'Alouette des champs

Composed: 1985
Published: Leduc

Un vitrail et des oiseaux
for piano solo and orchestra

Composed: 1986
Publisher: Leduc - full score

Orchestra

Woodwind:

3 flutes	1 alto flute in G	
3 oboes	1 cor anglais	
2 small clarinets (Eb)	3 clarinets (Bb)	1 bass clarinet (Bb)
3 bassoons		

Brass: 1 trumpet in D

Piano Solo

Claviers:

1 xylophone	1 xylorimba	1 xylorimba
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Percussion:

I tubular bells		
II triangle		
III wood block	6 temple blocks	
IV small cymbal	suspended cymbal	
V small tam-tam	large tam-tam	

La ville d'en-haut
for piano solo and orchestra

Composed: 1987
Publisher: Leduc - full score

Orchestra

Woodwind:

1 piccolo	3 flutes	1 alto flute in G .
3 oboes	1 cor anglais	
2 small clarinets (Eb)	3 clarinets (Bb)	1 bass clarinet (Bb)
3 bassoons		

Brass:

1 trumpet in D	3 trumpets
6 horns in F	
3 trombones	

Piano Solo

Claviers:

1 xylophone	1 xylorimba	1 xylorimba
1 glockenspiel		

Percussion:

I	tubular bells	
II	triangle	
III	wood block	6 temple blocks
IV	small cymbal	suspended cymbal
V	small tam-tam	large tam-tam

Un sourire
for orchestra

Composed: 1989
Publisher: Leduc: full score

Orchestra

Woodwind:

1 piccolo	3 flutes
3 oboes	1 cor anglais
3 clarinets (Bb)	3 bassoons

Brass:

1 trumpet	4 horns in F
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Claviers:

1 xylophone	1 xylorimba
-------------	-------------

Strings:

16 first violins	16 second violins	14 violas
12 cellos		

Percussion:

I. tubular bells	II. suspended cymbal
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Pièce pour piano et quatuor à cordes

Composed: 1991
Publisher: Universal edition - score/piano part

Éclairs sur l'au-delà...
for large orchestra

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Apparition du Christ glorieux... | 7. Et Dieu essuiera toute larme de leurs yeux... |
| 2. La Constellation du Sagittaire | 8. Les Étoiles et la Gloire |
| 3. L'Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée | 9. Plusieurs Oiseaux des arbres de Vie |
| 4. Les Élus marqués du sceau | 10. Le Chemin de l'Invisible |
| 5. Demeurer dans l'Amour... | 11. Le Christ, lumière du Paradis |
| 6. Les Sept Anges aux sept trompettes | |

Composed: 1988-1991
Publisher: Leduc - full score

Orchestra

Woodwind:

3 piccolos	6 flutes	1 alto flute
3 oboes	1 cor anglais	
2 small clarinets (Eb)	6 clarinets (Bb)	1 bass clarinet (Bb)
1 double-bass clarinet (Bb)		
3 bassoons	1 double-bassoon	

Brass:

2 trumpets in D	3 trumpets	
6 horns in F		
3 trombones	2 tubas	1 double-bass tuba

Claviers:

1 crotales	1 glockenspiel	
1 xylophone	1 xylorimba	1 marimba

Strings:

16 first violins	16 second violins	14 violas
12 cellos	10 double-basses (5 strings)	

Percussion:

I: tubular bells 1		
II: tubular bells 2		
III: tubular bells 3		
IV: 3 triangles		
V: bass drum	éoliphone (wind machine)	2nd triangle
VI: wood block	6 temple blocks	réco-réco
3rd triangle		
VII: 3 high gongs	whip	
VIII: small suspended cymbal	suspended cymbal	large suspended
cymbal		
IX: 3 low gongs	bass drum	
X: small tam-tam	tam-tam	very large tam-tam

Concert à quatre
for flute solo, cello solo, oboe solo, piano solo and orchestra

1. Entrée 2. Vocalise 3. Cadenza 4. Rondeau

Composed: 1990-1992

Publisher: Leduc - full score (in preparation).

Orchestra

Woodwind:

2 piccolos	3 flutes	
3 oboes	1 cor anglais	
1 small clarinet (Eb)	3 clarinets (Bb)	1 bass clarinet (Bb)
3 bassoons	1 double-bassoon	

Brass:

1 trumpet in D	3 trumpets	
4 horns in F		
3 trombones	1 tuba	

Soloists:

flute	oboe	cello
piano		

Claviers:

1 xylophone	1 xylorimba,	1 marimba
1 glockenspiel	1 célesta	

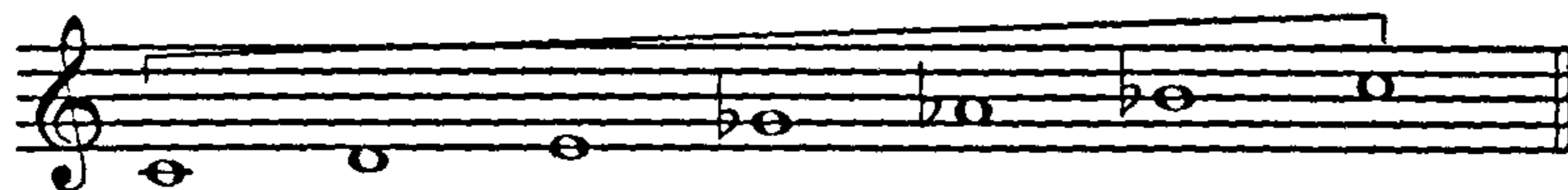
Percussion:

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whip	6 temple blocks	suspended cymbal
crotales	3 tam-tams	bass drum
éoliphone (wind machine)		

