

PART I

*Mondial Messiaen*

## CHAPTER I

*Introduction*  
*The Image of Messiaen*

*Robert Sholl*

Olivier Messiaen could be thought of as a kind of historical multi-dimensional image. Face-recognition software relies on matching enough nodal points on someone's face to an agreed or 'original' photo, especially through discrete measurements and contours. To write about a composer like Messiaen poses complex issues that can be appreciated through this analogy. For Messiaen, there is no original photo, but a series of snapshots in different contexts; such thinking informs this book.

When this project began, I thought that I was aware of many of these contexts, but what the authors of this book have revealed to me, and hopefully to its readers, is just how many different ways in which Messiaen made his presence felt. It is not merely the astonishing internationalism of his music, but ultimately the durability of it that makes Messiaen one of the twentieth century's major figures in the arts. So, this project points towards and takes down some not-so 'distant stars', but in doing so it illuminates the vast spaces between them, and therefore perhaps makes those stars shine more brightly.<sup>1</sup> It not only concretises and extends current Messiaen studies in significant ways but reveals some of the ways in which scholarship on the composer has been constructed and has orientated itself around this figure.

For the reader who already knows much about the composer, there is much here to enjoy; but the book also provides a useful starting point, an extensive introduction to this composer for the newcomer to this music. These are all substantive reasons for the present volume to appear at this time. Behind this book, and for all who engage with this topic,

<sup>1</sup> See Olivier Messiaen, *TMLM*, trans. John Satterfield (Paris: Leduc, 2001), p. 7, and Messiaen, 'Musique Religieuse', *La Page musicale* (5 February 1937), p. 1, in Stephen Broad, ed., *Olivier Messiaen: Journalism, 1935–1939* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 63–4 and 125.

there is an imperative ‘to begin again’.<sup>2</sup> To do this means that there are still many possibilities. It means starting with an attitude of inquiry from the place where we are aware of our apriorisms and the ways in which they have been construed, and it is this perspective, therefore, that has enabled the writers here to create the critical objectivity which marks the tone of this work.

Some of the chapters in this volume metonymically represent other works in the Messiaen literature – as syntheses, not necessarily as simplifications – but they also provide fresh views on particular topics, and enable different readers to participate in an ongoing discourse. Any sustained engagement with a composer such as Messiaen requires one to listen again; not just to new recordings and performances, but to hear the music in different spaces. Messiaen studies are growing older, and it is good therefore to welcome many new voices in this volume.

Scholarship is a domain that makes and forms a constructive interface with the works themselves; thus, Messiaen’s output shows up in new ways through these different lenses. Messiaen’s own recordings, and different generations of performers have allowed his works to be heard in new ways and in new circumstances. These present contextual studies act not only as a refreshment of the literature on this composer, but they also form a call to re-evaluate this music, to hear it again, and to rethink its intentions, purpose, sound, structure, and significance. Such thinking here re-evaluates the place of Messiaen and his images in the world; it does not merely assess his role to French music, but also charts his contribution to the human condition.

There are many different ‘Messiaens’: in his works, in his writings, in photos, and in his relations with people. He travelled widely and touched the lives of many people, so we have an abundance of images. However tempting it may be to homogenise these images, a critical perspective needs to be aware of various differentiations and even paradoxes. There are, for instance, public and private personas: as son, father, husband, carer; there is the person whom the critic Antoine Goléa described as an ‘extraordinary delicate man, of a timidity that is moving, and an exquisite politeness’.<sup>3</sup> Yet Messiaen allegedly wrote music of a ‘torrid eroticism’,<sup>4</sup> that was decried as

<sup>2</sup> See Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2006), and also Paul Ricoeur, ‘Naming God’, in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), p. 217.

<sup>3</sup> Antoine Goléa, *Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen* (Paris: René Julliard, 1960), p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> See Philippe Olivier, *Messiaen ou la lumière* (Paris: Hermann, 2008), p. 38, and see also p. 44 on Messiaen and sexuality.

