

Olivier Messiaen's *Turangalîla-symphonie*

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My opinion is that this symphony is, after *Le sacre du printemps*, the greatest composition written in our century.

– Serge Koussevitzky<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Introduction

Messiaen's *Turangalîla-symphonie* is a vast and complex love song. Lasting around 85 minutes, and composed for enormous orchestral forces, this ten-movement symphonic masterpiece is a pioneering landmark in twentieth-century orchestral music by virtue of its innovations in orchestration, rhythm, melody, harmony, and form. Writing in 1995, just a few years after Messiaen's death in 1992, musicologist Malcolm Hayes noted that it is “beyond serious dispute” that “*Turangalîla* has attained the status of a classic,” adding that the piece “must at the time have seemed gargantuan in its elaborate instrumental apparatus, hectic invention, flagrantly inflated rhetoric, and total lack of personal and artistic inhibition” (Hayes, 1995: 190). Since then, the piece has retained its place in the canon and has been regularly performed and recorded.

The symphony is important as part of Messiaen's oeuvre for several reasons. It marks the first significant expansion of his international career, and it solidified his reputation in the US (which led to his invitation to teach at the Boston Symphony Orchestra's summer home at Tanglewood). It is one of only a few pieces that does not have an explicit theological program but instead forms part of a trilogy of works based on the Tristan myth. While his personal faith and religious works in general have been widely discussed, the works of the Tristan Trilogy (*Harawi*, *Turangalîla-symphonie*, and *Cinq rechants*) have been discussed comparatively little, not least because the programmatic elements are fragmentary, highly personal, and not presented in the customary ways composers link music and meaning.

The piece is especially important in the development of Messiaen's musical technique and personal style. It contains numerous innovations, including the manipulation of themes and their meanings, its length, and its large performing forces (with solo piano, ondes Martenot, and a huge array of percussion). It is the closest he came to writing a piano concerto and is a significant work in his professional relationship with the pianist Yvonne Loriod (whose technical prowess undoubtedly influenced the piano writing). It is particularly notable for the development of several aspects of his unique rhythmic style. These are detailed in what follows and include additive rhythms; rhythmic cells; tâlas and superpositioned rhythms; rhythmic characters; and generative, periodic, progressive, and recursive rhythms.

<sup>1</sup> NBC interview with Olin Downes, broadcast November 28, 1949 (see Simeone, 2008: 41).

Olivier Messiaen was one of the most influential composers, teachers, and performers of the twentieth century, yet only within the last twenty years has he been afforded the same degree of scholarly attention as composers such as Schoenberg or Stravinsky. A flurry of publications after the centenary of the composer's birth in 2008 began to address compositional style and technique, theological themes, and general analysis of some prominent works. A major biography by Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone in 2005 presented a comprehensive insight into his life and, more recently (following the death of Yvonne Loriod), work has begun on his archives held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Several notable collections of essays (including *Messiaen Studies* [Sholl, 2007]) have expanded the scope of Messiaen scholarship, but there are very few books that cover repertoire (except for *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, which has received a lot of attention). Brief analysis and commentary on the symphony were provided in two survey collections published during Messiaen's lifetime (see Sherlaw Johnson, 1975 [especially 82–94]; and Griffiths, 1985 [especially 128–42]), and a short but informative essay in German by Klaus Schweizer appeared in 1982. Two books place the symphony in the context of the Tristan Trilogy and related works (Davidson, 2001; and Bruhn, 2008). In addition, there are many program notes that are largely based on Messiaen's own notes for the work. The principal scholarly work, however, is presented in theses and dissertations dating back to 1975. These include an analysis of the gamelan group (Bradbury, 1991), an algebraic study of rhythm (Hook, 1998), a study of pitch organization (Fancher, 2003), and an exploration of the cyclic themes (Byrne, 2009).

