

THE DIVINE IN MESSIAEN'S *CHANTS DE TERRE ET DE CIEL*: THEOLOGICAL
SYMBOLISM AND SUGGESTIONS FOR PRACTICE AND PERFORMANCE

BY

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For those who have given and continue to give me a life full of joy.

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Life Background: the Early Years (1908-1938)

“Lord! Music and Poetry have led me towards You: through image, through symbol and by default of Truth. Lord, illuminate me with your Presence! Free me, inebriate me, dazzle me forever with your excesses of Truth...”¹

Olivier Messiaen, the composer, poet, organist, and perhaps most importantly, faithful Catholic, paraphrased the above text from the theologian Thomas Aquinas. Messiaen gives the text to Saint Francis of Assisi to say on his dying breaths in the opera *Saint François d’Assise*. The words, however, sum up Messiaen’s own experience with music, poetry, and religion. From an early age Messiaen was drawn to music and poetry, habits fostered by his parents, and sought to devote himself to creating music to bring the religious experiences he had to others. Throughout his life, Messiaen sought to compose music that would evangelize the truths of the Catholic Church to the whole world. He said, “My work is addressed to all who believe—and also to all others.”² His work to spread the gospel enveloped all of his artistic work—his poetry and his music. Through text and musical means, Messiaen sought to bring others to Christ.

Messiaen was born on 10 December 1908 in Avignon, France to parents Pierre Messiaen (1883-1957) and Cécile Sauvage Messiaen (1883-1927). His father Pierre was an English teacher and a renowned translator of Shakespeare. His mother was a poetess. Being highly influenced by such a literary family, Messiaen from a young age

¹ Roberto Fabbi, “Theological Implications of Restrictions in Messiaen’s Compositional Processes” in *Messiaen’s Language of Mystical Love*, ed. Siglind Bruhn (New York: Garland, 1998), 74.

² Almut Rößler, *Beiträge zur geistigen Welt Olivier Messiaens*. Trans. by Barbara Dagg and Nancy Poland as *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen, with Original Texts by the Composer* (Duisburg: Gilles und Francke, 1986), 50.

would put on plays by himself, creating a toy theater out of bits of cellophane. It is from these early childhood playtimes that one can first glimpse Messiaen's affinity for color. Christopher Dingle, in his biography of Messiaen noted that Messiaen would take bits of cellophane from patisserie bags and paint them with watercolors. He would then place the colored cellophane in front of windowpanes and let the light shine through, creating the effect of stained glass.³ Stained glass, and color in all of its forms, would remain a centerpiece of Messiaen's art throughout his life, largely due to his condition of synesthesia (a topic to be more broadly discussed later) which led him to find expressive power in the use of certain musical colors.

Messiaen's interest in literary activities seems to have been most heavily influenced by his mother, who fostered Messiaen's taste for the fantastical and the fairy tale and also encouraged his music making. While she was pregnant with Messiaen, Sauvage composed a cycle of poetry, *L'âme en bourgeon*, which Messiaen credits with influencing his entire life, and even claiming it had power over his destiny.⁴ Of the cycle and of life with his mother, he said:

The greatest influence I received was from my mother, an influence all the more extraordinary in that, as I've already said, it preceded my birth because my mother, the poetess Cécile Sauvage, wrote while expecting me a magnificent book of "prematernal" verse called *L'âme en bourgeon*. This lyrical expectancy was followed by a fairy-tale education, mainly during the First World War, when my father and uncle were mobilized and I found myself alone in Grenoble with my mother and grandmother. In that period, my mother brought me up in an atmosphere of poetry and fairy tales that, independent of my musical vocation, was the origin of all that I did later. Indeed, such an atmosphere enormously develops a child's imagination and guides it toward intangible expressions that find their true end in music, the most intangible of all the arts.⁵

³ Christopher Dingle, *The Life of Messiaen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 8

⁴ Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 11. Music, the Orient and bird-song are all mentioned in the cycle.

⁵ Olivier Messiaen, *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, Translated by E. Thomas Glasow (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1994), 109.

Messiaen's beloved mother would eventually die in 1927 at a young age from tuberculosis.⁶ She had been plagued by illness for some time. As a tribute to his mother, Messiaen composed the *Trois melodies* (1930), setting one of her poems, "Primevère," among two of his own.

It was during his childhood years with his mother that Messiaen began to teach himself to play the piano. His interest in music quickly deepened, and for holidays he would request musical scores as his gifts.⁷ These included works of Mozart, Gluck, Berlioz, and Wagner, but the most beloved score he received was undoubtedly a copy of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. By the age of 10 he had entered the Paris Conservatory where he studied with Marcel Dupré and Paul Dukas, among others. It was Dupré who introduced Messiaen to the organ, which quickly engaged Messiaen's interest. He was so exceptionally talented at the organ that his teachers encouraged him to pursue playing it professionally.⁸ Messiaen, however, was more interested in composing and chose to direct his musical future along that path. As such, his musical education rolled along at the conservatory.

By 1930 he was ready to leave the conservatory, taking a position as a church organist at La Trinité, a post he would hold for 60 years. In 1931, he became the titular organist at La Trinité following the death of Charles Quef.⁹ Along with his post at La Trinité, Messiaen continued to compose. And perhaps most pivotal in his life, he met violinist and composer Claire Delbos and married her in 1932. Messiaen's love for Delbos would eventually inspire three different musical works: the *Theme and Variations*

⁶ Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 20.

⁷ Messiaen, *Music and Color*, 109.

⁸ Dingle, *The Life of Messiaen*, 12-13.

⁹ Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 34.

for Piano (1932), the *Poèmes pour Mi* (1936-1937), and the primary focus of this study, *Chants de terre et de ciel* (1938) which was inspired both by Delbos and by the birth of the couple's son, Pascal, in 1937. The familial bliss was sadly non-permanent. Delbos began to be plagued by mental illness as early as 1943,¹⁰ and her decline lasted for many years. She was eventually institutionalized, and died in 1959.

In spite of the inspiration Messiaen took from his mother and his first wife, it is arguable that the most important and influential force of Messiaen's youth is his relationship with the Catholic Church. Messiaen never deviated from his Catholic faith. Messiaen scholar Andrew Shenton notes that, "What is remarkable, is that Messiaen was, from birth, seemingly unquestioning in his faith, and his dedication to the Catholic Church remained constant throughout his life."¹¹ Though his parents were not as involved in the Church as Messiaen would come to be, they supported his religious devotion from the time of his childhood.¹² As strong as his faith was, there is no evidence that Messiaen ever had designs of becoming a priest, and instead considered music to be his vocation. There is evidence, however, that he lived his life in such a way that he was able to participate in the Three Offices of Christ, as all Catholics are called to do. In short, the three offices consist of: 1) the priestly office (prayer and works are offered as spiritual sacrifices), 2) the prophetic office (the sharing of testimony), and 3) the royal office (self-mastery and seeing that justice is maintained throughout the world). Shenton notes,

Messiaen's stated aims for his music (and therefore his life) clearly follow this threefold pattern: he constantly declared his work to be spiritual sacrifice, and his music became testimony to his loyalty in the ordinary world by asserting publicly

¹⁰ Ibid., 157.

¹¹ Andrew David James Shenton, *Olivier Messiaen's System of Signs* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 19.

¹² Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 14.

and repeatedly his unwavering faith. Self-mastery is apparent in his dedication to his art, and Messiaen's generosity, especially to struggling musicians, is well-documented.¹³

Messiaen's music was his primary method of evangelism. This sending of "Catholic" music out to the masses says much in and of itself about Messiaen's unwavering faith.

Shenton again puts it quite elegantly:

Not only does Messiaen write for those who believe (that is, anyone who ascribes to a theocentric religion), but for everyone else too. This is an extraordinary acknowledgement of the omnipresent grandeur and relevance of God, combined with a desire to describe God in terms that might be understood by all (albeit through the prism of Catholic doctrine). Messiaen's endeavour is not evangelism in the sense of a zealous effort to convert people to Catholicism, but evangelism in its literal meaning of 'spreading the gospel.'¹⁴

From an early age, Messiaen studied theology on his own, and his faith was dramatically shaped by the writings of Thomas Aquinas and other Thomist writers and writers from the Christian Intellectual Renaissance of late nineteenth century France. Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* strives to bring together the thoughts of Aristotle, and other Christian, Greek, Jewish and Muslim authors to create a synthesized work of reason and faith.¹⁵ The book is divided among several different topics and the structure follows this pattern: Aquinas 1) poses a question, 2) poses a series of arguments, 3) poses a series of counter-arguments, 4) provides what he considers to be the correct answers. This is a rather scientific approach to looking at faith, and is reflective of Messiaen's approach to composition as well. Messiaen always described his music as "theological" (he did not approve of it being called "mystical") and this implies a scientifically rigorous approach

¹³ Shenton, *Olivier Messiaen's System of Signs*, 18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁵ Andrew Shenton, *Messiaen the Theologian* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 104.

to composition since theology is the “science of things divine.”¹⁶ Mystical music could imply the unveiling of personal visions, which was certainly not Messiaen’s goal. He was seeking to espouse the truths of the Catholic Church, and Aquinas’ example of scientific rigor had to have left an indelible impression on Messiaen, who would throughout his career use symbols of increasing significance in his music to carry out his evangelism.

