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THE THEORIES OF OLIVIER MESSIAEN:  
THEIR ORIGINS AND THEIR APPLICATION  
IN HIS PIANO MUSIC

by

GRAHAM WILLIAMS B.Mus.(Hons.), Dip.Ed.

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SUMMARY

This dissertation is an investigation of the printed writings and sayings of Olivier Messiaen and the relationship they bear to his piano music. The objective is to describe the composer's writings in general, but with particular emphasis upon the influences he has acknowledged and the sources he has recognized as formative to his thought and expression. These influences are then examined both in their original sources and in the more personal and specific selection Messiaen has made of them. Thus described, they are then related, through his words and practice, to the technique of his musical language.

The research is presented in four main categories. Firstly, biographical data is discussed (Chapters I-IV) including Messiaen's early childhood and education (1908-1930), his first appointments and private researches (1931-1939), his return to the Paris Conservatoire as a professor (1942-47) and finally his international position since 1948.

The second section describes the major theological, philosophical and literary influences which Messiaen has recognized, examining from a general historical and derivative basis those features to which the composer has particularly ascribed importance. These include (Chapters V-IX) the writings of the Catholic theologians, St. Thomas Aquinas and Dom Columba Marmion, the philosophy of time in the

writings of Plato and Aristotle and the twentieth-century French philosopher Henri Bergson, the poetry of his mother Cécile Sauvage and the contributions of his father Pierre Messiaen to Shakespearean scholarship, the philosophy of Paul Claudel, and the Surrealist movement in France, particularly through the works of André Breton and Paul Eluard.

Thirdly, the dissertation investigates the major sources of Messiaen's musical language with particular concentration upon his rhythmic practice. These chapters (X-XIII) discuss Indian music, ancient Greek music, plainsong, and the influence of Claude Debussy, Maurice Emmanuel, Paul Dukas and Igor Stravinsky.

The fourth part (Volume II, chapters I-III) comprises an analysis of Messiaen's piano works in which the evolution of his musical language is traced through the formal, rhythmic, harmonic, melodic and timbral structures, these then being related to the theories outlined in the above sections. Included as an appendix to this volume of the dissertation is a list of the meanings of the names of the Hindu talas which Messiaen has incorporated into his rhythmic vocabulary.

The bibliography is divided into two sections: (1) primary sources, that is, Messiaen's printed articles and sayings, and those published scores consulted in the preparation of this dissertation, and (2) secondary sources comprising printed books, printed articles, dissertations, reports and reviews.

I certify that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except when due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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I am especially grateful to those who have assisted me in obtaining source materials: Dr. Werner Gallusser of the Elder Conservatorium Library, Miss Walker and Mrs. Bell of the Inter-Library Loans Section of the Barr Smith Library, University of Adelaide; Father C. Willcock, S.J. of the Library of Campion Collège, Kew, Victoria; the Librarian of St. Francis Xavier Seminary, Rostrevor, South Australia; the Conservateur of the Bibliothèque du Conservatoire de Musique, Paris; Mr. Salon, Cultural and Scientific Counsellor of the French Embassy, Canberra; Mr. Warren of Alphonse Leduc & Cie., Paris; Mr. Brossard of the Alliance Française of South Australia; and Mr. Gordon Anderson of the University of New England, Armidale.

I am indebted to a number of friends in Adelaide who have given freely of their time and help; to Mr. Dene Barnett of the Flinders University of South Australia who read the chapter on the Philosophy of Time, to Mr. Peter Lancaster, and especially to Mrs. Elizabeth Wood who read and discussed sections of the work. I also wish to thank Mr. Ian Riach and Miss Verna Blewett who proofread this dissertation.

I wish to acknowledge the assistance, in the form of a Post-Graduate Award, of the Commonwealth Department of Education, and also of the French Government, who, in awarding me a French Government Scholarship, gave me the opportunity of studying in Paris with M. Olivier Messiaen and Mme. Yvonne Loriod. I am deeply indebted to both M. Messiaen and Mme. Loriod for their invaluable help and inexhaustible generosity.