Messiaen wrote a great deal about his own music. In the early part of his career this led to “le cas Messiaen,” a public debate which centered around criticisms of Messiaen's program notes, his theological aspirations, and his original style. Most of the information for specific works provided by Messiaen is in the form of written commentaries and in conversations he had with various journalists, critics, and scholars who engaged with him and his music in detail (see especially Goléa, 1961; and Samuel, 1967/1986). Despite “le cas Messiaen,” this Element utilizes Messiaen's own descriptions of the *Turangalila-symphonie* because they are concise and definitive statements about his intentions and vivid descriptions of the musical material. When analyzed, they reveal much about his compositional process, and many are presented here for the first time in English translation.<sup>2</sup>

This Element covers many aspects of the *Turangalila-symphonie*. Section 2 provides information on the context, commission, and composition of the symphony along with information about the first performances by the Boston

<sup>2</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. Material from Messiaen's analysis in the second volume of his *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie* is cited in the abbreviated form (*Traité*: page number).

Symphony Orchestra conducted by Leonard Bernstein. Using information provided by Messiaen in several sources, but especially from the second volume of his *Traité* (Messiaen, 1995), Section 3 provides an overview of the various programmatic elements of the *Tristan* found in the symphony. Section 4 provides a brief introduction to Messiaen's unique compositional style as a prelude to Section 5, which is dedicated to a detailed analysis of each movement. This analysis seeks to demystify some of the complex innovations he made to his musical language, especially in the areas of rhythm and orchestration. Section 6 discusses the changes made to the score in 1990 that provide further insight into his compositional process.<sup>3</sup> Section 7 discusses the reception history of the work in live and recorded performances along with ballet versions and some documentaries about the work. Finally, concluding remarks in Section 8 assess the piece, offer suggestions for understanding the program, and advocate for its continued place in the canon.

## 2 Context, Commission, Composition, and Premiere

Messiaen was born in 1908 and studied at the Paris Conservatoire. During his career as a composer Messiaen returned to the Paris Conservatoire to teach harmony and composition from 1941 until his retirement in 1978. He was also a church musician and held the titular post as organist of Sainte-Trinité Church in Paris from 1931 until his death in 1992.

The American composer Virgil Thomson, writing in the *New York Herald Tribune* on September 23, 1945 (some four years before the *Turangalîla* premiere), succinctly summarizes the prevailing opinion about the radical music of the young French composer:

What strikes one right off on hearing any of his pieces is the power these have of commanding attention. They do not sound familiar; their textures – rhythmic, harmonic and instrumental – are fresh and strong. And though a certain melodic banality may put one off no less than the pretentious mysticism of his titles may offend, it is not possible to come in contact with any of his major productions without being aware that one is in the presence of a major musical talent. Liking it or not is of no matter: Messiaen's music has a vibrancy that anybody can be aware of, that the French music world is completely aware of, that has been accepted here indeed for the post-war period as take it or leave it, one of the facts of life.

While the charge of “pretentious mysticism” seems a little unfair given what we now know of Messiaen's devout Catholicism, it is true that some audiences still struggle with this aspect of the composer's work.

<sup>3</sup> The score has a copyright date of 1992 but was not published until June 1994 according to the dépôt legal copy in the Bibliothèque nationale.

Messiaen's reputation was initially based on some organ works and song cycles. Only four surviving orchestral works predate *Turangalîla: Les Offrandes oubliées* (1930), *Le Tombeau resplendissant* (1930), *Hymne au Saint-Sacrement* (1932), and *L'Ascension* (1932–3). In addition, Messiaen composed several works for orchestra and chorus. Some of these were entries for a composition prize, the prestigious Prix de Rome (which he never won), including *La Sainte-Bohème* (1930) and *La jeunesse des vieux* (1931). Hill and Simeone, 2005: 28, 31. In 1937, Messiaen arranged his own song cycle, *Poèmes pour Mi*, for orchestra, but it was his *Trois petites liturgies de la présence divine* (1944) for women's chorus and orchestra (with ondes Martenot) that helped to spread his reputation abroad. Messiaen learned about orchestration while a student, but he also studied (and taught) works by many canonic composers, including Debussy and Stravinsky. His orchestral writing was also influenced by his work as an organist and especially by the organ that Messiaen regularly played, made by the renowned Aristide Cavallé-Coll in Sainte-Trinité. This orchestrally conceived instrument allowed Messiaen to experiment with different timbres, registers, and dynamics that resulted in highly original sounds not only for his organ works but also for his orchestral compositions.