The first thirty years of Messiaen’s life shaped him emotionally, spiritually, and musically. His religious and musical convictions were born at a young age and tenderly fostered by his parents. Though his early life was marked by the tragic death of his mother, and eventually the decline of his first wife, Messiaen never lost sight of his will to praise God in all of his works. His compositional voice remains a strong testimony of faith.

¹⁶ Ian Darbyshire, “Messiaen and the Representation of the Theological Illusion of Time” in *Messiaen’s Language of Mystical Love*, ed. Siglind Bruhn (New York: Garland, 1998), 33.

Messiaen's Early Musical Style (1908-1938)

Scholars note with some amazement that his musical language remained strikingly uniform throughout his long life. This constancy arises from a central truth in Messiaen's character and philosophy. What never changed was the purpose of his creative activity: to praise God, and to share through his music his profound enthusiasm for the Truths of his Catholic faith.¹⁷

With Messiaen finding music to be his vocation, and seeking to evangelize what he considered to be religious truths through his music, he developed a style of composition uniquely his own and suited to his purposes. His music is always recognizably his own—one would never mistake a Messiaen composition for that of another. Of his strategy, Messiaen wrote:

One point will attract our attention at the outset: the charm of impossibilities. It is a glistening music we seek, giving to the aural sense voluptuously refined pleasures. At the same time, this music should be able to express some noble sentiments (and especially the most noble of all, the religious sentiments exalted by the ideology and the truths of our Catholic faith). This charm, at once voluptuous and contemplative, resides particularly in certain mathematical impossibilities of the modal and rhythmic domains.¹⁸

This “charm of impossibilities” Messiaen refers to has largely to do with his three main technical innovations: the modes of limited transposition, non-retrogradable rhythms, and symmetrical permutations. Messiaen believed that these musical elements had a certain “charm” or power about them which helped to express his points. These technical innovations, along with other symbolic elements, create Messiaen's theological music and carry his message of divine love through his early compositional style.

¹⁷ Siglind Bruhn, “Religious Symbolism in the Music of Olivier Messiaen,” *American Journal of Semiotics* 13, no.1-4 (Fall, 1996): 277.

¹⁸ Olivier Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, trans. John Satterfield (Paris: Leduc, 1956), 13.

Rhythm

“Time is one of God’s strangest creatures, since it is totally in conflict with his eternal nature, he who is without beginning, without end, without succession.”¹⁹

As is evident from the above quote from Messiaen, time, and therefore rhythm, was of great concern to him. Messiaen’s rhythmical style is one of the most notable hallmarks of his music. Messiaen believed that “rhythmic” music did not mean music that kept a consistent beat—such foot-tapping music completely lacked rhythm in his view—but that “rhythmic” music stretched and contracted time values in surprising ways.²⁰ He said, “Schematically, rhythmic music is music that scorns repetition, squareness, and equal divisions, and that is inspired by the movements of nature, movements of free and unequal durations.”²¹ This view related to Messiaen’s whole concept of the perception of time in general, and in his view of rhythm’s ability to carry symbolic meaning. In the first volume of his *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d’ornithologie*, Messiaen writes, “the perception of time is the source of all music and all rhythm”²² Moreover, in the third volume of the same work, Messiaen states,

Regular time moves towards the future—it never goes backwards. Psychological time, or time of thought, goes in all senses: forward, backwards, cut in pieces, at will... [In the life of the Resurrection] we will live in a duration malleable and transformable. The power of the musician, who retrogrades and permutes his durations, prepares us, in a small way, for that state.²³

¹⁹ Messiaen, *Music and Color*, 34.

²⁰ Jean Boivin, *Musical Analysis According to Messiaen*, in *Olivier Messiaen: music, art, and literature*, ed. Christopher Dingle and Nigel Simeone (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 150.

²¹ Messiaen, *Music and Color*, 67.

²² Olivier Messiaen, *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d’ornithologie (1949-1992)* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1994-2002), 9.

²³ *Ibid.*, 352-353.

Messiaen's view and use of time is, not surprisingly, linked to his view of eternity. Given that God lives already in an eternal state, Messiaen sought to recreate this quality within his music. His musical recreations of eternity, or at least the sense of eternity, through manipulation of rhythm and time are intended to help a listener to have a small taste of what eternity might be like. At the least, the symbolism supports the idea, if not actually providing a foreshadowing experience of the afterlife.

Messiaen's rhythmic innovations provide for his rhythmic theological symbolism. The first of such innovations is that of non-retrogradable rhythms, which he used extensively in his early compositions. His other innovation, symmetrical permutations, was a topic he explored more later in his life, and as such is outside of the scope of this study. Non-retrogradable rhythms are rhythms whose patterns are identical when played forward or backward. Messiaen first discovered the concept of non-retrogradable rhythms while studying Hindu rhythms. In short, Messiaen found a rhythmic pattern consisting of five eighth notes, divided into two groups of two notes and the fifth note being in its own group (5 relating to the number of fingers on the hand). He then found the same pattern while studying ancient Greek meters (essentially, the pattern was a half note plus a quarter note plus a half note).²⁴ This pattern, in its variable incarnations, shows up often in Messiaen's music, often in the pattern of an eighth note plus a sixteenth note plus an eighth note (see m. 5 of "Bail avec Mi" for an example). For Messiaen, non-retrogradable rhythms contain symbolic strength in three ways: first, the non-retrogradable aspect in and of itself. Second, the rhythms represent the "irreversibility of time." Past events cannot be changed, just as the rhythm cannot really

²⁴ Jean Marie Wu, *Mystical Symbols of Faith*, in *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love*, ed. Siglind Bruhn (New York: Garland, 1998), 97.

be played in reverse, for one's temporal perception of it would not change. And third, non-retrogradable rhythms link to the idea of temporal existence. The past and the future are indistinguishable from each other without the present, just as the central value designates the other parts of non-retrogradable rhythms.²⁵ Messiaen found the rhythms to be a very compelling analogy for life and eternity, often citing examples in nature, such as butterflies with their mirror image wings around a central body, as proof of the innovation's fortitude.²⁶

Time and symmetry in general are at the forefront of Messiaen's rhythmic constructs. As noted above, his symmetrical structures in the form of non-retrogradable rhythms provide a window into eternity. Likewise, any deviations from symmetry that occur also have symbolic significance. His distaste for "four-square" metrical constructs, along with his efforts to promote his faith in music, creates the unmistakable rhythmic character of his music.

Melody

It may seem from the above that rhythm took supreme importance over other elements in Messiaen's music, but in his early works, Messiaen was focused on melody. He wrote, "The melody is the point of departure. May it remain sovereign!" and "let us always work melodically; rhythm remains pliant and gives precedence to melodic development, the harmony chosen being the "true," that is to say, wanted by the melody and the outcome of it."²⁷ Messiaen had two main sources of melodic inspiration in his life: plainchant and birdsong. Though birdsong was something he used from the 1940s

²⁵ Ibid., 97-98.

²⁶ Messiaen, *Music and Color*, 76-77.

²⁷ Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, trans. John Satterfield, 13 and 31.

onward, plainchant was a longtime inspiration for him, in part due to its theological significance, for he referred to it as the “only one truly religious music.”²⁸ In crafting his melodies around borrowed plainchant, Messiaen would retain the general shape and character but stretch the pitches to accommodate his modalities. An example is the song “Résurrection”, which uses the Alleluia from the Mass of the Easter Vigil as its basis.²⁹ Messiaen’s attention to melody is particularly evident in his song compositions.

Color and Harmony

Part of what gives all of Messiaen’s music its unique sound-print is Messiaen’s trademark coloristic and harmonic approach. The influence of Debussy is readily apparent in his rich use of color. Messiaen had a fascination with color that began early in his life (recall the childhood plays complete with homemade stained glass for stage coloring) and also had a condition throughout his life known as synesthesia. Synesthesia causes one to have a sense impression in one part of the body in reaction to the stimulation of another part of the body. For Messiaen, this meant seeing colors when he heard music. Messiaen claimed that the color responses he experienced were fixed and consistent.³⁰ Messiaen’s synesthesia was one of the great frustrations of his life. He said, “[One of the great dramas of my life] consists of my telling people that I see colours whenever I hear music, and they see nothing, nothing at all. That’s terrible. And they don’t even believe me.”³¹ Frustrating or not, the condition undoubtedly influenced his

²⁸ Messiaen, *Music and Color*, 29.

²⁹ Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 21.

³⁰ Jonathan W. Bernard, *Colour*, in *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995), 205.

³¹ Rößler, 122.

compositional technique, and without the synesthesia, his music may never have reached its potential in the manner that it has.

To express these colors, Messiaen created a third technical innovation (the first two being the aforementioned non-retrogradable rhythms and symmetrical permutations), the modes of limited transposition. The modes are different scales that symmetrically divide the octave in different ways. The lure of them for Messiaen was that they can transpose only a limited number of times (far less than the typical eleven times of a major scale). This impossibility of transposition is what he in fact refers to as their “charm” (referencing the “charm of impossibilities”).³² The modes include mode 1 (the whole tone scale), transposable only twice, and mode 2 (the octatonic scale), transposable three times. Mode 3 was also a favorite of Messiaen, being built of three tetrachords and only possessing four transpositions. Messiaen drew a direct connection between the modes and the symbolic power of the non-retrogradable rhythms, saying

The modes of limited transpositions realize in the vertical direction (transposition) what nonretrogradable rhythms realize in the horizontal direction (retrogradation). In fact, these modes cannot be transposed beyond a certain number of transpositions without falling again into the same notes, enharmonically speaking; likewise, these rhythms cannot be read in a retrograde sense without one’s finding again exactly the same order of values as in the right sense. These modes cannot be transposed because they are—without polytonality—in the modal atmosphere of several keys at once and contain in themselves small transpositions; these rhythms cannot be retrograded because they contain in themselves small retrogradations. These modes are divisible into symmetrical groups; these rhythms, also, with this difference: the symmetry of the rhythmic groups is a retrograde symmetry. Finally, the last note of each group of these modes is always *common* with the first of the following group; and the groups of these rhythms frame a central value *common* to each group. The analogy is now complete.³³

³² Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, trans. John Satterfield, 58.