‘deviant’<sup>5</sup> – the reversion to sexualised language was present early in Messiaen criticism as a way of describing the religious ideology, excess and delicacy of the music, recalibrating his work through an implied moral turpitude and even as a form of ‘heresy’.<sup>6</sup> That Messiaen wrote music using ecstatic and Surrealist texts about the interior conversation with God, divine love, and God in all things in his *Trois petites Liturgies de la Présence Divine*, after the loss of over 1.5 million people in France in World War II, may have inspired the critical ‘sort of dance of glory and death around an incense-laden [*ensencé*] and crucified Messiaen’, after the first performance of that work on 21 April 1945.<sup>7</sup>

There was the *maître* whom the composer Gérard Grisey lauded as ‘God the Father’<sup>8</sup> – the spiritual godfather of many other composers in the latter twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> For his students there was the *professeur* who imparted ‘luminous explanations’ of music, who had ‘the most fabulous ears of the twentieth century’, and taught with ‘humility’ and ‘spontaneity’.<sup>10</sup> He adapted himself to the different needs of his students – Messiaen put this necessity metaphorically: ‘I’ve changed my waistcoat thousands of times’ – and also demanded great faithfulness and rigour from performers of his music.<sup>11</sup> There was the ‘simple’ man who wrote complex music; and there was the humaniser of modern music,<sup>12</sup> searching for order balanced with a sense of freedom in and with his own materials and derived from his ‘intuitions’,<sup>13</sup> but who did not ‘work by accident’.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Claude Rostand, *Olivier Messiaen* (Paris: Ventadour, 1957), p. 9. Rostand here cites unnamed critics.

<sup>6</sup> See Pierrette Mari, citing an unnamed critic in her *Olivier Messiaen* (Paris: Seghers, 1965), p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Rostand, *Olivier Messiaen*, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Les Dérives sonores de Gérard Grisey: Entretien avec Guy Lelong’, in Gérard Grisey, with Anne-Marie Réby (collab.), *Écrits ou l’invention de la musique spectrale* (Paris: MF, 2008), p. 235.

<sup>9</sup> For more on this, see *Contemporary Music and Spirituality*, ed. Robert Sholl and Sander van Maas (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Testimony of an unnamed former conservatoire student in Catherine Lechner-Reydellet, *Messiaen, l’empreinte d’un géant* (Paris: Séguier, 2008), p. 232.

<sup>11</sup> Messiaen speaking on 7 December 1968 in a public discussion in Almut Rössler, *Beiträge zur geistigen Welt Olivier Messiaens* (Duisberg: Gilles und Francke, 1984), trans. by Barbara Dagg and Nancy Poland as *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen* (Duisburg: Gilles and Francke, 1986), p. 35. See also Claude Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen, Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, trans. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1994), pp. 175–90, and Jean Boivin, *La Classe de Messiaen* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1995). On Messiaen and performers see Lechner-Reydellet, *Messiaen, l’empreinte d’un géant*.

<sup>12</sup> See Mari, *Olivier Messiaen*, p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> André Hodeir, *La musique depuis Debussy* (Paris: PUF, 1961), p. 87. See Rostand, *Olivier Messiaen*, pp. 25–6.

<sup>14</sup> Brigitte Massin, *Olivier Messiaen, une poésie du merveilleux* (Aix-en-Provence: Alinéa, 1989), p. 74. See also Olivier Messiaen, *Conférence de Bruxelles* (Paris: Leduc, 1958), p. 11.

Messiaen wrote more about himself than any other composer in the twentieth century, but began his *Technique de mon langage musical* (*TMLM*) with the words ‘It is always dangerous to speak of oneself’, words that are echoed in a somewhat darker critical vein at the start of Boulez’s *Penser la musique aujourd’hui* (1971).<sup>15</sup> In his writings, music from one continent or country, one era, a genre, or a technique could freely and holistically touch another, and be transformed creatively into something else. There was in Messiaen’s music and writings the religious-modernist renovator of tradition, the irrigator of musical ears, and the composer who wrote music described in quasi-Surrealist terms as:

tender or violent, full of love and vehemence, which soothes [*berce*] and sings, which honours melody and the melodic phrase. Music that is like new blood, a signed gesture, an unknown perfume, an unsleeping bird. Music like a stained-glass window, a whirl of complementary colours. Music that expresses the end of time, ubiquity, glorified bodies and the divine and supernatural mysteries: a ‘theological rainbow’.<sup>16</sup>