### The Commission and Composition

The Russian-born composer and conductor Serge Koussevitzky was an early champion of Messiaen's work, having conducted *Les Offrandes oubliées* (1930) in Boston with the Boston Symphony Orchestra during their 1936 season. This was the first ever performance of a work by Messiaen outside France (Simeone, 2008: 26). Koussevitzky's support continued and, in a letter dated June 25, 1945, he commissioned Messiaen to write something under the auspices of the Music Foundation, set up in memory of his second wife Natalie, who died in 1942. The fee was \$1,000 and, other than requesting a dedication to the Koussevitzky Music Foundation and that the manuscript be given to the Foundation, no other specifics were mentioned (Ibid. 31). Messiaen was greatly honored by the commission, responding:

I want to make every effort to write a work that will be beautiful and of significant proportions. To succeed, I need time to dream about it, to love it, to perfect it, and to orchestrate it without rushing. That will require a minimum of six months, a maximum of one year. I am going to think about all this now, and will keep you up to date with my work (Ibid.).

According to Messiaen, the piece was composed and orchestrated between July 17, 1946, and November 29, 1948 (*Traité*: 151). The order in which he

composed the ten movements is interesting because it helps us to trace musical ideas in different movements and to see how the composition developed from a four-movement work to the ten-movement finished piece. Messiaen described the process: “I first wrote movements 1, 4, 6 and 10. Then the three rhythmic studies called ‘Turangalîla’ 1, 2, and 3. Then no. 2. Then the large development which is no. 8. And I finished with no. 5” (Hill and Simeone, 2005: 160). Biographers Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone suggest that “it is probable that he followed his custom of composing the work in short score, only then turning his attention to the orchestration” (Ibid.). Notes in Messiaen’s diary at the end of 1947 give information concerning both a ten-movement and a nine-movement version of the work. In the ten-movement version, music for the “Finale” was used twice, but only once in the nine-movement version (Ibid.: 171):

Titles and subtitles for the *Symphonie-Tâla*

1. Introduction (old first movement)
2. 1st Tâla
3. Chant de rêve (old second movement)
4. 2nd Tâla
5. Sonata (old fifth movement)
6. Chant de tendresse (old fourth movement)
7. Chant de passion (old eighth movement)
8. 3rd Tâla
9. Kheyâla-Mâruta (old third movement)
10. Finale (use the old fifth movement again, in perpetual semiquavers by the whole orchestra *fff*)

or nine movements:

1. Introduction
2. Chant de rêve
3. 1st Tâla (with birdsongs on the piano)
4. Chant de tendresse
5. Kheyâla-Mâruta
6. 2nd Tâla
7. Chant de passion
8. 3rd Tâla (with ondes and clarinet only, using rhythmic series)
9. Finale (the old fifth movement orchestrated *fff*)

Order: *Bien*.

The following is the final order of the movements and an idea of their comparative length using timings from the 1991 Deutsche Grammophon recording:

1.	Introduction	6:25
2.	Chant d'amour (Love song) 1	8:14
3.	Turangalîla 1	5:26
4.	Chant d'amour 2	11:03
5.	Joie du sang des étoiles (Joy of the Blood of the Stars)	6:42
6.	Jardin du sommeil d'amour (Garden of Love's Sleep)	12:39
7.	Turangalîla 2	4:11
8.	Développement d'amour (Development of Love)	11:41
9.	Turangalîla 3	4:27
10.	Final	7:44

### The Meaning of *Turangalîla*

The final order, probably established early in 1948, renames several movements and gives a new title for the whole piece. In the liner notes for the 1991 Deutsche Grammophon recording, Messiaen wrote the following about the final title (which he had stated elsewhere, notably in conversation with Antoine Goléa [Goléa, 1961: 83]):

*Turangalîla* – pronounced “tour-ahn-gu-lee-lah”, with the last two syllables accented and lengthened – is a word in Sanskrit. As with all words from ancient oriental languages, its meaning is very rich. “Lila” literally means play – but play in the sense of the divine action upon the cosmos, the play of creation, of destruction, of reconstruction, the play of life and death. “Lila” is also Love. “Turanga”: this is time that runs, like a galloping horse; this is time that flows, like sand in an hourglass. “Turanga” is movement and rhythm. “Turangalîla” therefore means all at once love song, hymn to joy, time, movement, rhythm, life and death (Messiaen, 1991: 1).