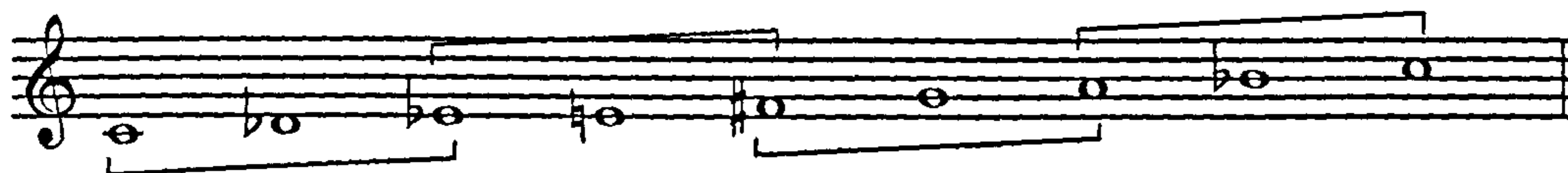
Appendix two

Modes of limited transposition

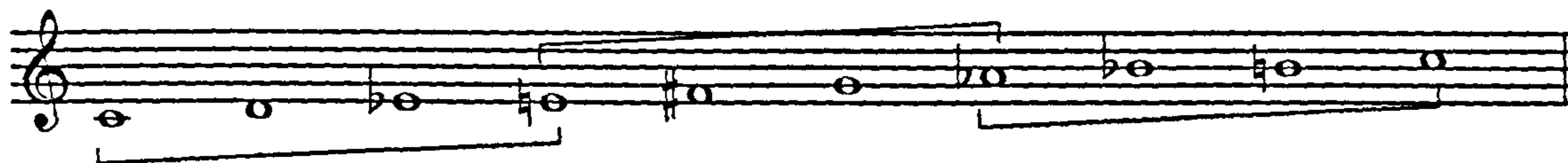
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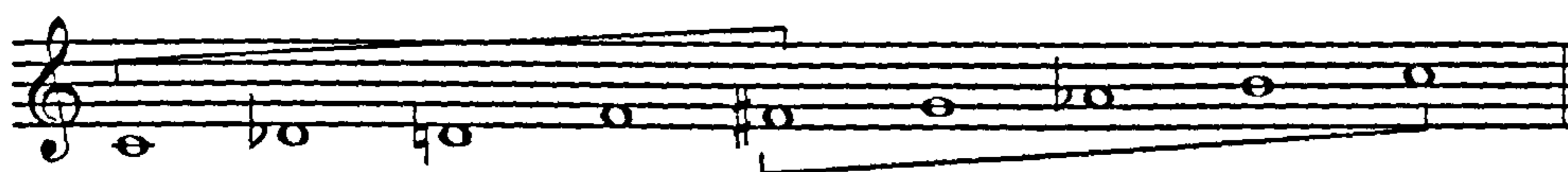
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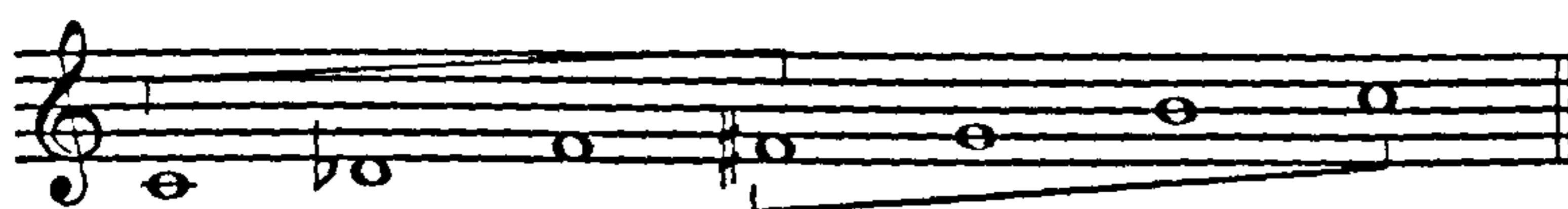
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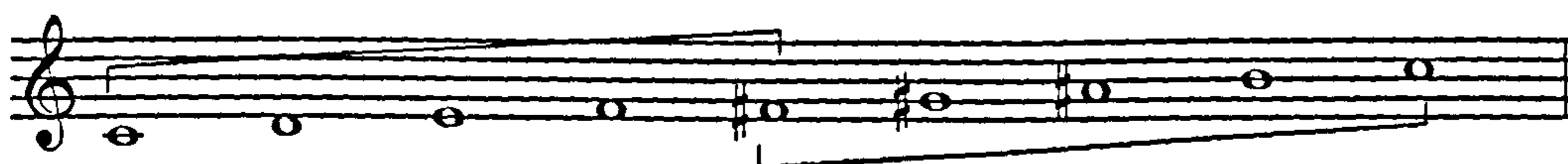
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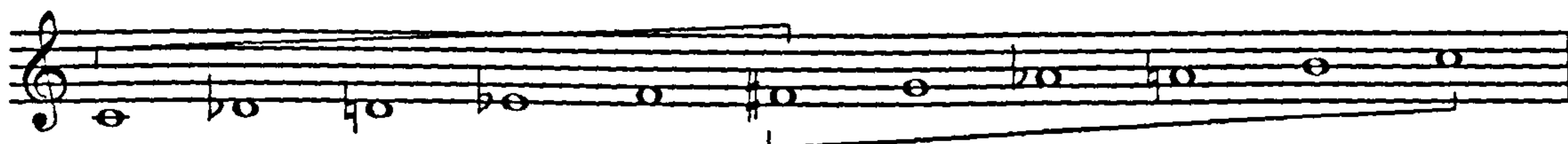
Mode 5



Mode 6



Mode 7



Appendix three

Greek Rhythms

Spondee	Spondaic	— —
Iamb	Iambic	∪ —
Molosse		— — —
Trochee	Trochaic	— ∪
Dactyl		— ∪ ∪
Anapæste	Anapæstic	∪ ∪ —
Cretic		— ∪ —
Bacchus	Bacchic	∪ — —
Antibacchus	Antibacchic	— — ∪
Choriambe	Choriambic	— ∪ ∪ —
Epitrite II		— ∪ — —
Epitrite III		— — ∪ —
Péon IV		∪ ∪ ∪ —

Appendix four

Interview with George Benjamin

London: 22 October, 1996

C.D. Could you tell me how you first came into contact with Messiaen's music?

G.B. Yes, I'm at the morning religious ceremony at school, I'm about fourteen or fifteen, and I hear this music coming from the organ loft. The harmonies are quite extraordinary and haunting, and I turned to someone and said 'Who wrote that, who wrote that?' and they said 'It's Messiaen'. Then having found his name (and a whole page on him in the Larousse encyclopedia where his class was referred to as the greatest of the post-war) I thought 'well if it's that wonderful, why not at least try there?'. My current teacher, Peter Gellhorn, knew Messiaen and suggested that we go to Paris to meet him. Soon after that, I heard *Turangalila* for the first time under André Previn at the Festival Hall.

C.D. So then you went to Paris, and would I be right in saying that you were in his class in its last year?

G.B. The last two years. The first day I met him was extraordinary for me; at the end of three hours he said 'come as a friend to my class'. I said 'I can't, I'm still at school'. 'Well come once a month then.' So once a month I went and spent Wednesday and Thursday in Paris, with two classes with him and one class with Yvonne Loriod on piano. There was a year of that, so I went in all about eight times. Then my A-levels were finished and I left school and in my year off before I went to Cambridge, I spent the whole year at the Paris Conservatoire. And I would have stayed longer, but he left. I decided to go when he went.

C.D. How often did you have contact with him after that year?

G.B. We wrote to each other frequently. Occasionally I went abroad to see him at concerts. I remember I turned up in Munich once to hear *Chronochromie*. Once in Brussels we just happened to be together, again *Chronochromie*, and in Metz just by chance with *Chronochromie*. Always *Chronochromie* - not my favourite piece!

In Britain I did do quite a lot of work on Messiaen's behalf. I had something to do with the South Bank Show television portrait of him and his eightieth birthday celebrations, including the idea of doing the British première of the complete opera. In the last fifteen years of his life, support and enthusiasm for his music in Britain just multiplied and he came over more and more frequently. There was very warm friendship between us and whenever it was possible to meet, we would. Plus whenever I'd finished a new piece, I'd usually send it to him. I would also go over to Paris frequently and we'd usually fix up a date to meet. A session with him felt like half an hour and in fact lasted four hours. Like with his pieces. With him, time seemed to shrink.

C.D. He would have been working on the opera when you first got to know him.

G.B. Just beginning it, having just finished *Des canyons aux étoiles*...

C.D. I know from talking to one or two other people that in his class sometimes his musical preoccupations of the time would show themselves. Were there any signs of what would later emerge as the opera whilst you were attending the class?

G.B. No, because the years I was there he was doing a grand summary of everything. I got the feeling that he wanted to leave with a fanfare. He wanted to cover as much as possible. So there was a lot of his own music, but he gave a huge amount of time to student pieces, including my own and my sketches. All sorts of things. He gave us over fourteen hours a week; an enormous amount of time. But he wouldn't talk about the opera. In fact I remember, late in 1977, there was an announcement on the morning news reporting that 'we've discovered what the subject matter of Messiaen's opera is - Saint Francis'. It was meant to be a complete secret and he came into the class in a really bad mood. It was almost a superstitious thing and he was very upset that the subject matter had got out.

C.D. One thing I find puzzling about what he said about the opera was that he 'composed' it from '75 to '79 and then he orchestrated it from '79 to '83. I find it difficult to believe it was a clear cut as that.

G.B. No, things were always clear cut with his sketching technique. With music in which the continuity is as simple as his, consisting of juxtaposed blocks of colour, then it's practical to compose in short score. The timbre is absolutely fixed to the material; there's no supple shading, no subtle organic transformation. So he would write the chorales on two or three staves, bird polyphonies on six, seven or eight staves. Then of course he had to make the full score - that was an immense task for a seventy year old! An immense task. Some of the big bird choruses in the sixth tableau must have taken months to write out.

C.D. With the opera, do you think that Messiaen felt during the composition of *Saint François* that it would be his last work?

