Introduction

In March 1948 Olivier Messiaen gave an interview to the newspaper *France-Soir*. He seemed at ease with life and, with the *Turangalîla-Symphonie* about to be finished, he spoke of his plans for an opera with a freedom unthinkable in later years, when he would become cautious and secretive about work in progress. When asked which musicians had most influenced him the conversation took an unexpected turn:

> The birds.
> Excuse me?
> Yes, the birds. I've listened to them often, when lying in the grass pencil and notebook in hand.
> And to which do you award the palm?
> To the blackbird, of course! It can improvise continuously eleven or twelve different verses, in each of which identical musical phrases recur. What freedom of invention, what an artist![1]

In the event there was to be no opera, at least not for another thirty-five years. Instead, Messiaen went through a period of experiment, prompted initially by a desire to develop his own version of serialism. The transformation of his music moved into a second phase from 1952 when, taking his cue from the *France-Soir* interview, he embarked on a decade in which almost all his music was inspired by the study of birds and birdsong. Messiaen's belief that birdsong is music gave him a sense of mission to bring that music within the scope of human understanding. A trio of works followed one another, each with 'birds' in the title: *Réveil des oiseaux* (1952–1953) and *Oiseaux exotiques* (1955–1956), both for orchestra with solo piano; and the most ambitious of the three, the *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (1956–1958), a vast cycle of thirteen pieces for solo piano portraying the birdsongs of France in their natural settings.

The years of renewal that followed the extraordinarily prolific decade of the 1940s form arguably the most fascinating time in Messiaen's life, of which

[1] Robert de Saint-Jean, 'C'est le merle noir et non le rossignol qui inspire Olivier Messiaen: à quarante ans, le musicien se prépare à écrire l'opéra dont il rêve depuis son enfance', *France-Soir*, 28–29 March 1948.

the *Catalogue d'oiseaux* is the crowning achievement. Despite this, the work has, in the past, struggled to win the admiration given to Messiaen's earlier piano cycle, *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* (1944). This is in part due to a misunderstanding. Messiaen's research into birdsong was carried out with characteristic thoroughness, and he was always proud of what he regarded as the accuracy of the birdsong in his music. By stressing this, however, Messiaen gave the impression that the *Catalogue* is a work as much of ornithology as it is of music, an impression perhaps reinforced by the work's matter-of-fact title. The result was that the *Catalogue* acquired a false reputation. Pianists who were eager to take on the challenge of the *Vingt Regards* looked on the *Catalogue* as the product of a private obsession, leaving the work to a small number of Messiaen specialists, led by Yvonne Loriod, the work's dedicatee.[2] Today the situation could not be more different. Loriod's pioneering recordings (made in 1959, the year of the *Catalogue*'s premiere, and in 1970) have been joined by versions made by a number of other pianists, while a younger generation regards the *Catalogue* as standing with works such as the Ligeti *Etudes* as pinnacles of the piano repertoire from the second half of the twentieth century.

Catalogue d'oiseaux unites two characteristics that stem from Messiaen's childhood: a love of nature (influenced by the poetry of his mother, Cécile Sauvage) and of drama, through his enactments with his younger brother Alain of the plays of Shakespeare (Messiaen's father, Pierre, would later translate Shakespeare into French). For Messiaen the natural world would become the supreme resource: 'ever beautiful, ever great, ever new, Nature, an inextinguishable treasure-house of sounds and colours, forms and rhythms, the unequalled model for total development and perpetual variation'.[3] Birds, in particular, fascinated him from an early age,[4] and as a teenager he made his first attempts to copy down birdsong in musical notation.[5] During his student years at the Paris Conservatoire (1919–1930) he took to heart the dictum of his composition teacher Paul Dukas: 'Listen to the birds, they are great masters.'[6]

[2] The *Catalogue* is dedicated both to Yvonne Loriod and to the birds.

[3] Olivier Messiaen, *Conférence de Bruxelles, prononcée à l'Exposition Internationale de Bruxelles en 1958* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1960), p. 14.

[4] Brigitte Massin, *Olivier Messiaen: une poétique du merveilleux* (Aix-en-Provence: Editions Alinéa, 1989), p. 24.

[5] Claude Samuel, *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, trans. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland: Amadeus, 1994) from Claude Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: musique et couleur. Nouveaux entretiens avec Claude Samuel* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1986).

[6] Quoted by Olivier Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, trans. John Satterfield, 2 vols. (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1956), Vol. I, p. 34; single vol. edn (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 2001), p. 38.

As a devout Catholic, Messiaen regarded birds as having a special purpose in God's creation as 'the greatest musicians on our planet', illustrated by the 'Regard des Anges' from *Vingt Regards*. The piece, as Messiaen explained it, is a battle between the angels and the birds; the cadenza of birdsong shortly before the end is a whoop of triumph as the birds realise that it is they, not the angels, who have been blessed with the gift of music. Throughout Messiaen's early music birdsong runs as a symbolic thread, with flights of song winging free from earthly existence.