³³ *Ibid.*, 62.

In terms of usage, Messiaen tended to treat the modes more like large unordered pitch collections than anything else, and was able to draw his chordal material using this collectional approach.³⁴ This strategy, combined with Messiaen's focus on color, leads his music to be composed of nonfunctional harmony. The element of discourse due to goal-oriented harmonies that is present in tonal music is removed and ideas and sounds are instead freely associated with each other. Color replaces discourse (though one should also note that color is also not discourse). The sound properties of individual chords become more important than how one chord moves to the next. Roberto Fabbri points out that this strategy creates harmonic "movement with no final destination, along with a loss of temporal finality in harmony (resolutions, cadences, keys), thereby stimulating a vivid perception of each chord as a color-timbre experience, each time new and unrelated to whatever follows or precedes it."³⁵ This approach makes Messiaen's harmony more about what happens vertically than horizontally, and as such the lack of traditional harmonic discourse can also affect one's perception of time during any given piece. Because the harmonies never have the feeling of progressing in the tonal sense, Messiaen's music naturally takes on a static quality rather than a dynamic one.³⁶ His harmonies imply neither tension nor relaxation, they just are. Part-writing therefore has no function, though there is evidence that he gave consideration to voice leading patterns.³⁷

³⁴ Allen Forte, *Messiaen's Chords*, in *Olivier Messiaen: Music, Art, and Literature*, ed. Christopher Dingle and Nigel Simeone (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 93-94.

³⁵ Fabbri, *Theological Implications of Restrictions in Messiaen's Compositional Processes*, 64.

³⁶ Johnson, *Messiaen*, 13.

³⁷ Forte, *Messiaen's Chords*, 98.

This approach also explains Messiaen's exceptional variety of chords. Though Messiaen used the modes as large pitch collections from which to draw material, Fabbi points out that

Messiaen's use of harmony is by no means limited to the modes of limited transposition. There is a variety of chord types that do not necessarily fit into a particular system and that vary in density, dissonance, and complexity...Messiaen's harmony adheres to a basic principle, which can be more or less visible, but is immutable—the natural resonance of vibrating bodies.³⁸

It is natural resonance, or the harmonic series, on which Messiaen based his exotic harmonies. His most basic approach was to add notes to chords. The added notes typically already exist in the harmonic series, though the average listener probably cannot hear this connection. Messiaen was confident, however, that acute listeners would hear the relationship of these pitches.³⁹ Another concept Messiaen spoke of is the “chord on the dominant.” Chords on the dominant contain appoggiaturas that can resolve in the normal way, but Messiaen also adds further appoggiaturas to make the chord a resolution of a more complex dissonance. Notes of the resolution are added as well so that the dissonance cannot really be resolved. The song “Résurrection” contains three versions of such a chord in m.3.⁴⁰ Messiaen also had a fondness for chords built of fourths and cluster chords. Such a variety of harmonic devices gives Messiaen's music its exotic colors.

Interestingly as well, there can be no dissonance in his music. Because of the modality of his music, the lack of traditional harmonic discourse, and his chordal constructs, dissonance does not exist in the classical sense. Messiaen therefore has to

³⁸ Fabbi, *Theological Implications of Restrictions in Messiaen's Compositional Processes*, 62.

³⁹ Johnson, *Messiaen*, 14.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

rely on other musical elements, such as dynamic accent, rhythm, or even melodic contour to achieve some sense of ‘dissonance.’⁴¹ Again, this is all part of Messiaen’s unique approach to color and harmony. Messiaen’s own words neatly summarize his approach, and also reference his own synesthetic connection between color and harmony:

The classic tonalities had a tonic. The ancient modes had a final. My modes have neither a tonic nor a final; they are colors. The classical chords have attractions and resolutions. My chords are colors. They engender intellectual colors, which evolve along with them.⁴²

Symbolism and Meaning

Messiaen’s sound-print is naturally suited to a symbolic function. The static quality alone seems to invite contemplation on ideas of a more grand, perhaps more divine nature. We have already spoken of the “charm of impossibilities” and how some of the mathematical properties of Messiaen’s music are intended to express observations on time and eternity or certain colors. These elements in general do not have specific symbolic meaning, though they do express general ideas. As previously stated, Messiaen did use certain melodic elements though, such as plainchant and birdsong to express specific ideas. Alleluias, for example, represent the joy in praising God (which is essentially the intended purpose of an alleluia in any scenario).⁴³ Certain words and ideas return often in his texts as well, such as “étoiles” and “silence.” Beyond these elements, Messiaen had a predilection for using certain notes and key signatures as symbolic signifiers. Messiaen scholar Siglind Bruhn provides a helpful summary of some of these elements and associations, which she refers to as “spiritual signifiers:”

⁴¹ Ibid., 20.

⁴² Messiaen, *Music and Color*, 62.

⁴³ Johnson, *Messiaen*, 42.

Messiaen's often unorthodox employment of key signatures, which he uses as spiritual signifiers rather than as devices to facilitate the writing or reading of pitches...Six sharps regularly appear in his scores when the music evokes God's or Christ's love or expresses gratitude for that love in human *alleluia* or bird song, all cases presuppose a relationship involving an earthly creature. Conversely, the Trinitarian number of accidentals, a key signature with three sharps, is found in movements that thematize relationships within the divine realm.⁴⁴

Other elements of note include the use of the pitch-class A#, which Messiaen uses to signify love; major chords with added sixths, which represent transcendent love;⁴⁵ and the key of F, which relates to angels.⁴⁶ Eventually he went so far as to develop his *langage communicable*, which mapped texts directly into his music.⁴⁷ The *langage communicable* is a sophisticated system of signs Messiaen created that draws upon linguistics to add meaning to his music through semiotics. In the system certain musical aspects are used as signs for words and concepts. And also, for many of his compositions, Messiaen would write lengthy program notes (such as those for *Quatuor pour la fin de temps* (1940-41)), detailing the symbolism of his pieces in depth.

Perhaps it is in those detailed explanations of his music that Messiaen set himself up for controversy. Many people did not perceive the link between what they read about a certain composition and what they heard in a composition. To the ears of many, Messiaen's music was not expressing theological truths, though his musicianship was rather universally admired.⁴⁸ Such is perhaps the trouble of a mission of evangelism as broad as Messiaen's was. Though he sought to reach all, saying, "my work is addressed

⁴⁴ Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2008), 111-112.

⁴⁵ Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2008), 44.

⁴⁶ Johnson, *Messiaen*, 43.

⁴⁷ Shenton, *Olivier Messiaen's System of Signs*, 1. See this entire book by Shenton for a comprehensive look at his *langage communicable*.

⁴⁸ Shenton, *Messiaen the Theologian*, 31.

to all who believe—and also to all others,” maybe not all were ready or willing to receive his message.

Poetry

It should come as no surprise that Messiaen would have a penchant for all things literary. We have already seen the influence of his parents, both being part of the literary industry themselves, his interest in theological study, and his predilection for adding lengthy descriptive program texts to his compositions. Writing the texts for his vocal music, therefore, was a natural choice for Messiaen. Only two of his works use texts by other authors: the song “Le sourire” is to a text by his mother, Cécile Sauvage, and the text to the choral work *La Transfiguration de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ* uses passages by Thomas Aquinas as well as texts from the Bible and the Missal. All other texts are Messiaen’s own.

Messiaen’s poetic writing shares many traits in common with the surrealist compositions of the first portion of the twentieth century. In a study of Messiaen’s poetry, Larry W. Peterson identifies the similar qualities between Messiaen’s work and that of the surrealists as the use of “radical imagery, lack of rational logic, and the Surrealist concept of the artistic relationship between the artist’s work and his soul or inner self.”⁴⁹ Neither logic nor reason can be used to explain much of the poetry of Messiaen and that of the Surrealists. There is one fundamental difference between Messiaen and the Surrealists, however, and it is that Messiaen was staunchly Christian and the Surrealists in general represented Christianity in no way, and many in fact were

⁴⁹ Larry W. Peterson, *Messiaen and Surrealism*, in *Messiaen’s Language of Mystical Love*, ed. Siglind Bruhn (New York: Garland, 1998), 223.

opposed to it.⁵⁰ More than ideas, Messiaen shared with the Surrealists a predilection for surprising or exotic images and an alternative verse style (in many cases avoiding a binding structure of any sort). Thus, his writing has a relationship with surrealism, but he was not explicitly a Surrealist writer.