There was also the ‘secret’ Messiaen (a topos of much recent general biography). This concerns what he remained silent about, what was left out of his diaries and writings, who he did not talk about, and most especially what was left out of his own discourse on his own music. There was the composer and performer (as pianist, organist, and improviser); the perpetual student and researcher; the polemicist and the auto-didactic teacher who embodied a spirit of ‘audacious iconoclasm’ searching beyond academicism.<sup>17</sup> There was the man of the mountains and the countryside who lived mostly in Paris;<sup>18</sup> the man fascinated by the natural world – birdsong, deserts, trees, rocks, forests, the sea, and space.<sup>19</sup> There was the image of the ‘poverello’ artist and church organist who was in fact quite wealthy, but who was uninterested in and also charitable with money,<sup>20</sup> and there was the private man of faith living in the secular and public world. There was the modernist engaged with medievalism (transcendental beauty; light and colour; gothic architecture and stained-glass windows; plainchant);<sup>21</sup> the ‘rhythmician’ and ornithologist, and the man

<sup>15</sup> Messiaen, *TMLM*, p. 7. Pierre Boulez, *Boulez on Music Today*, trans. Susan Bradshaw and Richard Rodney Bennett (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Messiaen, ‘Réponses à une enquête’, *Contrepoints* 1, no. 3 (March–April 1946), p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> Michaël Levinas, ‘Rupture et Système’, in *Le Temps de l’écoute: Gérard Grisey, ou la beauté des ombres sonores*, ed. Danielle Cohen-Levinas (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2004), p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel, *Music and Color*, p. 20, and p. 151.

<sup>19</sup> Massin, *Une poésie du merveilleux*, p. 175. See also Messiaen, *Conférence de Bruxelles*, pp. 11–14.

<sup>20</sup> Olivier, *Messiaen ou la lumière*, pp. 47–9.

<sup>21</sup> See Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

who identified the vanguardism of his music with mystical music as an expressive religious ideology, and with a translation of theological meaning and its religious gravitas.<sup>22</sup>

There are also the photographs that document a life ranging from the angelic and dreamy child to the bespectacled adolescent and the intense and studious young man; his life with his wives (Claire Delbos and Yvonne Loriod), his brother Alain, and intimate pictures of Messiaen with his son Pascal in the BnF collection. There was a move from neckties to open-necked shirts with large lapels after World War II; there was the beret for outdoors, and the notable change in glasses throughout his life. Later in his life, there was the man of brightly coloured shirts, and a coloured scarf (perhaps an 'extimate' reflection of his synaesthesia and spiritual inner life), an astrakhan hat in Sherbrooke Forest near Melbourne for the Australian Winter, the countless location shots (the touristic Messiaen), and photographs with composers, performers, and his students.<sup>23</sup> There was also a natural change in Messiaen's appearance, and in his voice (affected partly by changes in technology). This list of images is evocative but not exhaustive, and it illustrates the richness and complexity of the contexts for his music.

These images can be thought about in many ways, as fractured and as kaleidoscopic (to use negative and somewhat positivist descriptions), or more appositely as constellations of images, touching each other and being touched; and the chapters in this volume perform this function.<sup>24</sup> These are shared images, but also constructions that we make to understand better the face and fabric of 'Messiaen'. They are not static but given to be remade: the dimensional cartography of the images of Messiaen are constantly moving; these changed in his own lifetime and they have also altered since his death in 1992, and they will continue to evolve and deepen.<sup>25</sup> The perspectives we have inherited are also enmeshed with traditions of thinking about other artists and composers, and in what we know, what we think we know, and in what we would like

<sup>22</sup> See Messiaen, 'Musique religieuse', in Broad, *Oliver Messiaen: Journalism*, pp. 63–4, 125, and Messiaen in 'Autour d'un œuvre d'orgue', *L'Art Sacré* (April 1939), p. 123, in Broad, *Journalism*, pp. 73 and 135. See also Stephen Schloesser, *Visions of Amen: The Early Life and Music of Olivier Messiaen* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), pp. 206, 228–9.

