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## OLIVIER MESSIAEN

Earlier this year, the C.B.S.O., with a choir from the Birmingham School of Music, under the inspired baton of Louis Fremaux, gave enchanting performances of the 'Trois Petites Liturgies de la Presence Divine', composed in 1943 by Olivier Messiaen, both in Birmingham and in the Royal Festival Hall, London. Though Messiaen's organ works have been known and played in Britain for a good many years, his choral and orchestral compositions have not enjoyed such fame, although his wartime 'Quatuor Pour La Fin Du Temps' for violin, clarinet, 'cello' and piano is fairly well-known outside France.

Olivier Messiaen, who has retained his post as organist at the Church of Saint-Trinite in Paris for forty years, during which time he has developed his unique musical style as well as his stature as a highly influential teacher, can claim both to occupy a commanding position in the musical development of his own country, and to have made a distinctive and important contribution to the many-sided and complex elements which constitute the wide spectrum of contemporary European culture. His fame is not perhaps as great as that of his younger fellow-composer and pupil Boulez, whilst it has even been said by some that his music is little more than the simplistic product of a sentimentally mystic and erotic imagination. Yet he perhaps occupies a unique position in the field of contemporary music, and has by his inspiration as a teacher alone, helped to mould the future of music in Europe.

Born in Avignon in 1908, Messiaen must owe much of his powerful 'romantic' intellect and poetic imagination to his mother, the poetess Cecile Sauvage, as well as to his father Pierre Messiaen, who was also a figure of some literary importance. It is probably Messiaen's essentially personal and original outlook on the universe in general, as much as his technique, which places him at the forefront of French composers of this century. It is indeed a great over-simplification to say that he lies somewhere between Debussy and Boulez in thought and technique, yet one can sense in his music elements reminiscent of both the fin-de-siecle experimentalism of Debussy and his followers, and the uncompromising boldness of Boulez, Stockhausen, or Barraque. France, it may be said, has always been not only a nation of individualists, but also the most musically insular and self-supporting of all countries. The universality or cosmopolitanism of Messiaen therefore, is somewhat remarkable, and constitutes one of the main reasons why his music is often heard in preference to that of many of his lesser-known contemporaries.

Messiaen combines a highly individualistic vision of the purpose of his compositions with a burning sincerity & a musical curiosity extending far beyond his immediate environment. In addition he possesses a technique which represents a more complete synthesis of the many-sided tendencies of present-day music than that of many of his contemporaries. In 1936, Messiaen was one of a group which,

calling themselves 'La Jeune France', issued a manifesto in which they expressed their combined intention to 're-humanise' music, which they felt was in many cases being stifled by theories and abstract systems. The human content of a composition must be restored to a position of permanent importance.

At this time, two main styles of composition were in vogue: on the one hand, an adherence to one of the central-european systems, such as dodecaphony, and on the other, a reversion to classical principles. One either 'grew forward' to Schoenberg, or 'back' to Bach. 'La Jeune France' however, showed a middle way. To the members of this group, the basic problem lay not so much in evolving a musical language, as in defining the human element in music from which such a language would spring. This 'humanism' did not however mean exactly the same thing to each member of the group.

To Messiaen and Jolivet (who were at odds here with Baudrier and Lesur, other members of the group), man is part of something beyond himself: eternal, universal and spiritual, and art is therefore not limited to the expression merely of a personal experience; it must not be limited to the technical problems of a particular age, and even less to the arbitrary solution of any one particular composer. For Messiaen, the way to discover this universal human music was to reach out to the beginnings of human consciousness - to primitive and oriental civilisations, exotic modes and rhythms, the world of nature, and recognition of the role of the divine in the visible universe.

In comparison with a composer such as Stravinsky (to select a figure of paramount importance in the development of twentieth century music), it may be said that Messiaen's music, like that of the more monumental Russian's, is a creative synthesis of many different elements - including oriental modes and rhythms and bird song, but that strangely enough the Frenchman shows a lesser degree of sophistication and a greater freedom of instinct than the Russian.

Among Messiaen's teachers at the Paris Conservatoire were Marcel Dupre, Maurice Emmanuel and Paul Dukas. Returning later to the Conservatoire as a professor, he has exerted as much influence as a teacher as he has as a composer, by his instruction of musicians such as Boulez and Barraque, to mention only two. His teaching method, including his highly significant classes in 'Aesthetics, Analysis and Rhythm' also involves open discussion about unknown regions of music, such as Eastern music, Hindu rhythms and African music.

Meanwhile, he has enabled the general listener to grasp the purpose and structure of his music by the completion in 1944 of his book 'The Technique Of My Musical Language'. He is also a frequent performer of his own music, especially at the organ of Saint-Trinite. Perhaps his works can only be understood, however, by means of a dual assessment - involving a review of the many-sided aspects of his personality, and a glance at the more fundamental elements of his technique.

It is probably Messiaen's originality of thought and expression which gives his musical language such richness. Though his music has an apparently mystical feeling and

significance, he himself describes his thought as being 'theological' rather than 'mystical'. If one were to endeavour to define these two vague and somewhat over-used terms, one might reach the conclusion that mysticism is a state of mind in which, by contemplation, a man may reach outside himself and experience contact with the Divine. Theology, on the other hand, is the science of religion and is very much concerned with man's human condition. Its function is to reconcile the imperfections of the world, (when practised in conjunction with some system of religious observance) with Divine glory; and this is surely Messiaen's purpose, too. His poetic catholicism is, indeed at the root of his creative thought, and he uses theology as a means to interpret the themes of his works in thought and music. The commonest of these themes are love, death, bird-song and the chief festivals of the Christian Church, such as Christmas, Ascension and Pentecost. For his songs and song-cycles, he himself writes the poems.