Much of Messiaen's poetry is on the topic of love, and understandably so, considering he was often composing works to express divine love along with love within family and marriage, as in the *Poèmes pour Mi* and the *Chants de terre et de ciel*. The word "amour" appears more than 40 times in his 27 poems.⁵¹ Messiaen explores the many different kinds of love in his poetry, ranging from the lowest form (such as love in the *Don Giovanni* sense) all the way through maternal love and ultimately to divine love.⁵² It is arguable that Messiaen was always trying to express love through his music because of his music's evangelical nature. A more detailed look at the many incarnations of love in the song cycle *Chants de terre et de ciel* will follow in the next section.

Messiaen's focus on the many types of love unfortunately led many to criticize him as creating music and poetry that is inappropriately erotic for the subject matter. Some people found the close juxtaposition of marital love (and along with that sensual and sexual love) and divine love to be disconcerting. Bruhn effectively rebuts the idea that Messiaen was attempting to create erotic poetry with the following:

Messiaen believes that the soul of every Christian is drawn by an unspeakable love to the union with God in the Holy Spirit. This love can be metaphorically couched in the language of eroticism, because Eros is the most intense form of desire and fulfillment experienced by humans. Eros can therefore be understood as a foretaste of what awaits the soul at the end of time in its union

⁵⁰ Ibid., 221.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Wu, *Mystical Symbols of Faith*, 75.

with God. Outside the realm of metaphoric representation, however, this Eros is by no means sensual.⁵³

Bruhn further supports her point by using the example of the Song of Solomon (also known as the “Song of Songs”) within the Bible, which the Catholic Church regards as scripture (some faiths do not). The joy of union between man and woman is a type for divine love, and as such the two types of love could be discussed in the same breath:

When Messiaen reiterates that great love is a reflection—albeit only a pale reflection—of the only genuine love, i.e., divine love...he expresses a conviction that is in direct line with the lessons Bernard of Clairvaux thought should be gleaned from the Song of Songs. Writers on the Song of Songs have always held that the earthly union of man and woman may be considered as a faint echo of the Soul’s union with God, faint because the joy experienced by the human soul is infinitely superior to that experienced by the body.⁵⁴

Messiaen was not trying to create poetry that at once was both erotic and evangelical.

The awkwardness of such a feat should preclude its existence. Moreover, perhaps his sheer enthusiasm for the Gospel, his effusiveness in word and music, creates some confusion. Messiaen’s own words on the many types of love help to clarify just what his beliefs were, and also illuminate once again his faith in the family unit as a taste of the divine on earth:

For me, human love represents a kind of communication, but in its carnal realization, this communication is transcended by that of motherhood. The union of mother and child, so discredited in our time, is doubtless the culmination of nobility and beauty on earth. That union itself, however, is transcended by the communion of the Catholic who receives the host in church...we are absorbed by Christ who is our superior, something which doesn’t exist in human love, or even in the relationship between mother and child.⁵⁵

⁵³ Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Explorations of Love and Death*, 17.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁵ Messiaen, *Music and Color*, 31.

Conclusion

All aspects of Messiaen's early musical style contribute toward his goal of composing music that is at once evangelical and theological. His symbolic use of rhythm, time, melody, harmony, and color, along with his carefully composed texts create music that is rich in meaning and earnest in purpose. Though not all care to receive his music with its intended purpose, Messiaen's evangelical purposes are undeniable.

The Songs in General

Messiaen's compositions for solo voice with accompaniment are limited to five works: the unpublished *Deux ballades de Villon* (1921), the *Trois mélodies* (1930), *Poèmes pour Mi* (1936, orchestrated 1937), *Harawi* (1945), and the principal subject of this paper, *Chants de terre et de ciel* (1938). The *Deux ballades de Villon* are a work of his youth. The *Trois mélodies*, as mentioned earlier, were crafted as a tribute to his mother following her death. The remaining three cycles, *Poèmes pour Mi*, *Harawi*, and *Chants de terre et de ciel* are Messiaen's most important vocal works, along with his opera *Saint François d'Assise* from late in his career (1983). Like the opera, *Harawi* is beyond the scope of this discussion, it being a valuable work, but not one from his early period (it conveys further musical development). The *Poèmes pour Mi* and *Chants de terre et de ciel*, however, bear much in common and are related in purpose.

Both *Poèmes pour Mi* and *Chants de terre et de ciel* were created in honor of Messiaen's first wife, Claire Delbos, whom he wed in 1936. There is an additional third work written for her as well, the *Theme and Variations* (1932) for violin and piano, a work for the couple to perform together. *Poèmes pour Mi* is Messiaen's first large song cycle, and is a set of 9 songs that deal with different aspects of marriage. The work is scored for soprano and piano, and Messiaen also orchestrated the songs. The title references Messiaen's pet name for his wife, "Mi." Though dedicated to his wife, the work still maintains a strong evangelical feel, as Messiaen's poetry captures the

combination of human and divine love that occurs in marriage. Christopher Dingle, in his biography of Messiaen explains this further:

The dedication of the title is far from being the only way in which the cycle is inspired by Messiaen's relationship with his wife. His human love for Claire is placed within the context of the divine love of God. This results in some juxtapositions that can be uncomfortable for unbeliever and believer alike, with the language of heartfelt religious devotion...nestling alongside personal revelations about life with Claire.⁵⁶

Again, this returns to the above topic of the question of eroticism in Messiaen's poetry, or at least that of combining the celestial with the terrestrial. Such a combination was likely never intended by Messiaen to be shocking or provocative in any way. Instead, it should stand as a testament of how centered on faith marriage was for him, as he strove to keep his marriage not just a covenant made between him and Delbos, but also one made between him and God.

Like the *Poèmes pour Mi*, the *Chants de terre et de ciel* were also composed for Delbos, but also for the Messiaen's new son, Pascal. The *Chants* go beyond the topic of marriage and delve full force into family life, discussing childhood and parenthood. The arrival of Pascal in 1937 was particularly exciting for the Messiaen family, as Delbos had suffered several miscarriages previously and also because Messiaen's half-brother, Jacques (Messiaen's father remarried following the death of Cécile Sauvage) had died in infancy in 1934.⁵⁷ The *Chants* again combine celestial and terrestrial topics, though perhaps in a more comfortable way than the *Poèmes* for most listeners, as the two are kept more separate and the focus is more on the innocence and purity of children on the whole.

⁵⁶ Dingle, *The Life of Messiaen*, 50.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

Both cycles were created with a particular voice in mind: that of Marcelle Bunlet, Messiaen's favorite singer. Bunlet was a dramatic soprano whose primary repertoire focused on Wagner and Strauss, each of whose music she excelled in. Her signature roles included Kundry, Brünnhilde, Salome, and Arabella. Of Bunlet and his songs, Messiaen commented:

Indeed, I've composed three large song cycles: *Poèmes pour Mi*, *Chants de terre et de ciel*, and *Harawi*. All are written for piano and voice; only the first has been orchestrated. These three cycles are characterized by their call for a dramatic soprano voice, owing to my admiration for Marcelle Bunlet, a marvelous singer and wonderful musician who had a very flexible voice and extended tessitura and who sang Isolde, Kundry, and Brünnhilde effortlessly. I intended my song cycles for her. They are very long, very tiring for the breath, and require a very wide vocal range. For all these reasons, it is understandable that few singers have tackled them and that these pieces are less known than others.⁵⁸

Messiaen somewhat generously recognizes the sheer difficulty of his songs in the above quote. Both cycles play to the strengths of most dramatic sopranos: long breath lines, a wide range, plenty of singing in the lower and middle voice. But they are equally appropriate for multiple voice types (discounting the orchestrated versions at least). These issues will be returned to later.

It is interesting that Messiaen would choose the soprano voice to portray the thoughts of a man, specifically since they are his own words. However, in using a female voice to portray his texts, Messiaen is able in a way to retain his own voice. As Jane Manning, a singer who has performed and recorded Messiaen's song cycles points out, "a male singer would tend inevitably to appropriate the husbandly feelings Messiaen expresses, whereas a female interpreter can leave them intact as the composer's... moreover, the soprano voice has access to a physical warmth and ecstatic

⁵⁸ Messiaen, *Music and Color*, 128.

brilliance uniquely its own.”⁵⁹ Whereas a male singer could end up pasting his own feelings onto the words of another man, portraying them in a way as his own, a female singer can only report the words of a man, though she does have control of how the text is delivered. It is arguable as well that no voice but the female voice could truly express the grandeur of womanhood, which Messiaen so reveres through his songs. Messiaen’s choice to use the soprano voice probably was also related to his affinity for birds and bird song. Manning further states that, “Messiaen’s long-standing fascination and affinity with birds and their song may perhaps provide the key to what seems to be an astonishing grasp of the mechanics of the female voice, including importantly, awareness of the physical feeling of freedom that results from properly energized and supported vocal tone.”⁶⁰ Messiaen’s writing for the soprano voice then not only protects his words to his wife and son, but also subtly brings in the other aspect of his (extended) family, that of his beloved birds.

Chants de terre et de ciel and the *Poèmes pour Mi* are both intriguing looks into Messiaen’s spirituality and his family life. Both are works that have great value musically and pedagogically, though they are often cast aside in favor of other works or as part of a general avoidance of twentieth century repertoire deemed too “difficult” for most singers. Due to the scope of this work, the remainder of this paper will focus solely on the *Chants de terre et de ciel*, but the *Poèmes pour Mi* would be a more than worthy work to study, not just for its value musically but also for the opportunities it provides to students and teachers of singing. The following comments on vocal concerns and benefits within the *Chants de terre et de ciel* could largely be applied to both works, and

⁵⁹ Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 78.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

the author of this paper encourages the reader to explore all of Messiaen's vocal works further.