G.B. At some point there was an announcement that this would be his final work. Yes, a grand summation. A grand summation of the summations, because his pieces had been getting bigger and bigger since *Et exspecto* and I think there was the intention that it would be his last work. And for a couple of years after finishing the opera he felt blocked. Even after then, for a long time he was doubtful about the quality of the inspiration. He had been used both to causing controversy and to numerous, numerous triumphs. The initially lukewarm reception that *Saint François* received, plus the sheer exhaustion of having completed such an undertaking, undermined his confidence. Fortunately, as years went by, he saw the work gain ever and ever more fervent appreciation.

C.D. I remember the success of the Festival Hall production.

G.B. Well, nothing could have been a greater event, but he had similar great nights in New York, Bonn, Madrid, Salzburg, Tokyo and elsewhere

C.D. After *Saint François*, he immediately composed *Livre du Saint Sacrement*. Would it be correct to suggest that it is a summation for the organ works, in the same way as *Saint François* is for everything else?

G.B. Maybe, maybe. It's a work that I have not heard for a long time. You could equally say that the *Méditations*, fifteen years before, had that same ambition.

C.D. Yvonne Loriod has said that he went into a nervous depression after the opera.

G.B. Where did she say that?

C.D. In the interview with Peter [Hill].

G.B. Yes, I think he was depressed. Yes, something changed. The first thing was his age, the second was the fact that there were no immediate other productions for the opera, apart from various incomplete concert performances. Plus the effort. But, I think that bit by bit, his morale improved. He would say "I don't know if I'm gifted any more". And two or three of those short pieces are not his best. They don't add anything new to the catalogue. They are still Messiaen, but it's not his finest music. And then came the *Éclairs...*, which he got excited about. It even surprised him I think.

C.D. The series of miniatures just before that - the bird sketches for piano, *Un vitrail et des oiseaux* and *La ville d'en-haut* - feel like the tying up of loose ends from what has gone before.

G.B. I think the six little bird sketches may have a certain poignancy to them because that was the final work for solo piano. Definitely. But the *Éclairs* was a big surprise. I think the confidence of earlier years still hadn't necessarily completely returned, but I think he felt a new strength there. It was such a shame he never heard it.

C.D. Regarding the broad spirit of *Éclairs*, when I first heard that there was to be this new piece, during the time that I worked at UMP in 89 or 90 and heard that something big was on the cards and saw a letter with the instrumentation (typically it said that the title should be secret until about two minutes before the performance). I looked at the orchestration and thought that it was going to be another grandiose work, but if anything it felt like a smaller scale piece despite having a larger orchestra than *La Transfiguration*, *Des Canyons* or even *Saint François...*

G.B. Very much; there is very little fast music in it and it's much sparser. It's like Messiaen reduced to his essentials. But there is, especially in the two string movements, an authentically passionate expression. It's got a purity which is very touching.

C.D. What struck me about it was that, in a way, he had gone from one extreme to the other. Gone from being a master of overstatement to *Éclairs* which is wonderfully understated.

G.B. In many way it is, yes. Equally, he's a man in his eighties. It's unlikely that you will find the same degree of exuberance as before. Still the trombone and bass drum movement's got quite a punch to hit. And there is the big penultimate movement.

C.D. Do you think, given the surprising number of references - *Un sourire* obviously being written for the Mozart bicentenary and also the concerto, that Messiaen was referring to the spirit of Classical models?

G.B. You could have a theory that his music got more classical, but there's not much evidence of it. He hated neo-classicism, until the end. But I tell you something surprising. Amongst the sketches for the *Concert à 4*, which was an incomplete work, there was a sketch, or at least the title, for another movement which was 'Fugue with four subjects'. Did you know that?

C.D. I had heard about it, though the mind boggles.

G.B. Yes, this was an issue which he had almost not tackled for fifty or sixty years, integrated counterpoint, so it's very interesting to know what he would have done. Increasingly, including the last ten years, polyphony had become a matter of superimposition without any vertical control at all. Sometimes as in *Saint François* it's spectacular, other times I think it is less good, because you just get these lines superimposed on top of each other. What he would have done, who knows? I think it would have caused him quite a lot of trouble.

C.D. The concerto is a surprising work in many ways. There is the fact that it is a concerto when he has said that he didn't think that concertos had much use or that he was every likely to compose one. It is also by far the longest abstract work that he wrote.

G.B. Really? It's not particularly abstract. The *Vocalise*, the birdsong.

C.D. Abstract in that it does not have any specific titles or subtexts, religious or otherwise. It's music in which the listener makes their own interpretations.

G.B. I think the influence of the four soloists was very important. He'd promised Chung a piece. He'd promised Rostropovitch, he was very fond of Holliger. It's not his strongest work. Very touching, but he didn't have the time to complete it.

C.D. Would you say that the version we have been presented with is like Mahler's Ten, 'a performing version' of it?

G.B. Yes. As opposed to?

C.D. A complete work that just needed a bit of tweaking.

G.B. Well it isn't a complete work. The first movement was complete. The *Vocalise* was orchestrated by him. The *Cadenza* was also, I think, written by him, but the fourth movement had to be reconstructed considerably. Plus there was meant to be at least one more movement; so it's a fascinating document and a touching one, but neither is it complete or his finest piece. He was working on it almost until he couldn't write any more; Yvonne discovered it upstairs in his papers after his death - a tremendous shock

C.D. One impression I get is that the post-opera works, and particularly the last three works, are very much more personal works in that the message coming across is not Messiaen preaching as it were, but an absolutely personal viewpoint.

G.B. No, he was always completely personal and he never preached. He spoke of what inspired him with almost a child-like naivety. He had a message but he did not preach. Nothing could be further from the truth about him. No, I just hear a completely unquestioning continuity about him.

C.D. Harmonically, I've been looking mainly at *Éclairs*. I've studied *La Transfiguration* and *Saint François* and looking at the later music it seems to me that there is always this immense ambiguity, but he always seems to have an underlying tonality to the work. All of the chords could be interpreted as a combination of two tonal chords, or a lot of them can.

G.B. Most eight or nine note chords, as indeed all twelve note chords, can be interpreted as a combination of two diatonic scales. I challenge you to find a nine note chord that can't be seen in some way as a combination of two diatonic scales. There are some types of chord, particularly the transposed inversion ones, which do have a diatonic base - a pentatonic one in fact. In consequence, the notes above are diatonic (because when you deduct the pentatonic from the total chromatic, the residue is automatically a diatonic scale).

He was very content with his harmonic system and by the sixties almost nothing changed except the integration of older material. There are a few new harmonic discoveries in the *Éclairs* and some very touching nostalgic returns to his *Poèmes pour Mi* style. Some of the harmonies of the final movement are not so easily classified, at least to my ears - I haven't seen the score - as some Messiaen. But I

wouldn't see any particular diatonic associations within his latest pieces. Off the top of my head I think there are more diatonic things in *Saint François* and *Des canyons*; there, the rare white-note passages have a very strong structural and emotional significance.

C.D. One other connection which I would like to suggest is that in the second movement, the *Constellation du Sagittaire* movement, with the...

G.B. ...[sings 'Boris' motif as found in *Éclairs*]...

C.D. That's the one. The delicate bell chimes in that immediately reminded me of a piece that I had heard only once, in the Festival Hall in 89, the very latest version of *Visage Nuptial* and particularly the section with the spatially separated crotales.

G.B. Oh yes, Messiaen liked that piece a lot. He said to me that very evening 'It's the piece of Boulez which I prefer'. It's true. How many sets of bells are there in *Éclairs*? Is it two or three?

C.D. Three.