## INTRODUCTION

Although the writings and sayings of a major living composer such as Olivier Messiaen incite both interest and at times confusion among scholars of music, and despite the fact that the composer himself considers his published commentaries and explanations are relevant to his music, there has been no previous attempt to examine them as significant and substantial source documents. The task of this dissertation is to examine Messiaen's writings as theoretical evidence of his musical practice, and to describe the major events and influences bearing upon Messiaen's life, thought and expression.

The course of research led initially from the following acknowledgment made in The Technique of my Musical Language:

I do not want to close this introduction without thanking...those who have influenced me: my mother (the poetess Cécile Sauvage), my wife (Claire Delbos), Shakespeare, Claudel, Reverdy and Eluard, Hello and Dom Columba Marmion... (1)

Unfortunately, because little is known of Claire Delbos, it is not yet possible to trace the part she played in Messiaen's life. The unavailability of material related to the Catholic journalist Ernest

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(1) Messiaen, O., The Technique of my Musical Language, trans. J. Satterfield, (Paris, 1944, 1956), 8.



Hello has also precluded further discussion in the present work.<sup>(2)</sup>

Following a biographical study in the first section, this dissertation examines the major literary, theological and philosophical influences on Messiaen's writings in part two, and the sources of his musical language in part three. The final part of the dissertation comprises an analysis of Messiaen's piano works which, by elucidating the structural functions of form, rhythm, harmony, melody and timbre, relates practice with the theories outlined in the preceding sections.

Messiaen's life reveals a primarily literary inheritance, for his mother Cécile Sauvage was a poetess and his father Pierre Messiaen a scholar of Shakespeare and the English Romantic poets. The literary predilections acquired in childhood, especially for fantasy and magic, have remained throughout Messiaen's life and have influenced his own literary style. Another significant influence has been the French Surrealist Movement and the writings of two of its major figures, André Breton and Paul Eluard, are discussed in Chapter IX.

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(2) Hello, Ernest, Born Lorient 4 November 1828, died Lorient 14 July 1885. He studied at Saint-Barbe College, and Louis-le-Grand Lycée in Paris. He was originally destined for a career in law, but turned to journalism. In 1859 he helped found the monthly review Le Croisé, which eventually amalgamated with La Revue du Monde Catholique, and wrote many articles for this review. His works include literary criticisms, philosophical essays, biblical meditations and short stories. Some of his major works are Philosophie et Athéisme (1888), Le Livre des Visions et Instructions (1868), Le Jour du Seigneur (1871), L'Homme. La Vie, La Science, L'Art (1872), Physionomie de Saints (1875).

Messiaen's taste for the 'marvellous' in literature finds correspondence in his Catholic faith (Chapter V), and the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas and Dom Columba Marmion, both of whom Messiaen recognises as lasting influences, are examined in relation to his own writings. His interest too in the philosophical investigations of his contemporary Paul Claudel (Chapter VIII) reflects their mutual attraction to the teachings of Aquinas concerning the logic of unity within diversity; Claudel's 'logic of metaphor' itself presages the language experiments of the Surrealist writers. The French philosopher Henri Bergson's concern with the importance of the intuitive process is also an important link with Messiaen's concern for the processes of the subconscious, the roles of intuition and intellect and the relationship between faith and reason.

However, Messiaen's main philosophical preoccupation has been with Time, in the philosophy of which he follows rather the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition than the Bergsonian; that is, the concept of time as 'the number of motion according to before and after' (Chapter VI). This concept has become the theoretical basis for Messiaen's use of rhythm as a structural element to which he ascribes an importance equal to that previously accorded harmony and counterpoint in Western music.

Messiaen's researches into the use of rhythm in music are discussed in Chapters X to XII. Immediately after completing his early training at the Paris Conservatoire, where rhythmic studies were singularly neglected, he undertook private research into the theoretical

writings of the two musical cultures which had fully systematised their rhythmic practice, namely ancient India and ancient Greece, and supplemented his study with an investigation of the theories of the rhythm of plainsong propounded by Dom Moquereau. He has also acknowledged the influence of two twentieth century composers, Debussy and Stravinsky, upon his rhythmic practice, and, as well, the lasting influences on his development as a composer provided by two of his teachers, Emmanuel and Dukas, are examined in this context (Chapter XIII).