<sup>23</sup> See for example Catherine Massip, ed., *Portrait(s) d'Olivier Messiaen* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1996), and Anike Lesure and Claude Samuel, eds., *Olivier Messiaen: le livre du centenaire* (Lyon: Symétrie, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> See Walter Benjamin, 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue', *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (1928), trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), pp. 10–11.

<sup>25</sup> Hodeir signalled that Messiaen was 'the head of his generation', in *La musique depuis Debussy*, p. 80.

to know. *Messiaen in Context* reflexively takes stock and develops many areas of musical and intellectual life touched by and touching Messiaen. Messiaen is understood throughout this book as being in an ecology of ideologies, concepts, movements, and ideas, and the purpose of this book is to encapsulate and develop these formants.

It contains thirty-four essays and is divided into four sections, and it includes three essays that have been translated by the editor. These chapters bring us succinct and cogent summaries of existing areas of Messiaen scholarship, they illuminate new arenas of thought, and reveal how the understanding of Messiaen's presence as a world figure has spiralled ever wider. This collection of 'contexts' includes many new writers to Messiaen scholarship, independent scholars, scholars from other disciplines, and scholars who are perhaps better known for their work on other composers. The experienced Messiaen reader will find fresh insight and new reasons to enjoy this subject, while the novice will find much to initiate and inform here. This book therefore seeks to provide a refreshment of Messiaen's image for a new generation, as well as a contribution to the evolving understanding of the origins, style, and poetics of Messiaen's music and his place in the world of music today.

Part I, *Mondial Messiaen*, considers Messiaen's trajectory from an unknown and then reasonably prominent young composer in France to his place as a world figure in music. It encompasses his origins and family, the culture of the Paris Conservatoire, and then the ways in which his travels spread an awareness of 'Messiaen' as an image and product. It also examines how this product changed the places and people he visited (composers in particular), and how this reflexively shaped his own work.

Part II, *Messiaen and Theology*, explores the engagement with theology that was a notable feature of Messiaen's personal faith and his public works, which acted both as witness and testament. This Part engages with the theological context into which Messiaen arrives, and the culture and theology prominent in the 1920s and 1930s. It then examines the presence of St Thomas Aquinas, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and St Francis of Assisi in the cultural ecology of Messiaen's thought.

Part III, *Composers, Performers, and Critics*, examines Messiaen's life as a writer, teacher, pianist, and organist and explores his music and image through the lens of performance. It surveys his borrowings and creative transformation of music from other composers, his role as a journalist and critic, his role as a player, and the culture of organ playing that surrounded him in Paris. This Part includes chapters on the way Messiaen's piano

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music came out of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century practice, its relationship with birdsong, and on Messiaen's orchestration.

Part IV, *Concepts and Legacy*, discusses how Messiaen's modernism was founded on engagements with the very old and the very new, and an often-egalitarian treatment of these sources and contexts. These interests were tempered with an intellectual pragmatism, taking ideas, rather than wholesale ideologies, and transforming them to suit his own purposes. This Part examines a variety of concepts that inhabit and form the image of Messiaen. It considers the ideology of Messiaen (simplicity, naivety), his synaesthesia, his engagement with birds, and Surrealism. It then explores Messiaen's legacy in his engagement with the avant-garde, and with his French students – Jacques Charpentier, Pierre Boulez, and the spectralists, including Jean-Louis Florentz, and finally Messiaen's presence in France today.