“Bail avec Mi”

Poetry

The first song in *Chants de terre et de ciel*, “Bail avec Mi,” is dedicated to Delbos (Messiaen’s pet name for his wife was “Mi”). The title translates literally to “Lease with Mi,” referring to the marriage contract as well as Messiaen’s perception that his wife is somehow on loan to him from God, for he can merely have a lease with her, no more, as God has permanent ownership. Throughout the poem Messiaen draws a connection between the celestial and terrestrial aspects of love. The text heavily emphasizes how man and woman are mortal and separated from God, aided by repetition of the word “terre.” However, in the same breath the woman is afforded an elevated, heavenly status, thus providing a link to God. A handful of comparisons are drawn, always with the woman as the celestial body and the man as the terrestrial. Messiaen likens Delbos to being an “étoile du silence” to his “coeur de terre.” Delbos is also called a “petite boule de soleil” complementary to Messiaen’s “terre.” Even the final comparative image of the poem, “doux compagnon de mon épaule amère” pits her as something sweet to Messiaen’s bitterness. All of the comparisons are favorable to Delbos and liken her to heavenly bodies and characteristics. In these comparisons Messiaen truly pays a high compliment to his wife.

One particular reference in the song, “étoile du silence,” is a concept that comes up somewhat frequently in Messiaen’s music and poetry. The ‘star of silence’ references Revelation 8:1⁶¹, “And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven

⁶¹ All Biblical quotations come from the King James Version.

about the space of half an hour.” Robert Johnson notes that Messiaen uses stars symbolically as representing anything “spiritual as distinct from the physical.” Messiaen also discusses the silence of heaven in the preface to his chamber work *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*.⁶² Representing Delbos as a star therefore places her in a distinctly elevated status.

Music

The song is essentially ternary in structure with a short two-measure coda at the end (ABA'coda). The song on the whole is given a contemplative, placid feel by its slow tempo and cool coloring. The simple structure, along with its relatively simple vocal presentation, creates a simple and earnest aural portrait of a man's praise and love for his wife.

The A section is characterized by a recurring flourish motive in the piano ending on a C#7. This C#7 functions as a pedal. The high tessitura of this motive is in sharp contrast to the vocal line which lies in the soprano's middle voice and never really leaves it for the whole song, as F#5 barely scrapes the upper register of most sopranos. Messiaen is again creating a dichotomy between things of a celestial and things of a terrestrial nature: the high tessitura of the recurring motive is a nod to the celestial, with the voice being an earthly anchor. The A section also contains a second motive that occurs in both the voice and the piano, that of a descending major second that oscillates. This downward motion of this motive reinforces the terrestrial and being closely associated with the setting of the word “terre.”

⁶² Johnson, *Messiaen*, 58.

In the A section, the text setting is simple and natural. The predominantly syllabic setting, save for two important melismas, supports the humility and sincerity of the poem. The aforementioned descending major second motive supports an earthy, heavy feeling. A lengthy melisma on “l’atmosphère” while the piano is still creates a feeling of spaciousness, reflecting the broadness of the sky. And the ascent on “la montagne de l’atmosphère” readily portrays a mountain in form. “Montagne” also points again to reaching above the earth, towards heaven—to touch the ‘mountain of the atmosphere’ is to come much closer to touching God; also, the grandeur of mountains points to the greatness of God. The anticlimactic crescendo at this point (m. 6) prevents the song from becoming impersonally showy—retaining again a sudden *pianissimo* dynamic keeps the text intimate.

The B section is a remarkable shift in color as coolness shifts to brightness. Whereas the A sections convey the terrestrial world, the B section conveys the celestial world. The key signature changes to six sharps, which symbolically invokes the love of Christ and God. Also, each of the three vocal phrases ends on A#4. Messiaen uses A# to represent love (this pitch class importantly returns as the final note of the cycle in “Résurrection”). The gesture of a descending major second from the A section is replaced with an ascending major second (D#5-E#5), which begins each phrase (with an additional note preceding the start of the second phrase in m. 12) and also ends the final phrase of the section (m. 14). The tritone leaps should not mislead one here—Messiaen considered tritones to be one of the most calm and mild intervals, and often used them while mentioning perfection.⁶³ The voice and the piano operate in a higher tessitura during the section, though the piano much more so than the voice, for a vocal tessitura

⁶³ Theo Hirsbrunner, *Olivier Messiaen: Leben und Werke* (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1998), 19.

too dazzlingly high would eliminate the contemplative atmosphere. All of the changes from the A section, the key signature, the emphasis on ascending major seconds, and the higher tessitura reinforce celestial qualities.

The return of the A section is very similar to its first presentation, though it is truncated in length. The pitch material is essentially the same, though it is more grounded in its earthiness at this point, having just left the heavenly realm of six sharps. The piano performs the crescendo at the end of the section alone, with the voice joining in only at the switch to the *pianissimo* dynamic for an octave leap to F#5. The two-measure coda at the end is like a little love note that reinforces Delbos' sweetness to Messiaen's perceived awkwardness. Tritones are created throughout (sweetness) by constant leaping (awkwardness) until finally settling on a chord with C# as its bass and the pedal figure from the A section ringing one last time.

Vocal Matters

Vocally, "Bail avec Mi" is not too terribly difficult, though it does have some areas of isolated concern. If anything, it would make a good first foray into singing any of Messiaen's works or even post-1900 repertoire in general. The vocal part is well-supported by the piano, with a fair amount of vocal doubling. The moderate tempo, range, and largely syllabic text setting make diction easy. Several patterns repeat throughout the song. Its brevity alone makes it more accessible, for one has less material to learn. The rhythms are not difficult either, though they are just tricky enough to catch a singer who does not accurately subdivide rhythms in her head.

But all general ease aside, there are two main areas of concern in the song: the *pianissimo* F#5s in m. 6 and m. 19. F#5 is not a particularly high note and lies above the typical soprano passaggio. The problem is the *pianissimo* dynamic. The soprano voice has a natural inclination to open up and increase in volume on higher pitches. Singing an F#5 at such a soft dynamic requires a light adjustment with good spin over a solid foundation of support. Luckily, each approach to the pitch is user-friendly: in the first case, the ascent is a triad and in the second, an octave leap. The open vowels also favor the singer, though they do not remove the difficulty entirely.

Three different practice strategies will help with these passages. The first addresses the first passage (m. 6) and involves singing sustained triads in first inversion. The triads should first be hummed or done with a lip trill so that one can feel the necessary increases in support during the ascent. The triads should then be sung at a moderate volume on a comfortable vowel so that a singer can find the space required for the top note. This can then be modified by adding a crescendo or a decrescendo across the entire exercise. A variety of vowels should also be used, and the whole exercise should be sung at multiple pitch levels. Once this is mastered, the written dynamic of a crescendo to a *subito piano* should be employed. The second strategy is very similar to the first, though it addresses the passage at m. 19 more directly. Again, one should start by doing octave leaps on hums or lip trills and then progress to singing the leaps at several different dynamic levels and pitches. As comfort increases, the dynamic can decrease.

The third strategy is more holistic and less spot-focused than the first two, and that is of practicing the *messa di voce*. By working on dynamic control on single pitches,

one can begin to find the different adjustments necessary for singing at different dynamic levels. This obviously addresses more than just the issue of leaping up to a *pianissimo* note. The exercise could be expanded as well to be a crescendo and a decrescendo over any number of short vocal patterns.

“Bail avec Mi” would make a wonderful introduction to singing Messiaen’s repertoire. The relatively simple rhythms provide the opportunity for one to become more familiar with Messiaen’s additive rhythmic practices without getting in too deep, and also forces one into good counting habits (if one is to sing the rhythm correctly by any estimation). One’s ear can become accustomed to Messiaen’s use of colorful chords while still having the piano’s support of the vocal line. Striving to sing the *pianissimo* F#s will give one the opportunity to work on dynamic range, large leaps, and vocal coloring across the voice as well as making subito dynamic changes across registral transitions. Overall, the song promotes good vocalism and working on common difficulties and as such is excellent for teaching purposes.

“Antienne du silence”

Poetry

The second song of the cycle, “Antienne du silence” is another song meant for Delbos and is dedicated to *Le jour des Anges gardiens* (the Day of the Guardian Angels, October 2). The title translates to “Antiphon of Silence.” Antiphons typically are short liturgical sentences that are either sung or recited as part of the Catholic Mass, normally in responsorial fashion. In this case, Messiaen uses such a sentence to precede an alleluia sung by one voice, and this pattern twice through constructs the entire song. Robert Sherlaw Johnson points out that this structure is “associated with the canticles of Lauds and Vespers in Paschaltide [the Easter season]...and their musical setting is very simple and syllabic in treatment.”⁶⁴ The dedication references the belief in guardian angels that the Catholic Church both holds and celebrates. This belief can be traced in part to Matthew 18:10, which says, “Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.” The Catholic Catechism further clarifies this, stating that “the whole life of the Church benefits from the mysterious and powerful help of angels... ‘Beside each believer stands an angel as protector and shepherd leading him to life.’”⁶⁵ Discussion of angels, in a song meant for Delbos, is another example of Messiaen linking his wife to the celestial realm and idealizing her. It is also, perhaps, an offering by Messiaen to the angels, a request that they watch over his little family.