The analysis of Messiaen's piano works, which constitutes Volume II of this dissertation, examines the works from the point of view of the formal (Chapter I), rhythmic (Chapter II), harmonic, melodic and timbral (Chapter III) structures. Their evolution is followed chronologically, and it is shown that the concept of the self-contained unit comes to predominate as these structures increase in complexity. It is then established that this concept is fundamental to both Messiaen's music and philosophy.

It would be presumptuous for any research to draw definitive conclusions on the place and importance of the work of a living and continually productive composer. However, whilst at first sight the extreme diversity of ideas, influences and sources which embody Messiaen's philosophy and his musical creation may appear to be eclectic and arbitrary, a common major preoccupation with time and intuition may be discerned. Accordingly, the present study attempts to elucidate the unifying thought process which sustains this diversity.

## **ADDITIONAL NOTE TO THE THEORIES OF OLIVIER MESSIAEN**

When I began my research everyone understood that Messiaen's formal structures were built from completely distinct and separate parts – he had notated this in all of his scores. However the question which motivated my research was: how was it that music constructed in this way still came across in performance as a unified whole? How was it that totally disparate, completely unrelated elements with no common material or bridging sections could sound coherent? No-one at that time had answered that question.

I decided to begin by understanding Messiaen's philosophy and way of thinking because I had seen with other composers that what often seemed like poetic descriptions of what they were doing were actually totally precise, once you understood their language. In Messiaen's case this turned out to be absolutely true. And so this is why the first volume of my thesis details all his influences and philosophy and draws out the conclusion of an intuitive form of logic, the logic of association. From this I learned how he thought, and this gave me the key to understanding how he had constructed his music.

Since then I have studied the Buddhist tradition in detail and have become aware of, and participated in, the latest research in neuroscience, and have learned that this is the way our subconscious brain is structured. This form of thinking and feeling is the basis of our western mediaeval culture and all oriental cultures – and the east developed and perfected it. Messiaen, then, was truly a mediaevalist, and his loves confirm this. When he discovered Sarngadeva's list of 13<sup>th</sup> century Indian talas it was an affirmation of his own way of thinking.

However, for private reasons, I didn't spell out in my conclusion and summary what I had discovered and I would now like to do so and explain why. Messiaen's music is constructed exactly like the mediaeval stained glass windows which he adored. If you have a close view all you can see are totally separate pieces of glass, of different colours, totally unrelated and distinctly separated by lead, but when you step back and take in the whole view, it makes up a complete picture. It's the patterns in which the colours are arranged which make up the picture. I described this in my thesis as a mosaic form of construction.

In Messiaen's music, and particularly in the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, he perfected this and by the time of the *Catalogue* some of these patterns had become extremely intricate. My formal analyses lay out these patterns clearly.

When I discovered them back in 1975 no one knew whether they were correct or not. I then had the good fortune to gain a French Government scholarship in 1976 which allowed me to study with Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod for three years. I clearly remember him once saying in class that he did not compose so much as juxtapose.

On meeting Messiaen for the first time I mentioned my thesis and he asked to see it. He invited me to his house for an evening and we discussed my work. When I placed my analyses of the *Catalogue* in front of him I was understandably very nervous.

He sat for at least five minutes in silence contemplating them and then said, "C'est terrifiant". I waited, and then asked what he meant and he said that they were exactly the same as his first sketches. He then opened up completely and we spent the rest of the evening looking through his library of original editions of French fairy tales after which he showed me his studio where he worked.

## **ADDITIONAL NOTE TO *THE THEORIES OF OLIVIER MESSIAEN***

This was evidently a very moving and powerful experience for both of us, and from that moment we became very close – Yvonne, at my next lesson, told me that they considered me to be their son. Because this was such a private experience, and my life took such an unexpected turn when I then went on to study the Buddhist tradition and did not follow through on my career as a pianist and musicologist, even though I did teach for over 20 years at the University of Adelaide, I decided not to spell this out in my thesis, or recount this encounter with Messiaen.

Messiaen, Yvonne Loriod and I remained life-long friends and corresponded until their death. I have left the correspondence to the National Library of Australia where it is now stored.

Graham Williams 16 October 2012