## CHAPTER 2

*Messiaen's Family**Nigel Simeone*

It is well known that Messiaen's father was a teacher and his mother a poet, but his immediate family also included a sculptor, a surgeon, at least two other schoolteachers, and farmers. With his father hailing from the far north-east of the country and his mother from the Vendée in the far west, it was a set of chance circumstances that brought them together in Provence. Like every other family that lived through World War I, several members were killed in action or died from wounds sustained in battle; and like every teacher at the time, Pierre Messiaen was moved to new posts at the whim of the authorities. It was this that brought him and his wife Cécile to the Provençal city of Avignon in 1908. Pierre had just been appointed to a teaching post at the Lycée Frédéric Mistral when his wife Cécile Sauvage gave birth to a son on 10 December 1908, baptized Olivier Eugène Prosper Charles Messiaen at the church of Saint-Didier on Christmas Day. The Messiaen family came from the other end of the country. Pierre Messiaen (13 March 1883–26 May 1957) was born near Wervicq-Sud, close to the Belgian border just north of Lille. In 1900 he was admitted to the University of Lille and the same year his family moved to the village of Fuligny in the Aube, 60 km (37 m) due east of Troyes, where Pierre's parents Charles and Marie became tenant farmers. One of Pierre's younger brothers was Léon Messiaen (1885–1918), a gifted sculptor (and graduate of the École nationale des Beaux-Arts) whose career was cut short by war: Léon was killed in action in 1918. The young Olivier often stayed with his aunts Marthe and Agnès at their farm in Fuligny, a place that was significant in awakening his love of nature. As he told Claude Samuel, 'The Aube countryside is very beautiful and very simple: the plain, its big fields surrounded by trees, magnificent dawns and sunsets, and a great many birds. It was there that I first began noting down birdsong'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Claude Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen, Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, trans. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1994), p. 33.

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II

Messiaen's mother, Cécile Sauvage (20 July 1883–26 August 1927) was born in the west of France, at La Roche-sur-Yon in the Vendée, the daughter of Marie (née Jolivet) and Prosper Sauvage, who was appointed to a teaching post in 1884 in Digne-les-Bains, a town in the department of the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence (known as Basses-Alpes until 1970). It was here that Cécile grew up, one of three talented children: her sister Germaine became a science teacher and her brother André studied medicine and became a surgeon in Grenoble. Cécile was encouraged by the great Provençal writer Frédéric Mistral – winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1904 – and with his support she submitted a poem in 1905 to the *Revue forézienne*, a literary journal which had just taken on Pierre Messiaen, recently qualified as a teacher, as an editorial assistant. Both families had reservations about the relationship (the Sauvages were worried about their daughter marrying Pierre just as he was about to be called up for military service – in common with every young French man at the time – while the Messiaens thought Cécile was too delicate), but they were married in Digne on 9 September 1907. The following year, with Pierre's appointment in Avignon, the family moved there, and during her pregnancy and just afterwards, Cécile wrote the set of poems published in 1910 as *L'Âme en bourgeon*. A decade later, in 1917, she wrote to Pierre (serving at the front in World War I), about reading the poems with young Olivier: 'With him, I leafed through *L'Âme en bourgeon*. It's for you, I said to him, with its bees and grasshoppers. Mummy, he said, you're a poet just like Shakespeare. Like him, you have suns, planets, ants, frightening skeletons. I like things which are frightening'.<sup>2</sup> This unusually intimate and tender collection of poetry was something Messiaen cherished throughout his life. In 1987, *L'Âme en bourgeon* was reprinted in a limited edition by Librairie Séguier Archimbaud with a preface by Messiaen himself, in which he wrote:

Motherhood, that sublime union, unique, which men do not know and can scarcely understand. Motherhood, an exclusive prerogative, gentleness and glory of women, which women have overlooked apart from Cécile Sauvage! *L'Âme en bourgeon* is a poem of motherhood – and above all of pre-motherhood: its most beautiful verses are addressed to a child yet to be born.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Brigitte Massin, *Olivier Messiaen: une poésie du merveilleux* (Aix-en-Provence: Editions Alinéa, 1989), p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Messiaen, 'Préface', in Cécile Sauvage, *L'Âme en bourgeon* (Paris: Séguier Archimbaud, 1987), pp. 8–9.