During the 1930s and 1940s Messiaen's musical approach made little distinction between sacred or secular subject matter; one could point to the striking similarity between the love theme of *Vingt Regards*, representing divine love, and the portrayal of human, erotic love in *Turangalîla*. Another example is *Poèmes pour Mi* (1936), in which divine love is reflected in the love of husband and wife. In a second song cycle, *Chants de terre et de ciel* (1938), Messiaen's poems interleave scenes from infancy and the life of the family with religious reflections that culminate in an ecstatic paean of praise to Easter (a reference to Messiaen's son Pascal, born in 1937). Defending his approach, Messiaen argued that religious art is by its very nature diverse: 'Why? Because it expresses ideas about a single being, who is God, but a being who is ever-present and who can be found in everything, above everything, and below everything. Every subject can be a religious one on condition that it be viewed through the eye of one who believes.'[7]

The interview with *France-Soir* hinted at a new ambition for birdsong, and there are signs of this in the two works for organ from the early 1950s, *Messe de la Pentecôte* and *Livre d'orgue*, in which birdsong is associated symbolically with the central mysteries of the Catholic faith, Communion and Easter.[8] Nonetheless, the complete immersion in birdsong from 1952 was a decisive change. From now on Messiaen sought the company and advice of leading ornithologists, and he began compiling his notations of birdsong in specially designated notebooks. These *cahiers* take us deep into the heart of Messiaen's private musical world, a world that despite everything Messiaen said publicly about his music – in books, essays, lectures and interviews – he was at pains to keep private.

The *cahiers* are an indispensable source for understanding the development of Messiaen's music in the 1950s and beyond.[9] No Messiaen

[7] Olivier Messiaen, 'Autour d'une parution', *Le Monde musical*, 30 April 1939, p. 126. Quoted in PH/NS, p. 80.

[8] See Christopher Dingle, *The Life of Messiaen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 139.

[9] Some 203 of Messiaen's *Cahiers de notations des chants d'oiseaux* survive; the last entry came in the summer of 1991, a year before Messiaen's death. See Peter Hill, 'From *Réveil des oiseaux* to *Catalogue d'oiseaux*: Messiaen's *Cahiers de notations des chants d'oiseaux*, 1952–59', in

documents demonstrate better than the *cahiers* the extremes in Messiaen's character, the way he balanced relentless pursuit of detail and soaring imagination. Messiaen spoke about music in terms that were by turns technical and poetic, a trait that inevitably influences the way his music is discussed. For the *Catalogue* the *cahiers* show not only how he evolved the parallel language with which he translated birdsong into his music, but also the evolution of his thinking as he worked to solve the musical and structural problems in his path. At the heart of these was the tension between Messiaen the ornithologist – with his passionate admiration for birdsong – and Messiaen the composer. Messiaen's difficulty was that he regarded birdsong as music – and (as we have seen) God-given music at that – not simply as a source of sounds and patterns of which a composer might make use. As a result it was essential that the birdsong in his music, necessarily adapted to the limitations of human musical instruments, should be as authentic as possible. All this accounts for the very literal approach Messiaen took in *Réveil des oiseaux*, the first major work after the inception of the *cahiers*. As Messiaen's knowledge of birdsong deepened, however, his approach started to change, so that his birdsong became less a transcription and more an imaginative response. At the same time he started to select and edit the birdsongs he had collected so that by the time he came to compose the *Catalogue* they interact, almost like protagonists in a drama.

Messiaen, it should be remembered, approached birds as a musician, not a scientist, seeing them as singers with the ability to express human emotions. Here he describes the nightingale's song to his interviewer, Claude Samuel:

MESSIAEN: Most nightingales alternate five or six themes common to all, with changes in intensity and feeling. The nightingale performs a volte-face from sadness to joy –

CLAUDE SAMUEL: What *we* call 'sadness' –

MESSIAEN: Yes, you'll excuse my use of human terms: being anthropomorphic despite myself. Let's say that the nightingale seems to be passing brusquely from sadness to joy, from anger to renunciation, from rancour to forgiveness, or from supplication to victory; and it really goes from a slow tempo into a fast one, from a *pianissimo* nuance to *fortissimo*, with brusque and obvious contrasts.[10]

Christopher Dingle and Robert Fallon (eds.), *Messiaen Perspectives 1: Sources and Influences* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 143–171.

[10] Samuel, *Music and Color*, pp. 88–89.