G.B. Yes he was quite worried about whether they would be able to find them in New York, thought he was being quite extravagant. Maybe Boulez gets that tintinabulation from Messiaen. *Turangalîla* and the *Trois petites liturgies* are strongly gamelan influenced. There's no doubt that Boulez had an influence on Messiaen, but that goes back to the forties, fifties and early sixties and then their ways parted. You could say that the later Boulez has a tangential influence from early Messiaen in that it's more luxuriant, in its harmony and orchestration - I wouldn't over-stretch that. The nearest work to Messiaen of Boulez is *Rituel* with its immensely static block structure and its super-imposed heterophonies, chorales and gongs. The colour of it is pure Boulez but its conception is rather Messiaen-like, despite a completely different technical approach.

C.D. Musicologists have an occupational disease of dividing composer's lives into periods...

G.B. ...but there are periods there.

C.D. How do you see Messiaen's life as an overview.

G.B. He saw it in periods. He was aware of that. Compositional crises lead to changes in direction; they are very painful things to go through, but, coming out the other side, very profitable. So, we have the early period when he's learning his trade and he doesn't know exactly where he's going. The *Préludes*, the *Fantaisie Burlesque*, some joke pieces. There's intimations of the real Messiaen there, particularly *Banquet céleste*. Then you get to the pre-war works which share a special poignancy and tenderness - *Poèmes pour Mi*, *Chants de terre et de ciel*, *La Nativité*. I

have a particular affection for those pieces. Then come the ecstatic war and post-war pieces - suddenly immense inspiration. Then equally a vast crisis. A barren period, leading to a startling aesthetic change and the more abstract and austere 50s pieces, of which the exuberance of *Oiseaux exotiques* is something of an exception. And that goes all the way to *Sept Haïkai*, I think. And then in the middle of the sixties, another crisis in some way, after which Messiaen simply pursued a completely idiosyncratic path in a series of monumental works which integrated all of his previous technical discoveries, beginning with the marvellous *La Transfiguration*. So it's basically four periods. Maybe the first two can go together.

C.D. With the crisis in the mid-sixties.

G.B. That's me guessing. I don't know of a crisis then. But Parisian political radicalism and the student riots disturbed him a lot. Certainly Sixties Paris, Sartre and Existentialism were very foreign to him. I think he felt very out of water.

C.D. Do you think that the Second Vatican council would have been compounding that, posing questions about the very heart of his faith?

G.B. When was this?

C.D. The first proclamations came out in 1963-64 and one of the very first ones was that the vernacular would take over from latin in the Mass, and hence there was a threat to plainchant.

G.B. He would have been against that.

C.D. It strikes me that suddenly there is the latin title of *Et exspecto* and then *La Transfiguration* which is all in latin, with lots of Aquinas.

G.B. It's a very interesting avenue of thought. His attitude to contemporary religious thought has not really occupied me, but he certainly read a lot of theology. As for his biggest 60s work, *La Transfiguration*, its religious purpose may have been rooted in all sorts of hidden pressures. I am sure he was accused of being reactionary for that piece with all its unadorned triads and its simplicity. But he had a particular affection for it, as I do.

C.D. Yes, I have to admit that I came to it not knowing it particularly well and being fairly unenthusiastic about it and ended up with the opinion that it is his most important religious work.

G.B. You need time to get to know it. It is a piece which shows itself slowly and you have to get accustomed to its immensely leisurely pace.

C.D. Peter [Hill] has commented that Messiaen was remarkably impervious to criticism...

G.B. ...Not at all. That's not entirely true...

C.D. It strikes me that after *Trois petites liturgies*, for which he got attacked from all sides...

G.B. He didn't get attacked from all sides. It was a unanimous, triumphant success from the public. The post-war, *Les six* favouring journalists went for him. Went for the text, went for the lushness of it, went for the ecstatic atmosphere. But at that point, when he had so many devoted pupils and his name was moving quickly across the world, he told me it simply augmented his fame and did him no harm. He was very sure what he wanted, of course, and impervious in a way, but he was not insensitive to criticism.

C.D. Nevertheless, after that there was no large overtly religious work for the concert hall for some time, until *Couleurs*.

G.B. Well there is the *Messe de la Pentecôte* and he would say that *Réveil des oiseaux* and *Oiseaux exotiques* are religious works. Even so, there was a break, a crisis in every aspect of his life in the 50s. A huge questioning of everything musical - a lot of things previously essential had to be sacrificed. It's very interesting to see how a man of such generous and lyrical musical instincts coped in the more austere, positivist era of the fifties. A deeply experimental, questioning period. So it is fascinating to see how he maintains his personality and yet fits in. That's why he went to birdsong. In the last couple of years of his life, he told me how birdsong had been his refuge and his saviour in the 50s - at a time when he felt obliged to evolve a new melodic style. And not just for decoration - it was to prove the melodic core of his new idiom. Its non-humanistic essence is the crucial thing. Outside the will, beyond taste. Outside tradition, and yet fantastically melodic. He spent four or five days of ecstatic revelation at some point in the early fifties with an ornithologist friend, staying in a forest house, somewhere in spring, in which he had the birds explained to him by a real expert. He listened early in the morning, day after day; from that experience comes *Réveil des oiseaux*, a very important piece. I believe it's dedicated to the memory of that very same friend, Jacques Delamain.

C.D. In some ways the birdsong is the least understood aspect of Messiaen because people just discuss what they conventionally understand as music and say 'oh and there is also some birdsong'?

G.B. Imagine what it must have felt like in the fifties with this man making orchestral pieces entirely out of birdsong. They must have thought 'why doesn't he just write music himself?'. And it is indeed a very curious thing to observe someone discovering their music uniquely from *outside*. He would, however, explain that his birds were idealized, transformed, re-tuned, harmonised, notated - indeed distorted in myriad ways, to produce the avian music to which his inspiration aspired. Here he found the rhythms, the timbres and the lines that appealed to him, inspired by an

outside source. Inspired by the plumage, the light, the landscape, everything which he either imagined or saw. As much of Darmstadt statistical constructivism is derived from outside the will, so is birdsong. The systems of thought are, in some ways, related. And I am sure that in future centuries people will be moved by such a poetic image from a systematic time. The image of a man turning to nature, in an entirely non-sentimental way, to find solace and inspiration - and thus strongly opposing the general path of his time

C.D. The forties and fifties were also a period of personal crisis...

G.B. ...Very much indeed. Very, very much.

C.D. Claire Delbos becoming very ill...

G.B. ...In 1948-49. That's when she became ill.

C.D. And then having to bring up a teenager.

G.B. He was not a very practical man.

C.D. What was Messiaen's relationship with his son later on in life?

G.B. All right, but not particularly close. It is very difficult to be the son of a great composer. It was the same with Stravinsky.

C.D. Also his brother, Alain. I know that he wrote one or two things, poems and books.

G.B. It's also difficult to be the brother of a great composer, especially if you want to be an artist yourself.

C.D. On a practical level, is Alain still alive?

G.B. No. One of the last times I saw Messiaen, he had described sadly how he had eventually had to go into an old peoples' home and he had died.

C.D. Do you know anything about Messiaen's relationship with his father?

G.B. I don't really. It was not the relationship he had with his mother, which was obviously fantastically close. The spiritual world of hers matched almost entirely his, I think. I don't know whether the father understood the son's genius. I don't really think he did, but his mother definitely knew what she had produced, certainly. When she died, when he was not even twenty-one, I think that was the most terrible thing for him. The tragic pieces from his early twenties come from that.

C.D. Another thing that has always puzzled me slightly is how Messiaen's faith developed on a practical level. He says 'I was born a believer', but in the Claude Samuel books he dodges the issues of when he first went to church and what his parents' opinions of his faith were.

G.B. I don't think they were very religious. Isn't that right?

C.D. He said they weren't believers, basically.

G.B. Oh really! That's even more curious, isn't it. But he must have had contact with someone who was intensely religious mustn't he? I think the death of his mother increased the need to turn to his faith, enormously, as did being a prisoner of war.

C.D. Another thing I heard recently was that *Turangalîla*, when he composed that, he originally had just four movements.

