



Birds in culture



Olivier Messiaen

Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992) is one of the most important composers of the twentieth century. Messiaen undoubtedly influenced the development of modern music for a large part of the twentieth century.

Messiaen's preoccupation with birdsong began when he was fifteen years old, when he noted down his first example while on holiday in the Aube district. Before *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, however, there are only hints of birdsong style in his music. From the time of the *Quatuor* onwards birdsong appears in most of his works, and frequently the names of the birds from which the songs are derived appear on the score. From 1953 to 1960 he wrote a group of works in which birdsong forms the principal material. It is the only source of material in the first of these, *Réveil des oiseaux* for piano and orchestra, which is an impression of birdsong from midnight to midday.

The second piece, *Oiseaux exotiques*, for piano, wind and percussion, mixes birdsongs from North and South America and from the East, and combines them in the two long tutti passages with Indian and Greek rhythms played by the percussion section. In this and in most works, Messiaen simply used birdsong as a source of melodic ideas, without regard to their association in nature, but *Réveil des oiseaux* and especially *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, are more concerned with realism.

Messiaen's concern for realism in his representation of birdsong has been a source of misunderstanding. He has claimed to have translated their songs into music as accurately as possible, while allowing for the fact that they must be slowed up and transposed down in pitch in order to make them intelligible on a human timescale and within the

normal range of human perception of pitch. His method, at the time of writing *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, was to go into the country with only manuscript paper and pen and note down directly, 'like an exercise in aural training' (as he expressed it), the songs which he heard, while identifying the singer with the aid of pictures of the bird, or sometimes enlisting the help of a local ornithological expert. There is no doubt that his researches were most careful and thorough, so that it is not difficult, in most cases, to relate Messiaen's interpretation to the original birdsongs.

Catalogue d'oiseaux

There is a distinct development of Messiaen's representation of birdsong, especially over the period from *Réveil des oiseaux* to *Catalogue d'oiseaux*. In works up to and including *Réveil des oiseaux*, he generally confined himself to a purely melodic representation of a bird's song. *Oiseaux exotiques* was the first composition to make extensive use of a harmonic representation of the timbre, and this is refined still further in *Catalogue d'oiseaux*. He went further than merely using dissonant harmonies to suggest the more raucous bird calls and consonant harmonies to suggest the sweeter ones: many subtle shades in between these two extremes are also represented.

Catalogue d'oiseaux was the result of many journeys to different parts of France in search of the songs of birds which are specific to a particular locality. Each of its thirteen pieces sets out to paint (as he put it) a portrait of a particular bird, together with other birds to be found in the same locality. Some of the songs used are inevitably those

of birds found in more than one locality; hence the blackbird, the songthrush, the nightingale, the robin and others are to be found in more than one piece. In addition to birdsong, he also invoked natural sounds associated with the bird's habitat: the sea in '*Le Merle bleu*' (the blue rock thrush) and '*Le Courlis cendré*' (the curlew), for instance, or the sounds of frogs and insects from the swamp in '*La Rousserolle effarvate*' (the reed warbler). Or he created

impressions of night, as in '*La Chouette hulotte*' (the tawny owl) and '*L'Alouette-Lulu*' (the woodlark), or of natural phenomena such as rock formations in '*Le Chocard des Alpes*' (the alpine chough) and '*Le Merle de roche*' (the rock thrush). Some pieces cover the events of a time, the most extensive in this respect being '*La Rousserolle effarvate*', which takes us through a period of twenty-seven hours, from midnight to 3 a.m. on the following day.