In the *Traité* he noted that some thought the word was a young woman's name.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the *Traité* text omits the rest of the description of the two individual words, noting only that he chose the word “for its euphonic qualities. Simply because it sounded well, it was pleasant to hear” (*Traité*: 151).

As well as describing *Turangalîla* as a love song, Messiaen described it as a “hymn to joy” and elaborated on what he meant by joy:

<sup>4</sup> This is not the case, but it did become the name, in the Americanized version *Turanga Leela*, of the female lead in the animated science fiction TV show *Futurama*.

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Not the bourgeois and quietly euphoric joy of some honest seventeenth-century man, but such that one can conceive of it who has only glimpsed it in the midst of misfortune, that is to say a superhuman joy, overflowing, blinding and excessive. Love is presented there under the same aspect: it is the fatal, irresistible love, which transcends everything, which suppresses everything outside itself, such as it is symbolized by the potion of Tristan and Isolde (*Traité*, 151).

These notions of superhuman joy and utterly transcendent love are the principal themes of the work and are elaborated and colored by other brief references Messiaen makes. These are collated and discussed further in the following analysis.

### The Meaning of *symphonie*

While Messiaen was explicit about the meaning of the word *Turangalîla*, he was less clear about the term *symphonie*, which had been part of the title since the early conception of the piece. It could be that he meant it in its literal meaning of “sounding together,” however, *Turangalîla* does have some formal similarities with the symphonic genre: movements 4 and 5 could be likened to the scherzo (as Messiaen himself suggested), movement 8 is an extended development, movement 9 is a set of variations, and movement 10 is a modified sonata form. Other traditional techniques used in the symphony include cyclical themes, thematic development across movements, and an extramusical program.<sup>5</sup> Even though he named four themes, Messiaen avoided the term leitmotif because he felt it was too influenced by the way Wagner used it. Despite these traditional elements, the symphony includes many innovative techniques, which suggests that Messiaen was saying something new about the form.

### The *Trois Tâla*

Scholars have traced the development of the three movements once collected as a group under the title *Trois Tâla*, which became movements 3, 4, and 5 of the symphony. The *Trois Tâla* were rehearsed (in front of an audience) as a set on February 14, 1948, and premiered the following day. They were conducted by André Cluytens with Yvonne Loriod and Ginette Martenot as soloists (for more, see Baeck, 2017: 153–179). Hill and Simeone believe these performances were simply a chance for Messiaen to hear the pieces live and evaluate whether or not they were successful. Baeck suggests “he first chose the title *Trois Tâla* in order to make possible the performance of three movements from a symphony commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation without attracting the attention of its sponsors before the world premiere” (Baeck, 2017: 168). It is clear, though, that

<sup>5</sup> For more on this, see McNeill, 2010.

Messiaen never intended them to be stand-alone works and they were never published, although they were performed again in Vienna on June 28, 1948, and on February 6, 1949, in Baden-Baden. Later, Messiaen was insistent that “*The Trois Tâla* never existed. Through the publisher Durand I forbade the improper use of this title . . . I have never been of the view that my *Turangalîla* should be split into separate pieces. So this title should not be used, as it is misleading” (Hill and Simeone, 2005: 173).

Messiaen made contradictory remarks about whether selected movements of the symphony should be performed. In the preface to the first edition of the score, Messiaen notes that he conceived the symphony “as a whole” and that he therefore prefers the piece to be performed “complete and without interruption” (although the Boston premiere included an interval after movement 5). He also indicated that the length may be off-putting and that conductors may prefer to perform only parts of the work. He therefore provided some options for the performance of selected movements:

1. Movements 3 (*Turangalîla* 1), 4 (Song of love 2), and 5 (Joy of the blood of the stars).
2. The three *Turangalîla* movements in the order 7, 9, 3.
3. A “shortcut” version of the whole symphony in this order: 1 (Introduction), 6 (Garden of the sleep of love), 2 (Love song 1), 4 (Love song 2), 10 (Finale).