G.B. Four movement symphony, he intended - initially there was only movements 1, 2, 4 and 10, I believe. The rest were added in a highly unpredictable order (the last being the fifth). There was a partial performance of three of the movements in about 1947 at the Théâtre des Champs d'Élysées one Sunday morning, a public rehearsal; it was there that the young Boulez reacted to the piece with such scorn.

But the large-scale form of his works was never predictable. He had been asked to write an opera before the war. I think *Poèmes pour Mi* resulted. He never did what he expected or what other people wanted. Equally, the *Transfiguration* was supposed to be a cello concerto for Rostropovitch.

C.D. Somewhere, I think it is in Grove, there is a horn solo listed in about 1970.

G.B. Yes there is. A memorial to the Canadian composer Jean-Pierre Guezec; that piece was then included in *Canyons* as its sixth movement. It would be interesting to hear the quarter-tone Onde martenot pieces before the war - and there are one or two other remaining unpublished works, particularly from early in his career.

C.D. Did he ever divulge how he got on with the various American composers that he met in Tanglewood, Copland or Bernstein?

G.B. No, we didn't talk about that. I mentioned Messiaen to Copland. I met him once, for two minutes. It was his eightieth birthday concert and said I was his student and he responded warmly. So I think they must have got on.

C.D. It's always puzzled me why Bernstein did the première of *Turangalîla* and then...

G.B. He didn't like it. He did a very good job, but he did not like it. Sadly. *West Side Story* - the influence of *Turangalîla* is worth studying! Some of that bitonal and octatonic harmony.

C.D. Messiaen always said that he didn't like jazz.

G.B. He really didn't like jazz. I know it's strange, isn't it, when you hear some of those harmonies. If you want to understand Messiaen, you've got to understand what Paris was like in the twenties and early thirties. It's at that point when you're learning your craft as a young composer and everything is possible - you're trying to define yourself at that period, both by what you like and what you are against. I think that the young Messiaen was against a lot of things. His dislike of syncopation, that's a complete reaction to *Les six* and neo-classical Stravinsky. And Messiaen going against jazz and syncopation was not merely a technical decision; it was a stand against a whole aesthetic. It would have been an ethical thing as well, as I'm not sure that one of the strongest connotations in jazz, at least in his eyes, was pure religiosity.

C.D. I know he didn't think much of the music of Poulenc.

G.B. No he didn't really, though their relationship was cordial. He had time for some Milhaud. He was very impressed as a teenager with *L'homme et son désir* and *Les Choéphores*. He was even influenced. The percussion writing you find in *Turangalîla* (or Villa-Lobos, even Varèse) goes back to what Milhaud was doing around 1920.

C.D. The Villa-Lobos connection has been mentioned.

G.B. They got on very well, and I think he was very impressed by his orchestration. And if you listen to *Choros 8*, you can see just why: the multi-coloured orchestration, plus the almost uncontrolled heterophony. All these layers superimposed, going along their own rails: that had an impact. Messiaen did it better and he did it in a more radical way. Even so, quite a lot really comes from Villa Lobos.

C.D. Now all the things Messiaen says about his own music - the *Technique*, the *Traité*, all the prefaces - in so many ways it's immensely helpful, but the information only goes so far, and sometimes it almost seems to be deliberately giving the impression of giving a lot of information but actually saying very little.

G.B. That's a very interesting thing to follow. He did write a lot about his music and created antagonism against his music through doing so. Why did he do it? What did he *not* say? He gives the impression of almost saying everything, but of course he doesn't.

C.D. Do you have any feelings, or hunches about that yourself? The two possibilities that immediately spring to mind - which could both be true - one is that sometimes he is deliberately trying to obscure the issue because of a liking for mystery...

G.B. No, no, I don't think that was true. He didn't like mystery. I don't think so. No, he wanted to be understood on his own terms. He was a composer who had a very, very original and idiosyncratic way of doing things and he wanted them to be understood. He felt impelled to explain his birdsong and his modes, and he wanted

people to know how complex and craftsmanlike his technique was. He was a wise and profoundly intelligent man, but he was also a simple man. That was his great gift. Throughout a very difficult period he remained entirely himself, and, above all, naive - an attribute he encouraged in his pupils.

C.D. Do you think it is possible that some of what he doesn't say can be explained by the fact that it was too obvious for him?

G.B. He says some quite obvious things. It's not a music of complex psychology, it's not music of complex continuity, metamorphosis. It is music of immediate impact, and a resplendent synthesis. But there's plenty he doesn't say. Amongst the most interesting aspects of what he doesn't discuss is the pure musicality of it. Behind the simple, grand public utterances, there's the choice of the individual notes. The taste and refinement that goes into the choice of a succession of harmonies, a succession of notes within a line. Which is that of a great musician. If you knew him or attended his classes, you began to get intimations of how that process went.

C.D. What intimations did he give of his composing process?

G.B. Out in the forest, sketchbook in hand. Reading, studying other music, syphoning off anything that interested him. Putting them into catalogues for when he wanted to compose. He composed quite fast. He did so much preparatory work, that a lot of the process of composition was simplified. He composed mainly during the summer, working very hard, I think though he often sketched when he had spare time during the year. Short score, followed by, I think, draft full score, followed by tidy full score. Exactly how much sketching went in, I don't know. Much less than some composers. He said to me he enjoyed composing. He was happy when he was composing. It can't have been the case always, but I think mostly he was. It is such a very large output that I'm not at all surprised at that. Very disciplined, I imagine, in his working hours. He would always take a siesta in the afternoon.

C.D. Finally, what do you think in years to come will be seen as Messiaen's legacy or influence on music, direct or indirect?

G.B. Who knows, but in numerous directions he's had a profound and irreversible impact on twentieth century musical thought. In certain regions, like integration of language, continuity and the conception of polyphony, which were the great strengths of the Second Viennese School, his impact has not been strong. However, by evolving a new way of looking at harmony he has exerted a considerable influence. Of course, his rhythmical research had enormous ramifications for Boulez and Stockhausen, through to Ligeti, through to the Manchester School here and beyond. There's almost no post-war twentieth century music which hasn't, in some way, been influenced by those thoughts. And as a teacher, of course, his impact has been very, very large. Time will tell. I am certain that his voice will remain one of the strongest of the twentieth century. He's like Mussorgsky. A completely individual voice, yet useful in influencing a large number of other people, but really exceptionally original. Doing things no-one else does, in a way no-one else does and, paradoxically, with a vast audience, a vast ability to communicate.

Appendix five

Interview with Paul Crossley

London: 4 September 1996

C.D. Could you tell me when you first came into contact with Messiaen?

P.C. When I first came into contact with it? At the very first concert I ever went to in my life, which was an organ recital by Noel Rawsthorne, who was the organist of Liverpool Cathedral in those days. It was actually at Leeds Parish church doing *La Nativité du Seigneur*. I was about thirteen, I think, and [I] immediately got the music, I used to play the organ too, and that was it. I'd never heard any Messiaen at all up to that point. And there wouldn't have been much chance. Very shortly afterwards I remember hearing John Ogdon [who] did a complete *Vingt regards* on the BBC. But performances were few and far between, and I think there were no records in those days at all. I think there were perhaps some organ records. This would be 1957. I don't think there was anything quite honestly on record, so one just heard it in bits and bats. By the time I got to university I think there was that old record of *Turangalila* with Maurice Le Roux, on Véga records I think (which I used to have for a long time), had come out. So it was just the things I played. It was the piano and organ stuff for a long time, and nothing else.

C.D. How was Messiaen regarded by teachers or anyone in the musical world?