⁶⁴ Johnson, *Messiaen*, 58.

⁶⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995): 334, 336.

Silence is again emphasized in “Antienne du silence.” In this text, however, Messiaen is able to go beyond observing heavenly silence (“étoile du silence”) to holding it in his hands and drinking it in (“silence dans mes main” and “Que j’aspire le silence du ciel”). This new opportunity to truly experience the heavenly silence revered in “Bail avec Mi” is yet another reference to marriage and family that Messiaen makes, in that through his family he can have celestial experiences in a much deeper and more sentient way. In other words, marriage and family have brought him closer to God.

Music

Where “Bail avec Mi” was relatively simple, “Antienne du silence” is complex. While the text organizes itself into two main sections, with the vocal part following this structure, the piano part is absolutely continuous. The piano part is spread across three staves. The top and bottom staves work as measured time keepers, albeit delicate ones. The two bottom staves are in counterpoint against the top staff. The bottom staff moves mainly in leaps, and always in eighth or sixteenth notes. The top staff plays continuous sixteenth notes throughout, with the one exception being a sixteenth note rest on the downbeat of the final vocal pitch in m. 11. The material of the top staff is a constant variation of itself. M. 1 through the first four sixteenth notes of m. 2 is the initial iteration, and the material is then varied and expanded with similar gestures throughout. The effect of this top line in the piano with its high tessitura is like the twinkling of stars, which is apropos considering the subject matter. The middle staff is the most lyrical in nature, and its rhythm links up to the vocal line. Overall, the piano part creates a colorful background over which the voice can float.

The vocal part in “Antienne du silence” is the most ethereal of the entire cycle. Each of the two main sections consists of one or two short phrases that hover around the *passaggio*, end in the middle voice, and are followed by an extended *alleluia*. The short phrases all contain the same pitches and general shape of line, and also have the bulk of the text. The *alleluias* are the true focus of the vocal part and resemble a vocalise. Each *alleluia* is of extended length, resembling the highly melismatic *alleluias* at the end of some masses that would typically also contain a lengthy final *jubilus*.⁶⁶ The vocal part climaxes on A5 in m. 8, just shy of Messiaen’s A# ‘note of love.’ On a large scale, one can interpret this A5 pointing toward the final A# of “Résurrection.” The entire vocal part is meant to be sung at a *pianissimo*, making it very challenging for the vocalist.

Johnson makes several interesting observations about the pitch content of the song. He points out that the piano predominantly uses mode 7, a mode that contains all but two notes of the chromatic scale. However, Messiaen then introduces two foreign notes into the mix and then has the total chromatic available to him. He does not use it as such though, for when he adds the two foreign notes, he also removes two notes from the original mode. The vocal line uses this same pitch collection, and the way notes are enharmonically written influences the direction of the melodic lines. For example, D^b always descends to C, while C# always ascends to D.⁶⁷ The result is a feeling of stasis and calm, even amid all of the motion within the piano part. It is again color that controls the mien of the song, and these altered modes create a color that allows Messiaen to express silence through sound.

⁶⁶ Johnson, *Messiaen*, 59.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Vocal Matters

This is undoubtedly one of the most difficult songs of the cycle to sing. However, it provides one with the potential for much vocal growth through its study. Unlike “Bail avec Mi,” this song would make a terrible choice as an entrance to contemporary repertoire, as it requires that a vocalist have a solid vocal foundation with limits that can be stretched. The breath lines, dynamic, tessitura, pitch, and rhythm, all make this a difficult song to sing.

Messiaen’s vocal works do in general favor the singer and Messiaen credits this to the fact that he sang through every work himself to make sure they were vocally realizable, saying that by doing so he became “aware of the problems of diction, the phonetic value of vowels and consonants, the importance of breathing, the right places to take breaths, and the different registers of the voice.”⁶⁸ In general, Messiaen did an excellent job of screening out particular difficulties, though one can reasonably assume he had a massive lung capacity when looking at “Antienne du silence.” The most difficult breath lines occur on ascending passages. One must learn quickly how to budget air or, if necessary, stretch the phrase as far as one can and then take a catch breath. Even if this second option must be used in performance, attempting the longer lines in practice will be a useful vocalise for improving breath management. To practice these long lines, it is a good idea to do them on lip trills or hums or even down the octave to start, as repeatedly trying to sing in the higher tessitura could fatigue certain voices. Another idea for improving breath lines would be singing long tones (a favorite among instrumentalists). Long tones can help to build stamina and can be helpful for catching any tensions that might creep into a voice, and similarly any breath support that might

⁶⁸ Messiaen, *Music and Color*, 129.

dwindle across a held note. These could be single notes, stretched across a pattern, or performed as a *messa di voce* exercise as described above in relation to “Bail avec Mi.”

The issue of the *pianissimo* dynamic looms large, as it must be sung from F4 up to A5. This song is particularly suited to high and light sopranos, in spite of the dramatic voice Messiaen had in mind when composing the song. Bunlet must have been quite the artist and technician. Larger-voiced singers would have to start at a comfortable dynamic and then whittle the volume from there without adding tension. Attempting to create the *pianissimo* mainly from color and less from dynamic will likely be the easiest strategy for most voices. One could also try singing sections of the alleluias with first a crescendo and then a decrescendo, finding comfort at multiple dynamic levels. Working the alleluias in transposition would also be helpful, to establish comfort at several pitch levels. And if all else fails, even a gently sung *mezzo piano* dynamic should be able to carry the appropriate affect if necessary.

Finding pitches and coping with the high tessitura can also be challenging. There is some support from the piano for pitches, but really, one will need to be quite independent with the ear to find the correct notes. To practice, one should try to sing the vocal line against each of the three piano staves, noting the intervals created against each line. It is perhaps easiest to focus one's ear on the top line, for if nothing else, Db is regularly proffered and one can use to re-center one's sense of pitch. If pitch is a really horrid problem, one should remove the rhythm and do each phrase as a vocalise on its own. The issue of tessitura is maybe a harder one to address. The approach to the highest pitches is difficult in that they are preceded by lengthy ascents with few opportunities to breathe. These lines present an excellent chance though to work on

breath support and vocal freedom, for the throat must be completely free in order to float the high pitches. Practicing them in reverse order could be helpful. Instead of singing the phrase as written, one could begin at the highest pitch and proceed backwards to the start of the phrase. By starting the highest pitch from a comfortable placement, one can get a good feel for the space and support necessary for the note, and then reverse engineer the ascent to end in such a favorable position. Spending a little time each day on working the high tessitura should bring gains if done conscientiously.

Rhythm, or keeping track of it, is the final challenging component of the song. It is exceptionally difficult to keep track of one's place in the music because there are neither harmonic nor rhythmic guideposts for the singer to follow. A singer who does not subdivide rhythms in her head will quickly be exposed. The plan of attack should be rather obvious: speaking the text first, articulating each sixteenth note as an exercise, and manually tapping the beat somewhere on the body. But really, to stay on track in the song, one must be intimately familiar with both the vocal and the piano parts. Knowledge of the piano lines, especially the middle staff will be extremely helpful in keeping track of the vocal rhythm.

Though "Antienne du silence" is quite difficult, the opportunity for improvement of vocal skill through study of it makes it a worthwhile project. Breath support, dynamic control, vocal freedom, sense of pitch, and rhythmic accuracy can all be improved through working on the piece. The song would make a fine piece for advanced vocalists to study.

“Danse du bébé-Pilule”

Poetry

“Danse du bébé-Pilule” is the first of two songs dedicated to Messiaen’s infant son, Pascal (“Pilule” was Messiaen’s pet name for his son). The text of both songs (the second being “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence”) depicts children as being completely innocent (a view Messiaen held that somewhat contradicts Catholic doctrine). Siglind Bruhn explains this:

Significantly, this pair of poems is the only one in which Messiaen does not seem to posit a contrast between celestial and terrestrial dimensions. Against doctrinal pronouncements according to which even newborn infants are heirs to original sin, the devotional tradition has always depicted infants as the only human beings who are untouched by evil. Messiaen implicitly endorses this position.⁶⁹

In “Danse du bébé-Pilule,” Messiaen focuses on the baby at play with his parents. The text is a collection of fanciful images, each either describing the little boy or things he can play with. In a way the text is composed through the child’s eyes in terms of the simplicity of images and delight in small things, but it is told from the father’s perspective. A faux folk line runs throughout the song. As Bruhn points out, though the title and the first line of the poem both suggest dancing, “the overwhelming impression in this poem, even without Messiaen’s music, is one of song.”⁷⁰ As in the first two songs, reverence for the mother (Delbos) continues. She is compared to the beauties of nature (“Son oui perpétuel était un lac tranquille”) and is noted as being a source of joy and

⁶⁹ Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Explorations of Love and Death*, 90.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

peace for Pascal. Messiaen's appreciation obviously extends beyond his own wife to mothers in general, making the song in a way another tribute to his mother, Sauvage.

Music

Messiaen describes the opening of the song as a false folk-song with an onomatopoeic refrain in his treatise *Technique de mon langage musical*.⁷¹ It is the longest song of the cycle. The song is dancelike in character, but perhaps for a person with two left feet. The song is by Messiaen's standards very rhythmic in its variety of rhythmic patterns. The changing rhythmic patterns throughout the song give the impression of the lilting, unsteady steps of a small child.