The *Catalogue d'oiseaux* – and this is another misleading aspect of the title – is also as much about the landscapes of France as the birds that inhabit them. For the first time in Messiaen's music birds are set in their habitats, and these inspire many of the work's most memorable images – the veiled light of dawn, the sunset staining the sky shades of pink and violet, silvery-grey foliage reflected in water, and the peaks and chasms of the Alps, which had impressed Messiaen during his boyhood years in Grenoble. On his trips to Brittany in 1955 and 1956 Messiaen devoted pages of his *cahier* not only to the cries and calls of the birds but also to musical studies of the sounds and movement of the sea, leading eventually to the *Catalogue*'s shattering finale, in the final piece 'Le Courlis cendré' (curlew), as the Atlantic shoreline, smothered in sea-fog, disappears into the darkness.

The *cahiers* enable us to follow in great detail the progress of Messiaen's thinking during the long gestation of the *Catalogue* (from the summer of 1953) and its composition (between September 1956 and December 1958). Each piece in the *Catalogue* imagines a fresh relationship between birds and their habitat, and at the same time shows a fresh relationship between Messiaen and his birdsong material. In broad terms, the composition of the *Catalogue* divides into two: the seven pieces composed over the autumn and winter of 1956–1957, and the six further pieces written in the summer of 1957 and the following year. The earlier pieces were composed on the basis of notations made earlier from nature or from recordings. By the summer of 1957, however, the *cahiers* show that Messiaen's approach had moved on, with birdsong now an instantaneous trigger to his composer's imagination, so that increasingly the act of writing down birdsong becomes the act of composition.

A desire to trace the progress of Messiaen's thought influences the shape of the book, which follows a chronological order wherever possible; in particular, we decided to discuss the individual pieces of the *Catalogue* in the order in which Messiaen composed them, in so far as this is known, rather than the order in the score. The order of the thirteen pieces of the *Catalogue* in the printed score is given in Chapter 1 (pp. 9–10). The order in which we consider the pieces (reflecting the order of composition) is as follows:

'L'Alouette lulu' (composed in September 1956); 'Le Chocard des Alpes', 'Le Loriot', 'La Chouette hulotte', 'L'Alouette calandrelle', 'Le Courlis cendré', 'La Rousserolle effarvatte' (composed between September 1956 and February 1957 – 'La Rousserolle effarvatte' was substantially revised later in 1957); 'La Bouscarle', 'Le Traquet stapazin', 'Le Merle bleu', 'La Buse

variable' (composed during the summer of 1957); 'Le Merle de roche' and 'Le Traquet rieur' (composed in 1958).

The first three chapters set the scene in different ways. We start by introducing the *Catalogue* and its characteristics as a whole. Chapter 2 examines the uses of birdsong in Messiaen's earlier music, before tracing the evolution of his *style oiseau* in the 1950s, following his researches up to the point where he began composing the *Catalogue*; the chapter ends with the first piece to be written, 'L'Alouette lulu'. Chapter 3 considers a number of specifically musical influences on the *Catalogue*, including Messiaen's own earlier music and the music of his contemporaries.

Chapter 4 resumes where we left off at the end of Chapter 2 by considering the remaining six pieces written over the winter of 1956–1957 (five of these are given in the order they appear in the score, for lack of better evidence). On 30 March 1957 Loriod performed six pieces in a recital billed as 'Extracts from the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*'; she omitted 'La Rousserolle effarvatte', which she was given too late for her to learn, and which in any case was considerably enlarged later in the year. Loriod's recital marks the division between the earlier pieces and those composed later that summer and in the following year. With the second wave of composition (Chapter 5) the order of composition is much clearer. 'La Bouscarle' was conceived during a trip to south-west France in April, 'Le Traquet stapazin' and 'Le Merle bleu' were inspired by a visit to the Mediterranean coastline in late June, while 'La Buse variable' is based on notations made in the Alps of the Dauphiné in July. The last two pieces – 'Le Merle de roche' and 'Le Traquet rieur' – were based largely on notations made in the summer of 1958 and were completed later that year.

Both authors are pianists who perform the *Catalogue*, so that reflections on performance and interpretation feature throughout our discussions of the music. Chapter 6, however, is specifically devoted to performance. First we explore the early performances given by Yvonne Loriod, and in particular her two recordings of the work. Next Peter Hill recalls his time working on the *Catalogue* with Messiaen when preparing his own recording. Lastly, we consider the different approaches taken by a number of pianists in their recordings; this is not in any sense a review, but a comparison of different approaches to interpreting the music.

In the final chapter, the Postlude, we consider the influence of the *Catalogue* on Messiaen's later music, especially the works for solo piano. These are *La Fauvette des jardins* (1970), which returns to the location of

'La Buse variable' from the *Catalogue*, the scene in front of Messiaen's summer retreat at Petichet in the French Alps; and the late birdsong 'sketches', the *Petites Esquisses d'oiseaux* (1985). Also discussed is a recently discovered work from 1961, *La Fauvette passerinette*, which proves to be a significant missing link in the development of Messiaen's later birdsong style and which was almost certainly intended by Messiaen as the start of a second 'Catalogue'.