P.C. It wasn't known and when I made my professional debut in London, which was in 1973 I did the three sonatas of Michael Tippett, the third one being the first London performance, and the rest was Messiaen. I was heavily dissuaded from doing this, I mean Tippett they had heard of, because this was in England, but Messiaen was completely unknown. So I was actively asked not to do it. I did it nevertheless, and it was a huge success, but nobody was playing it. There was somebody, a phenomenon like John Ogdon, came and did *Vingt regards* on the radio. It wasn't repertoire at all. The first time professionally I played *Turangalila*, I didn't then play it again for another ten years. Now I guess I do it in a couple of places virtually every season, somewhere or other. It's now repertoire. But that was the reason. You have to wait for new generations of musicians to whom this becomes mother's milk before it gets done. There must have been performances because I remember that photo in one of the books I've got where it's when he went to Japan with Yvonne (it was actually their honeymoon because that was when they were able to get married, I think it was in '62, it was just before *Sept Haïkai* came out) and one of the things she was doing there was the hundredth performance of *Turangalila*. Now that's not bad between 1948 and 1962 if you think about it. Oddly enough a CD just has come out of what must have been about the sixth performance with Hans Rosbaud, which I was very interested to hear. Even Ginette Martenot playing. It's very, very good. You thought, would they have got a completely rudimentary idea of this piece and actually you get a perfectly good idea of it. And there was the famous performance that was here sometime in the

fifties of *Turangalila*, Walther Goehr did it. It was the thing that set Harry [Birtwistle] and Max[well Davies] and all that generation off. They thought it was just the most extraordinary thing they'd heard. But there wasn't much around.

C.D. Can you tell me when you first came into contact with Messiaen himself?

P.C. It's a fairy story. I was still at university and there used to be something called the English Bach Festival run by Lina Lalandi, which started off doing mainly Bach in Oxford. And then it became a festival which was in Oxford and London. And then she started doing a modern figure as well as Bach and it so happened that in my last year at Oxford they decided to do Messiaen. All the musicians, they were all French musicians, came to Oxford to do this thing. It was actually the first time I'd heard lots of the stuff in any form at all. They by accident overheard me playing the piano one day and asked me what I was doing and asked would I come to Paris to study with them, so that was that. So that's how I met them personally. And then because I was helping out, I could speak a bit of French - I was helping out Lina Lalandi, just as a sort of helper - so [I] went around and [would] interpret for them most of the time or even turn pages for them when they were doing *Visions de l'Amen* and that sort of thing. I got to know them quite well, and it was all in one go. That was when I first heard things like *Turangalila*, *Chronochromie*, I hadn't heard an orchestral piece at all.

C.D. How long did you spend in Paris?

P.C. I actually lived there for a year and then commuted back and forth for another year in 67-68. It was during all the famous events when they were tearing up the street and so on.

C.D. Messiaen is famous, in his works, for remaining unaffected by terrestrial events (with the exception of *Chant des déportés*). How did he react to the events in 1968?

P.C. He was horrified by it, because as opposed to his music he was terribly conservative. Conservative catholic gentleman. So he was horrified by it all. Thought it was going to be the end of civilisation as we know it. He didn't take part in it or didn't say anything, but he was horrified by the idea of it.

C.D. At the time you were there he would have been working on *Transfiguration*. Did you ever get any idea of how he felt about the revolution almost in his own world - the Catholic church - which had happened a few years before with Vatican II?

P.C. I'm sure he would regret that. They (I say they because Yvonne was the same) were about as traditionalist as it comes. They got terribly upset when Saint François was done at Salzburg for instance. They really do want plastic wings on the back of the Angel otherwise it's not an angel so the loss of the latin would be horrifying. I'm sure he would also have completely agreed with this present Pope's reinstatement of

the Virgin Mary as being virginal for ever and ever and ever. The entire paraphernalia of it I think they believed in lock stock and barrel and thought that it was quite awful to change any of it. Nobody in life could have been less revolutionary.

C.D. That must have placed him in quite a quandary as he wouldn't have wanted to disobey the Pope but at the same time the Pope was throwing out much of what he held dear.

P.C. Oh, he'd be obedient. He'd do what the Pope said. It's funny that he never squared that, in that he used to get into terrible trouble with the authorities who thought that his music was not quite the sort of thing that ought to be played in a Catholic church. But these things were sacrosanct. I think that's one of the reasons that he never, of course, set any part of the liturgy at all. Here is this extraordinary Catholic composer, but I think to him the liturgy was something that had to be left alone.

C.D. In a work like *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, which is entirely devoted to the eucharist, the transsubstantiation movement is birdsong and mechanical structures. Messiaen also has a prayer before communion and a prayer after communion but no movement actually called communion. Do you think he shyed away from composing anything specific on the very big issues?

P.C. I think it must be because it's so patent. Apart from that little motet, *O sacrum convivium!*, there's nothing. There's absolutely nothing. There's no mass, there's no *Stabat mater*, no *Tenebrae* or anything like that. None of it. Not even the slightest bit. So I think that was a very specific gesture.

C.D. When you were in Paris, you studied piano with Loriod. Were you studying with Messiaen?

P.C. No. I just used to go and sit in on his classes from time to time just to see what they were like.

C.D. What were they like?

P.C. Well, they were terribly interesting. What was always so staggering apart from anything else was the wealth of things that he could illustrate from memory at the piano. He played very well, I might add. So it was always this wonderful contact with music all the time. All sorts of music as well.

C.D. What kinds of subjects was he covering when you sat in on the classes?

P.C. Curiously enough, I can hardly remember. One thing was *La mer*. He played large chunks of *La mer* on the piano. I can't remember. It's funny. I know what some of his things were, because he always used to do a different thing every year. He must have been doing orchestral pieces I would have thought that year. But occasionally he did piano concertos, opera, it was always something different so that he wouldn't get tired. I think it must have been orchestral pieces in the year I was there. The one I remember most vividly, as I say is this one on *La mer*.

C.D. With your own performances of his works, what kind of tips did both Messiaen and Loriod give you?

P.C. I used to have my lessons in their apartment so in fact he used to sit-in on a lot of lessons. I could almost say that I was equally taught the piano by him as well as by her because he always used to sit-in. What's terribly interesting is, I remember doing a lot of Debussy *Préludes* at one point and he brought in his copy. The old Durand edition used to have very wide margins at the side. Very wide margins, it was nearly half the page. All of it was covered with not an analysis but a poetic programme that he had written to all these pieces. There's Debussy who makes sure to put his titles at the end so that they might only be glimmers of suggestions, but Messiaen has actually elaborated them into a fantastic sort of poetic programme. By each piece there is a text.

C.D. It could perhaps be released as an edition of the *PrÉludes*.

P.C. It would be very interesting. What he would have to say was actually much more often to do with the musical feeling, of the poetic content. This was the same with his own stuff, rather than sheer technical exactitude or something. He could do that kind of thing. Which as you say is much the way he plays.¹ His comments about his tempi were always interesting. He said often his fast ones were faster than he had intended. He said 'If in doubt, play slower'. That got ridiculous towards the end because he started tampering with them, so it's interesting that half the tempi of *Turangalila* were changed when the score was re-printed. Not necessarily for the better in my opinion.

C.D. Did you just study the solo piano works?

P.C. The only orchestral one I did with them was *Sept Haïkai*, because we had to do it for the competition, so I didn't study the other ones at all.

C.D. Apart from the tempi, what was it that Messiaen would want from a performance?

P.C. He was terribly fussy about dynamics and textures and so on, because in these vertical complexes there were incredible balances which had to be worked out. Particularly on a solo instrument. That he was certainly very keen about, and so was she [Loriod].

C.D. During the seventies, Messiaen's stock was rising and performances of his works were becoming more frequent. During this period he composed what Paul Griffiths refers to as *Trois Grandes liturgies - Transfiguration, Des canyons* and the opera.

P.C. Which are the masterpieces.

C.D. One review I came across of *Des canyons*, by Nicholas Kenyon, says "What on earth was Messiaen up to? Everything seems to be a bigger extrapolation of previous ideas than previous one. Was that a general perception? How were the new works being received?"