Messiaen advocated for the first option as the best, since it had already been performed this way many times. He also notes that because movement 8 is “the grand development of thematic elements of the work it absolutely cannot appear in a selection,” but notes that movement 5 (Joy of the blood of the stars) can be performed alone since it is “sufficient in itself.”

The *Trois Tâla* received reviews that Baeck characterizes as “rather mixed in Paris (where the traditionalist opinions of the critics and the public prevailed), downright negative in Vienna (the capital of the old empire Austro-Hungarian still suffering after the war from cultural isolation due to the Anschluss and the disaster of the war), but more positive, if not enthusiastic in Baden-Baden” (Baeck, 2017: 169). The critic for the *Wiener Kurier* pointed to one of the most problematic issues for Messiaen’s music, namely how much of what is going on beyond the audible surface of the music should be comprehended by the listener. The critic follows Messiaen’s program note for the Vienna performance (slightly longer than the one for the Paris premiere) and notes that Messiaen set out to compose “a love song in three parts (sad – tender – passionate);” however, the critic also observes that for the audience, this “cannot even be discerned with the sensitivity of a seismograph without the author’s explanations in the program” (Baeck, 2017: 161). This perennial issue for Messiaen’s music is discussed further in what follows.



Baeck quotes the brief program note Messiaen provided for the performance of the *Trois Tâla* in Vienna on June 28, 1948, which provides some interesting background about the form and content of the three *Turangalîla* movements (Baeck, 2017: 160). Messiaen first asserts that “the work is a love song,” a comment he repeatedly made about all three of the Tristan works, but of *Turangalîla* in particular. He then goes on to describe the importance of rhythm for the three pieces and ascribes to them certain emotional characteristics:

Tâla is a word in the Hindu language which means rhythm. The three pieces are an essay on rhythmic language. The rhythms, which are based on many entirely new principles (values of quantity, dynamic values, alternation between arsis and thesis, added values, non-retrogradability) are used to express a violent love: sad in the first Tâla, tender in the second, violently passionate in the third.

The description Messiaen provided of the form and content of each movement offers useful clues to the *Turangalîla* movements and is similar to his later commentaries:

1st Tâla: A nostalgic theme played on the ondes Martenot. Followed by a heavier theme on the trombones. A slow vocalise on the oboe. The vibraphone and the glockenspiel produce sounds resembling a gamelan. Four rhythmic forms are used: rhythmic decrease in zigzag, rhythmic increase in scissor form [i.e., fan form in which music plays forwards and backwards like the opening or closing of a fan; see *Traité* 3: 325], retrograde rhythmic canon and rhythm with asymmetrical enlargement with three rhythmic characters on maracas, wood block, and bass drum.

2nd Tâla: Scherzo theme exhibited by the piccolo, the bassoon and decreased [*réduire*] on the piano. After the bridge Trio 1 follows on the winds: a love song of great depth; undulating rhythms and voluptuous choice of durations. Trio 2 is also a love song, played with more flexibility on the strings. Bird songs on piano and vibraphone that mingle with the superposition of the two Trios. After another bridge, superposition of the Scherzo and the two Trios. Piano cadenza. Coda on the love song, even more tender and more sweet.

3rd Tâla: Long dance of love and joy; the full orchestra is unleashed, violently swirling with passion. Alternation between chorus and verses in the dance of love. First development, very passionate, [with] rhythms in three pronounced characters in asymmetrical enlargement, borrowed from the love dance (brass). Resumption of the chorus in the distance. Resumption of development simultaneously backwards and forwards: the result is a rhythmically retrograde canon of the three rhythmic characters with trumpets and trombones. Resumption of the chorus in the distance, an ostinato bass on the chorus variation. The coda develops in a manner more and more dynamic up to the maximum height of strength and passion. Piano cadenza and brass increase to the climax (Ibid.).

This analysis is developed further in Section 5, but for now let us return to the chronology of the symphony.