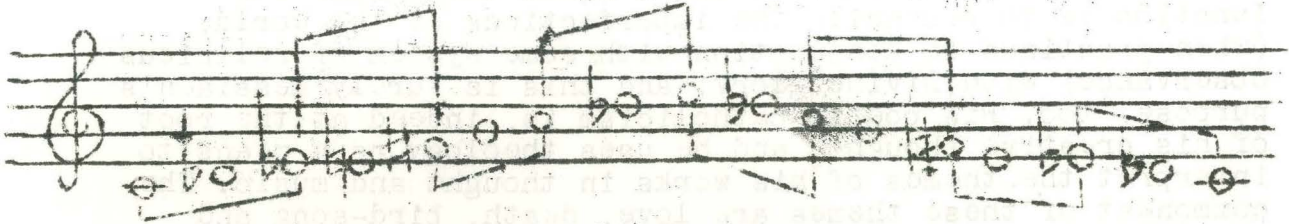
To emphasise how the above-mentioned themes dominate much of Messiaen's work, it may suffice to glance at the music which he wrote between 1944 and 1948, from which it will be apparent that the theme of love occurs again and again. In 1944, Messiaen explored the language of mystical love (as he says in his preface) in 'Vingt regards sur l'Enfant Jesus'. The romance of a Peruvian Tristan and Isolde forms the subject of 'Harawi' (which contains some very effective passages of bird-song, such as those in 'Bonjour toi, colombe verte' which was composed in the following year, whilst the 'Turangalila' symphony (1946 - 1948) depicts, on one level, the violent contrast between passionate physical love, and an ideal, tender mystical love. The 'Cinq Rechants' of 1948 return once again to Peruvian folk-song and express the physical union of two lovers.

It must be remembered that throughout Messiaen's entire corpus of work, irrespective of whether its theme is love or bird-song, there is an underlying act of faith. This is nowhere more apparent than in the work with which Messiaen first came before the public - the 'Banquet Celeste' (1928), a work in which a highly spiritual interpretation of one of the most emotive and mystical scenes of the Christian epic, 'The Last Supper', is supported by a technically successful style of composition which one might call a 'repetition technique', i.e. repetition of phrases of an original stanza, which are restated and modified in subsequent stanzas, powerful cadential phrases being used as 'couplets' to round off individual stanzas.

As far as the development of Messiaen's technique is concerned, it may be said that the highly personal use of tonality employed in 'Le Banquet Celeste' was gradually abandoned, (for example, in the 'Liturgies' of 1943 and the 'Vingt Regards' of 1944), until total chromaticism was adopted in works composed after 1950. The central and critical period of his creative life, which we may say ends with the 'Turangalila' symphony (1948), was marked by many technical discoveries, which he has summarised in 'The Technique of my Musical Language'.

What gives Messiaen's music its particularly personal melodic and harmonic character, are the so-called 'modes

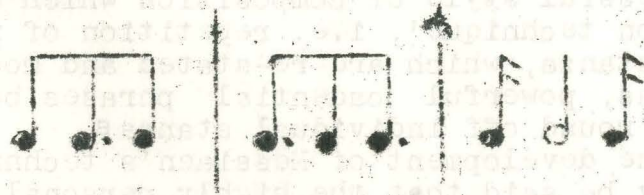
of limited transposition',. There are seven of these, the second and third being most often used, and each mode being formed of several symmetrical groups, the last note of each group always being the same as the first note of the following group. For example, the second mode, which is transposable three times, and is perhaps one of the most easily recognisable, is divided into four symmetrical groups of three notes each. Each group contains a semitone and a tone, as shown in the following:-



Messiaen's modalism is a coherent system based on vigorous and logical harmonic thought, and in the resulting chord system all the notes appear which belong to the mode used. Each mode therefore has its own harmony, and is not harmonised by chords made up of notes foreign to it. Because of their polytonal flavour, Messiaen's modes can be combined with a tonality, or with one of the traditional ecclesiastical modes. Their use led inevitably to the abandonment of tonality.

Messiaen's contrapuntal treatment of rhythm in a system which recalls Bach or the earlier madrigal composers, embodies a three-fold canon of rhythmic principles. Firstly, rhythm is entirely free from the domination of the bar-line. His music is without regular metre, but very precisely notated. He will add to any rhythm a small pulse-unit, in the form of a dot, a note or a rest, which will transform its balance. The resulting rhythm is subtle and refined. Secondly, rhythm can be augmented or diminished by fractional amounts. Whereas Bach only halved or doubled note values, Messiaen achieves similar results by augmenting notes by a quarter, a third, a half, or twice, three or four times their value, and in diminution by reducing them by inverse proportion of the system used in augmentation.

Lastly, Messiaen's use of non-retrogradable rhythms produces a certain unity of rhythmic movement, just as a certain ubiquity of tonality results from the use of the 'modes of limited transposition'. Thus:-



These three principles are contained in the Hindu rhythm 'Raga-wardhana', and it comes as no surprise, therefore, that Messiaen employs oriental or non-European rhythms and melodic devices throughout his works:-



All these elements combine to produce a very remarkable and interesting musical language which in turn is employed in the composition of equally dynamic yet highly sincere and profound music, such as the 'Ascension' - a group of four inter-related 'meditations' on that Christian festival, which is sublime in its interpretation of the mysterious dynamism of Christianity. Messiaen himself says that he prefers music which is 'refined, glistening and even voluptuous.... music that sings.... a music in stained-glass, a swirling round of complementary colours. A music that expresses the end of time, ubiquity, the blessed saints, the divine and supernatural mysteries.....'

J. CHRISTOPHER GATISS