P.C. It's funny. I wish I could hear a tape of it, because I remember hearing *Canyons* the first time in London, which was Boulez, and having almost the same impression. That I thought it was just a rehash of the earlier stuff but not as good. But I wonder if that was a terribly good performance. Boulez is notoriously unsympathetic of a lot to do with Messiaen in a sense and I wonder how actually sheerly good or bad it was. I'd like to hear that now, because the next time I heard it, I was actually doing it and it's always seemed marvellous to me. You might say some of it you might call it a rehash. Is the long slow movement a rehash of movement six of *Turangalila*. In one way it is the same kind of idea, but it's much better in my opinion. It's much more varied. The sixth movement of *Turangalila* goes on about two stanzas too much for my liking. The sound is so unusual and so unvaried in that [Des canyons] so he had a right to do it again. He was always in one way trying to write his string adagio which he finally did in *Éclairs*, I think. It's a damn good movement too. He, as it were, reconstituted all sorts of things from himself. There are all sorts of melodic shapes. I think of one my favourites is one thing the cello plays in *Transfiguration* which is actually a tune, I don't know whether you've researched that, it's the tune of the yellow Irises in *La rouserolle effarvate*, that's where it was. I'll play it for you. It's one of the nicest things the cello plays. I think he had difficulty finding real melodic curves. It's supposed to be the yellow Iris at eight o'clock in the morning. [plays it at the piano] It's one of the best cello bits in *Transfiguration*. It's funny because things are nothing if not repeated in Messiaen, but I don't think that happens anywhere else even in that piece. I think actually finding fresh melodic material, I think that's one of the reasons for the birds, they were ready-made melodic material, but ready-made material without any sentimental quality attached to them. So that when it came to something with real feeling, like that, (we know how he took his melodic shapes from Mussorgsky and Grieg and that sort of thing, and also the modes suggest it in themselves) but that's a sort of completely invented melody. He only used it once then and it really is a very good one. And there are probably more if you really went through everything. So the idea of things getting repeated, well, they just did, but there not the same. Once I got to know *Canyons*, it seems to me remarkably original. Alright, we've got various movements with the old mozaic form, which he was doing for years and years and years, but all the material is different. The sheer sound of it is different. I think it's one of the most extraordinary things about Messiaen, that the actually assembly of instruments of a work is always unique. The choice of instruments is part of the composition before you even write any of it. He never wrote for the same forces twice.

C.D. One of the most difficult things about analysing Messiaen is that the timbre has to be taken into account when analysing...

P.C. Absolutely.

C.D. It makes it very difficult to do that without simply listing the instruments involved. Listening to the piece must be the first step.

P.C. Absolutely. It's the first thing that ever struck me about his music. The first time I heard anything that wasn't an organ or a piano piece, was that I had never heard anything that sounded like that. It was the sheer sound. I couldn't remember any of the details much afterwards, it was just the sound. That introductory movement of *Turangalila*, when you get into the middle section, it's such an extraordinary sound. I'd never heard anything that sounds like that before. But every piece sounds different.

C.D. Moving onto the opera. I first heard that at the Festival Hall production and, having heard many other pieces during the same festival, what struck me in retrospect was that there were quite a number of moments in *Saint François*, particularly the seventh tableau, which sound completely unlike anything else in Messiaen.

P.C. It's also by far the best tableau in the piece I think. It's absolutely fantastic.

C.D. Do you think that Messiaen felt that was going to be his last work?

P.C. He definitely did. He got absolutely terrified. He was terrified of the idea of dying, for which his Catholic faith didn't prepare him at all, strangely enough. He almost made himself ill by thinking he wasn't going to get through it. Even when he'd written the notes - he was one of these people who orchestrated after writing the notes - he was terrified that when he'd got all the notes down, he wasn't going to have time to finish orchestrating it. He went on for quite some time afterwards. He certainly thought it was going to be his swansong. And certainly thought it was going to be his Magnum Opus. It was supposed to stand for everything so that has to be an all-inclusive work. But as you say, it's full of things that actually aren't anywhere else. You say you're now doing all the music after that, all of which I think is dead boring other than *Éclairs* - and I think it's dead boring because it has absolutely nothing new at all and it's all a mannered rather poor version of what went before.

He always had material for this. I remember when I was a student he said "I could write two more complete *Catalogue d'Oiseaux*" To which I said "I hope you won't. I think one is enough, because you'll simply be repeating yourself over and over again." So I think the little bird sketches - they're pretty - but any movement in *Catalogue d'Oiseaux* makes them look... well I call it reproduction Messiaen, like reproduction furniture, all the late stuff. I had a bit of time for *Un sourire*, and that's all. The *Concert à quatre* is one of the great disasters of all time. That should never have been allowed to see the light of day. *Éclairs* I think is fantastic, and that really is. When he realized he wasn't going to die, I think he got a kind of second wind and wanted to do one more big piece and decided, as he wasn't going to be around to argue the details, there was no reason why he couldn't have ten flutes and ten clarinets and so on, because they'd either perform this after he was dead or not.

C.D. What has struck me about the very final works, namely *Un sourire* and *Éclairs*, is that there is a new sound-world. There is a slightly fresher feel to it. It's almost, without being neo-classical or pastiche, a slightly more classical, restrained approach. Would you agree with that?

P.C. I think so, but I don't know whether that's a deliberate gesture or whether he'd run out of the real knack of inventing fantastic chords, which of course he did. He used to collect chords in a book. He really did love the idea of inventing one chord after another. If anybody who had never heard any Messiaen, heard *Éclairs* for the first time, that's a fantastic compendium of Messiaen techniques. It works. The sound is going to be different with the ten flutes and ten clarinets, but there's nothing that he didn't do in any of the earlier pieces, except that the string movement would have been an organ piece in the past, or the last movement of *l'Ascension* - that's the world it comes from. The chords in that are often quite simple, dominant sevenths and so on. Actually he used them even in *Saint François*. There are suddenly a lot of plain major and minor chords which were hardly ever there in the past. Used almost in their old-fashioned way.

C.D. In the slow string movements of *Turangalîla* and *Des canyons*, there is always some kind of decoration, usually birdsong, which seems designed to prevent them becoming too sweet. Do you think that with *Éclairs* it was the case that Messiaen decided to wear his heart completely on his sleeve?

P.C. Well I think there was, but I also think that one of the things that's remarkable about it - one of the things I like about it, that makes it sound fresh - is, for once, at last, the damn courage not to use this blasted piano everywhere. Either joining the material together, which is what it does half the time, or... you can just about wear the kind of piano writing in *Canyons* because it has such a fantastic raw energy to it, but that immense cluster harmony half the time, never less than eight note chords, can be very wearing after a while. Generally from forte to fortissimo level. I think something like the mocking bird movement works fantastically in *Canyons* simply because of the two movements it's inbetween. I don't think you'd ever extrapolate it and play it as a solo piece, though it does have a fantastic, aggressive energy. It's quite insane, I think. I think what make both *Sourire* and *Éclairs* particularly fresh in sound is not having the piano and not having the kind of reinforced percussion sound that often comes with this piano writing - you find it's being doubled in some kind of way. I think that's one of the most interesting changes in the sound. Then you have the slow movement which doesn't have a piano. It's a wonderful mixture of a very mature composer doing the last movement of *l'Ascension* and some of the tender moments in *Vingt regards* and even the organ thing. You think of the best passages in something like *Corps glorieux* or something. There's a marvellous adagio in that which I think is gorgeous, I think.

C.D. When I first heard *Éclairs*, what struck me was that, with this vast orchestra of 128 it feels like it is on a far intimate and smaller scale than *Des canyons* with only 38 players.

P.C. It isn't monumental in that kind of way, apart from the very opening which does the *Et exspecto* thing. There's a bit of everything, although, what's that sweet movement?

C.D. The seventh one? *And God will wipe away the tears from their eyes?*

P.C. Yes that's the one. That's new.

C.D. Now the *Concerto*...

P.C. Oh, I think it's just awful beyond compare. Every single note in it. And that *Vocalise*, it's just silly doing that. There's no point in doing that at that stage in your life. I have nothing to say about that. It seems to me an unmitigated disaster that piece.

C.D. What do you think possessed Messiaen to write it?