The form of the song could be described as ABCB'Acoda. The A sections are in the aforementioned mixed meters and contain the folk-like refrains ("Malonlanlaine, ma"). It almost sounds like a silly little song a parent might sing to child, making it up as he goes along. All of the "malonlanlaine" sections are in mode 2 (octatonic).⁷² The two *plus lent* interjections in each of the A sections (mm. 15, 21, 101, 107; "était un lac tranquille" and "autour de mon sourire") highlight the positive qualities of the mother, and it is notable that Messiaen chooses to slow the music at this point, lingering over the praise of the woman. The B sections are each in two parts. The first part is a fast section with the voice and piano moving in predominantly contrary motion. The second part, beginning respectively at m. 43 and m. 77, begins a pattern that is sonically typical for Messiaen and serves as a bridge to the C section. There is one notable and interesting

⁷¹ Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, trans. John Satterfield, 33.

⁷² Bruhn, *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death*, 104.

link in the B section to the first song as well. M. 40 of “Danse du bébé-Pilule” quotes mm. 7-8 of “Bail avec Mi.” The connection here is the text, linking “étoile du silence” to “les aureoles,” recalling the star sung of in “Bail avec Mi.” The C section pays homage to children. It is all on nonsense words (“io”) and is reminiscent of the songs children will sing to themselves during play. The vocal line is doubled on the piano. The song finally comes to an end with a short coda full of laughter and a childishly triumphant ascending portion of an octatonic scale to end the work on A5 (again, building excitement toward the final A#5 at the end of the cycle).

Vocal Matters

Vocally, this song is a great break for a singer in spite of its length. With the first two songs being of a subdued and sustained nature, the chance to sing at a full dynamic is a welcome change. The vocal phrases are shorter as well and there are enough rests throughout the song that stamina should not be a problem. The challenges for “Danse du bébé-Pilule” come instead from rhythm and musical character.

The rhythmic challenges of the song are of a different nature than the first two songs. Whereas “Bail avec Mi” has some additive rhythms and “Antienne du silence” is essentially devoid of rhythmic landmarks, the difficulties of “Danse du bébé-Pilule” come instead from mixed meters and some quick shifts in tempo. Here again, one who does not subdivide and keep track of the smaller pulse (in this case eighth or sixteenth notes) will be exposed unfavorably. Also, the quick shifts in tempo (and musical character) keep one on her toes as she navigates between sections. One would be wise to first speak the rhythms and carefully mark the duple versus the triple figures in the music.

The favorable aspect of the rhythm is that the piano completely supports the vocal line. Once the rhythm is mastered, the natural swing of it that Messiaen composed into the song should become evident.

The issue of musical character looms larger than rhythm. While the first two songs of the cycle are reserved and require a certain amount of formality in their vocal presentation, “Danse du bébé-Pilule” asks both singer and pianist to express an almost reckless joy. The element of play referenced in the text is easy to hear in the music and see on the page as the vocal line leaps about in figures that swirl and climb. It is the leaping nature of the line, with more motion in intervals a third and larger than by step, which makes the song so challenging vocally. One solution would be to separate the vocal line into several shorter vocalises to be sung slowly so that one can find how to balance the changes in mouth-space necessary between each pitch. Such patient work will also reveal problems of vocal tension, such as clenching the jaw, tongue, or neck in order to traverse a wider interval. It is this opportunity to work on ridding the body of vocal tension, among other reasons, that makes this such an ideal song for study. Any tendency a singer might have towards gripping a muscle or pushing the sound will quickly become evident. And likewise, because the character of the piece demands such a free-wheeling dance, a tense production of sound will rear itself as inappropriate vocal character.

“Danse du bébé-Pilule” is the most cheerful and approachable piece of the cycle. It could excerpt well. Its lightness of character and playful text match the music well, making it more accessible to audiences that might be unfamiliar with Messiaen’s typical sound-print. For a singer, it provides an opportunity to improve rhythm and counting

skills as well as a springboard for addressing issues of vocal tension. And its sweetness can bring a smile to all, as it so accurately depicts the innocence of a small child at play.

“Arc-en-ciel d’innocence”

Poetry

“Arc-en-ciel d’innocence” is the second of two songs in the cycle dedicated to Messiaen’s son Pascal. The title references another of Messiaen’s favorite symbols: rainbows. Bruhn notes that in Messiaen’s works, “the rainbow is one of the manifestations of God’s presence in human life” and “innocence [is] an attribute that characterizes saintly human beings.”⁷³ Here again, Messiaen highlights the innocence of the child, letting no terrestrial qualities be associated with him. Shenton points out that Messiaen also uses the symbol of the rainbow in the seventh movement of the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, and in the notes preceding *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* Messiaen says that the rainbow is a symbol “of peace, [and] wisdom of every vibration of luminosity and sound.”⁷⁴ Here also notice how Messiaen has tied the symbol of the rainbow to the number seven, referencing the number of colors in a rainbow. Such symbolism occurs in “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence” as well, as will shortly be shown.⁷⁵ In the poem, the father is watching his son sleep. The father encourages the son to dream and then begins to hope for the boy to wake up as he fantasizes about the games they can play together in the coming day. The piece ends as the little boy awakens and the father tenderly greets him.

⁷³ Ibid., 95.

⁷⁴ Olivier Messiaen, *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, D. & F. 13, 901 (Paris: Durand, 1942).

⁷⁵ Shenton, *Olivier Messiaen’s System of Signs*, 27.

Music

The symbol of the rainbow is maintained musically as well. Bruhn notes that the song is in seven main parts (or there are seven iterations of the principle component) representing the seven colors of the rainbow.⁷⁶ Seven as a symbol shows up likewise in the length of the song, it being forty-nine measures in length (7x7). The main component of the song, a recitative-like motive spanning G#4-D5 in its most typical displays, is also a symbolic gesture in and of itself. This motive is known by Messiaen scholars as the “Boris motif” (being derived from Mussorgsky’s *Boris Gudonov*) and is used by Messiaen in several instances to represent the parent-child relationship.⁷⁷ These sections of recitative are followed by more lyrical passages (for example, see mm. 4-7) that consist of wide leaps and also broadly arching passages (see mm. 15-17). There are also passages of distinct excitement when the father dreams of the games he can play with his son (mm. 37-41) where the piano line bounces about and the voice jests. The effect on the whole is one of sweetness and tenderness, a combination of the father’s eagerness to both play with and love his son.

The harmonic rhythm, or shall we say, color rhythm, is much slower in “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence” than in the previous three songs. This gentleness of motion is representative of the atmosphere of calm that the father is trying to maintain while the baby sleeps and is also supported by the use of a contained vocal range, using mainly the lower and middle voice. Rather curiously, soft dynamics do not seem to be a priority. The baby must have been a heavy sleeper! Interestingly as well, there are three cadential moments in the song, or as close to cadential as one will get with Messiaen, at mm. 13,

⁷⁶ Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Explorations of Love and Death*, 106.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

26, and 49. These are of course “cadences” on what could be called half-diminished chords with added minor ninths, but nonetheless, each feels like a point of arrival and rest.

Vocal Matters

Again, with “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence” we have a song that is more accessible vocally, though not without its difficult spots. The primary concern is diction, for the recurring recitative-like motives should be delivered at a natural, speech-like pace. Freedom and clarity of the articulators is necessary to be understood, and this is complicated by some of the leaps within the recitative. Any tension within the vocal mechanism will result in garbled speech, for the voice will not be able to freely flow if the tongue, neck, or jaw is tight. The text should first be spoken and then intoned on a pitch. From there, to check for freedom, it would be ideal to sing the text across any number of musical patterns, including the written pitches to check for any tensions that might crop up. This will not only help the diction in the song, but can help increase cognizance of vocal tensions that occur in general, and therefore hopefully help to reduce them.

The tessitura of certain passages will likely be difficult for voices that sit higher. Mm. 4-7, and correlating passages throughout the song, are built of leaps to and from C4, a note in an area of registral transition for sopranos. The challenge is finding a good placement for C4. For passages that begin on C4, this is easier because one can take a good breath and plan ahead for the right mix. Passages that descend to the note are more challenging, because one must cross a point of registral transition to get there. It is

helpful to first make the leaps scalar, adding pitches between the notes of the leap. Also, singing on a closed vowel, [y] being one that is typically favorable for most sopranos in this area of the voice, can help one find the right mix of chest and head voice for C4.

Gliding between the notes is another option. Either way, keeping the sternum lifted and support constant, even increasing it across leaps, will help with these passages.

The other obvious point of difficulty is mm. 42-46, the climax of the piece. At a *fortissimo* dynamic, one is asked to leap up from D#5 to G#5, sustain the G#5, and then traverse a descent of an octave and a half while completing a gentle diminuendo. It is a tall order to artfully descend from a held high note in most circumstances, but adding the diminuendo, a few small leaps, and the changing of the musical pulse under the held note makes it quite difficult. The solution is to begin to taper the G#5 in m. 44 over the rests in the last two beats of the measure, allowing a slight decrease in volume to also effect a character change that explains the new, and much slower, tempo. The descent from there will be a matter of diligent practice, first at a comfortable volume, and then gradually reducing the volume and musical tension until a good solution is found. Again, working on *messa di voce* exercises will be helpful. Motivating the diminuendo by character, for this is the moment the little boy awakens, will help immensely.