P.C. I think he was just getting terribly ill by then. That sounds to me like somebody, let's face it, really raking the bottom of the bottom drawer. And it doesn't work in its context at all.

C.D. I went to the première at the Bastille and one thing that did strike me, which may have been more to do with the soloists - Rostropovitch, Holliger and Catherine Cantin - in the cadenza section where they were each doing their birdsongs, it struck me as one of his most successful passages of birdsong writing...

P.C. Really?

C.D. Because each soloist was more or less in their own tempo and yet interacting with each other. That was something which was lost at the British première, which I thought was performed pretty abysmally, because there was no characterization by the soloists.

P.C. I don't know. If you want to hear that kind of thing, I think that's best done in the bits where that does happen in *Réveil des oiseaux*. You do hear individual instruments with different timbres doing individual birds. It often gets cluttered, but some of the best bits in there are when that's happening. I can't agree with you. I think the material is awful, the form is awful, the sound is awful so I couldn't actually believe it. And the last movement - well that's not even thinkable about, I don't think. But I don't think that's really by him. I think that's Madame, and George said he helped to do something. I told him he should be ashamed about it.

What else is there? There's an organ piece isn't there?

C.D. *Livre du Saint Sacrement.*

P.C. That's the other big piece really, isn't it? I don't know it terribly well, I have to say.

C.D. That struck me as being a summation for the organ works in the way that *Saint François* was for everything else?

P.C. Yes. The trouble is that when one says a summation of the organ works, the first ones are so good. They're the masterpieces, I think. I think *Corps glorieux* and *La Nativité* are masterpieces. I think they're amongst his top works. I can't get on with *Livre d'orgue*, but I can't get on with most of the music of that period, but nor could he. He knew he'd got himself down the wrong road altogether. It's just because all the pupils were nattering him and so on. And he couldn't go on writing *Turangalila* forever, but he had to find a way that wasn't their way. I don't think he cared for any of it, actually. I like one, I can't remember whether it's *Ile de feu I* or *Ile de feu II*, in which there are semiquavers going like mad in the middle, that's really good. And I quite like *Neumes rythmiques*, but I have to go from *Cinq rechants* to *Réveil des oiseaux* before I start to like anything again.

1 Referring to a conversation about Messiaen's own recordings before the interview began.

Appendix six

Letters

- I. Letter from Olivier Messiaen to Zubin Mehta
- II. Letter from Olivier Messiaen to Jane Williams (overleaf)

Le 2 Août 1987

au Maître ZUBIN MEHTA
 New York Philharmonic- Avery Fisher Hall
 - Broadway at 65 th Street- NEW YORK
 N.Y. 10023 U.S.A.

Mon cher Maître et Ami,

J'ai bien reçu votre lettre . Je suis très touché que vous ayiez pensé à moi pour une commande: J'accepte avec plaisir d'écrire une oeuvre de grand orchestre pour le New York Philharmonic, qui serait dirigée par vous, dans la saison 1992-93, à l'occasion du 150e anniversaire de l'orchestre.

Je vais bientôt avoir 79 ans, et je dois déjà réaliser deux autres commandes pour grand orchestre , sans parler de mes voyages incessants pour concerts à l'étranger. Je me porte très bien et j'espère que je serai encore en bonne santé pour 1992-93. De toutes façons, j'essaierai d'écrire une oeuvre digne de vous et de l'orchestre, mais il m'est impossible de vous dire si longtemps à l'avance quelle en sera la durée et la composition instrumentale. Nous devons donc, un peu plus tard, décider des détails matériels de la commande.

En tout cas, vous pouvez compter sur moi, c'est oui !

Ma femme se joint à moi pour vous dire toute notre admiration et nos bonnes amitiés.

Olivier Messiaen

OLIVIER MESSIAEN
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75018 PARIS
TEL 4627-00-34

RECEIVED 18 MAR 1991

Paris, le 14 Mars 1991

à Madame JANE WILLIAMS
Promotions Manager- United Music Publishers
LTD - 42 Rivington Street- LONDON EC2A 3EN

Chère Madame,

Jean Leduc m'a transmis votre lettre. Je réponds à toutes vos questions.

Ma nouvelle oeuvre d'orchestre, commandée par l'Orchestre Philharmonique de New York, doit être dirigée par Zubin Mehta, avec l'Orchestre Philharmonique de New York, en création mondiale, à New York, les 5,6,7 novembre 1992.

Le titre doit être tenu secret jusqu'en novembre 1992.

L'orchestre est très grand: vous trouverez ci-jointe la nomenclature de tous les instruments.

Il y a 11 pièces. L'oeuvre totale doit durer (très approximativement) environ une heure 1/4 (peut être un peu plus).

Vous remarquerez dans l'instrumentation:

- 1) la présence de 3 jeux de cloches-tybes-
- 2) 10 flûtes et 10 clarinettes se divisant comme suit:
3 piccolos, 6 flûtes, 1 flûte en sol-
2 petites clarinettes en mi bémol, 6 clarinettes en si bémol,
clarinette basse en si bémol, clarinette contrebasse en si bémol.

Le reste de l'orchestre, quoique très important, ne comporte pas d'instrument extraordinaire (sauf l'Éoliphone, que l'on trouve partout).

Zubin Mehta et l'Orchestre Philharmonique de New York ont l'exclusivité pendant 1 an aux USA. La Première audition en Angleterre a été promise par moi-même à Kent Nagano et au London Symphony Orchestra, pour 1993.

J'aurai 85 ans le 10 décembre 1993. Mais Kent Nagano peut diriger l'oeuvre dès novembre 1993.

L'oeuvre appartient à la maison Leduc, qui fait actuellement copier le matériel d'orchestre.

Restant à votre disposition pour tous autres renseignements, je vous prie de croire, chère Madame, à tous mes sentiments bien reconnaissants et profondément dévoués.

Olivier Messiaen

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Éclairs sur l'au-delà...

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3. Sydney Symphony Orchestra - David Porcelijn (cond.).
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4. Orchestre National de la Radio Polonaise Katowice - Antoni Wit (cond.).
JADE JAD C 099
Live performance from 'Autumn in Warsaw' festival, 23 September 1993.

Livre du Saint Sacrement

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|----------------------|------------------|----------------|-----------|
| 1. Jennifer Bate | Unicorn-Kanchana | DKPCD 9067/8 | (2 discs) |
| 2. Hans-Ola Ericsson | BIS | BIS-CD 491/492 | (2 discs) |
| 3. Rudolf Innig | MDG | MDG 3170623-2 | (2 discs) |
| 4. Almut Rössler | Motette | DCD1106 1 | (2 discs) |

Petites esquisses d'oiseaux

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|------------------|------------------|----------------|-----------|
| 1. Håkon Austbö | Naxos | 8.553532-34 | (3 discs) |
| 2. Gloria Cheng | Koch Schwann | 3-7627-2H1 | |
| 3. Peter Hill | Unicorn-Kanchana | DKPCD 9144 | |
| 4. Yvonne Loriod | Erato | 2292-45505-2/V | |

Pièce pour piano et quatuor à cordes

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|--|--------------------|---------------|
| 1. Pierre-Laurent Aimard (pno), Arditti string quartet | Disques Montaignes | |
| | | MO 782027 |
| 2. Yvonne Loriod (pno), Quatuor Rosamonde | Jade | 74321 67411-2 |

La ville d'en-haut (continued).

3. The Cleveland Orchestra - Pierre Boulez (cond.).
Deutsche Grammophon 445 827-2 GH
4. Y. Loriod (pno), Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin - K. A. Rickenbacher (cond.).
Koch Schwann 3-1123-2-H1

Un vitrail et des oiseaux

1. Yvonne Loriod (pno), Ensemble Intercontemporain - conducted by Pierre Boulez.
Disques Montaigne XXIII
(Live recording, world première: Paris, 26 November 1988).
2. Y. Loriod (pno), Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin - K. A. Rickenbacher (cond.).
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