The rewards for working on “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence” are certainly desirable. The song offers the opportunity to work on diction, maintaining legato across larger leaps, registral transitions between the lower and middle voice, and dynamic control. All of its difficulties are aided by the fact that they are character driven. It is a challenging song, but not inaccessible to moderately advanced singers.

“Minuit pile et face”

Poetry

In “Minuit pile et face,” we see Messiaen turning away from the innocence and purity of the wife and child. The last two songs of the cycle focus on the male character (Messiaen): first, his sinfulness and then the glory of resurrection. While Messiaen easily spends four songs in a row extolling the virtues of his wife and child, when he turns specifically to himself he first and foremost recognizes his sins and weaknesses. In fact, with Messiaen having focused so intently on the innocence and beauty within his family life in the previous four songs, his own foibles are set in even greater relief. “Minuit pile et face” is a horrific barrage of images that explicate the man’s guilt over his sinfulness. Here we find an excellent example of Messiaen’s tendency toward Surrealism in poetry as gruesome images pile upon each other. Sin is likened to both a fearsome city with horrifying images (for example, “Grands corps tout pourri des rues”) and an animal that eats him from within (“Bête inouïe qui mange. Qui bave dans ma poitrine.”). Siglind Bruhn points out that

The speaker in Messiaen’s poem expresses the three internal stances of traditional Catholic anxiety: the perception of the presumably abject human sinfulness (captured here in the emblem of the city), interjected invocations of Christ, and the desperate wish for a return to childhood purity, couched in images of utter naïveté as if to underscore the professed desire to undo the first human’s fateful quest for knowledge...[and] dread is by far the most pervasive of these three stances.⁷⁸

There are references to Carnival as his sins dance before his eyes (“Ils dansent, mes péchés dansent! Carnaval décevant des pavés de la mort!”). Carnival not only connotes

⁷⁸ Ibid., 97.

a sinful period of time for many people, but also points toward Lent and the Easter holiday that follows it, foreshadowing the resurrection that will be the focus of the final song of the cycle.

These frightening images are sharply contrasted with a dramatic plea for Christ's aid that comes in the middle of the text: "Pères des lumières, Christ, Vigne d'amour, Esprit consolateur, Consolateur aux sept dons!" Here he seeks refuge from his sins in Christ, a potent shift from fear and dread to almost desperation (and a striking musical shift as well). The "sept dons" reference refers to those items mentioned in Isaiah 11:2-3, which reads:

And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord; And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord: and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes the seven gifts as "wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord."⁷⁹ Following this plea to Christ, the text returns to enumerating fears, before finally settling on the image of a sleeping child ("Oh! M'endormir petit! Sous l'air trop large, dans un lit bleu, la main sous l'oreille, avec une toute petite chemise.") as he yearns for his lost innocence.

The song stands out in the cycle and among Messiaen's entire repertoire for its focus on sin. Messiaen's tendency was towards uplifting theological topics, those of joy and glory. It is rare for him to focus on negative aspects of religion, and he tends to avoid the topics of sin, evil, the Crucifixion, Satan, hell, and purgatory.⁸⁰ This avoidance makes the text of "Minuit pile et face" all the more poignant, for in all of his efforts to be

⁷⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1831.

⁸⁰ Shenton, *Olivier Messiaen's System of Signs*, 27.

an evangelist and a loving family man, Messiaen still viewed himself at times as a sinner who was unworthy of all the good that he had in his life at the time. The text thus becomes an even more powerful tool of evangelism in this respect, as Messiaen shows that all he can do after trying to correct his sins is to rely on Christ.

Music

Musically, this is the most challenging song of the cycle for both singer and pianist. The song is in an ABCA'D structure. The A sections are declamatory, with the voice intoning a single pitch. The piano plays in fifths across arpeggios of a fourth. Interestingly, in the first A section, the voice intones on A#4, A# being Messiaen's note of love. This may seem an incongruent pairing in this instance since the man is speaking of his sins, but A# serves as an important reminder of Christ's continued love for man even when man has sinned. The pitch in the first A section only changes when addressing the Lord directly at m. 9. In the return of the A section in m. 56, the voice intones on G#4, down a whole step from the initial presentation, and the piano inverts its arpeggios. This drop in pitch makes the singer sound resigned. The weight of sin may have been lifted some at this point, but one is acutely aware of the separation from God that exists in mortality, a fact that is reinforced in the comparison between a man and an innocent, sleeping child. It is notable as well that both A sections carry a key signature of four sharps. Bruhn notes that this key signature is unusual for Messiaen and that numerologically, the number four references the terrestrial.⁸¹ The key signature therefore reinforces the line Messiaen draws between himself and his family in the text of the song—he belongs in the terrestrial world, while they are more part of the celestial world.

⁸¹ Bruhn, *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death*, 112.

The B section (m. 14) is a ferocious musical explication of the man's sins that dance before his eyes ("Ils dansent, mes péchés dansent!"). Johnson notes that this section begins a five-part fugal exposition in which "each phantom of the past commences its terrifying dance."⁸² The rhythmic pattern begins in the piano as a combination of duple and triple groupings, but the pattern consistently reorganizes itself, swapping where the triple group is, or dropping a duple group. Thus the rhythms continue to drive forward, but the switching pulse lends a disoriented feel, showing the fear and anguish the surreal images inflict upon the man. The rhythmic dance of the piano eventually gives way to tremolos at m. 39 as the voice builds in intensity towards the climax of the piece. Both voice and piano crescendo together as images pile on top of each other, culminating in homophony between voice and piano at mm.43-44 as the voice asks, "Et je resterais seul à la mort qui m'enroule?"

The man's question is answered at the song's climax in m. 45. He breaks away from sin as he seeks God's love and help. This is without a doubt one of the most beautiful moments of the cycle. Rhythmic complications and horrific images fall away and are replaced with brightness and praise. Voice and piano play broad lines in a high, 'celestial,' tessitura with a slow harmonic rhythm. The vocal line at first highlights A#5, the note of love. Tritones are present in every vocal phrase in this section, symbolizing the rest and peace the man finds in Christ (recall that Messiaen found the tritone to be the most mild and restful interval). The phrases are spaced apart by a collection of low grace notes in the piano left hand, which are likely meant to reinforce upper harmonics in the following chords. The vocal material is then liquidated by the piano in mm. 53-55, as the return of the A section comes about at m. 56.

⁸² Johnson, *Messiaen*, 60.

Following a brief return of the A section, a lullaby, the D section begins at m. 67. The right hand of the piano is again in a high tessitura, delicately playing *pianississimo* sixteenth notes over a gentle bass pattern. The vocal line is full of painful yearning for innocence lost, an extremely strong longing that most every adult has no doubt felt. The vocal part almost sounds as if it does not fit in pitch-wise against the right hand of the piano, symbolizing the man's separation from innocence and childhood. The delicate recitative in the final measure shows the softening of the man's heart as all musical symbols of strife are removed. He is then able to turn from tormenting himself over his sins to focus instead again on family, and begin to look forward to the resurrection when he can be made whole again.

Vocal Matters

Rhythm and pitch make up the most difficult vocal tasks in "Minuit pile et face." In the A sections, the voice and piano must be steady and declamatory with no notion of pushing forward or pulling back. Presenting the text in such a matter of fact way helps to set the images in greater relief, allowing the surreal qualities of the poetry to be even more striking. The rhythm itself becomes an extremely complicated issue in the B section (beginning m. 10) and not only must the singer keep a subdivided pulse in her head, but she must, as in the other songs of the cycle, be very familiar with the piano part. Because the voice and piano duel through this section, each must know what the other is doing, so that moments of both rhythmic consonance and of rhythmic dissonance are clear. The rhythm in the remaining portions of the song is not as difficult, however, as in the A section, the character in which the rhythm is presented is important. Speaking the

text of the song in rhythm and tapping out the rhythm of the piano line is the best course of attack to solving the song's rhythmic puzzle. Similarly, to find the syncopated qualities of the B section, it can be helpful to try to dance to a recording of the piece (using a two or three step dance will work for the rhythmic patterns shift between the two). When one can feel how the rhythm changes under the dancing to cause missteps, one will better understand the shifting pulse and its effects.

Pitch can become an issue in this song, for there are sections in which the voice is unsupported by the pitch material of the piano part. Both the A sections and the C section have the support of the piano, with notes either presented before vocal entrances or in doubling with the voice. For the other portions of the song, and also for other songs in the cycle, it can be very helpful for a singer to develop her sense of relative pitch. There are several things that can help with developing relative pitch. Playing a musical instrument can help, particularly instruments that have the same tessitura as the voice (such as clarinet, violin, and flute). Due to the way many instruments are constructed, many have specific timbres associated with each pitch (woodwind instruments perhaps possess this quality the most). Becoming familiar with these specific timbres can lead one to become familiar with certain pitches, to the point that when one hears an A in a specific register, there is no question that the note is an A. Another strategy can be incorporating musical note 'memory' practice into one's day. Starting with a familiar pitch, such as A4, one should play the note on a piano (or any fixed pitch source) and then sing the note. One should pay attention to the specific timbre of the note, the vocal space, and support required to produce it. This should be repeated many times, and done periodically throughout one's vocal practice. The next day, one should try to begin by

producing A4, and check it against a piano, correcting if necessary. More and more pitches can gradually be added. This practice transfers well into vocal literature, as one can practice being able to find the starting pitch of pieces and practice vocal lines with no assistance from a piano. One should still check one's work against the piano to prevent learning lines incorrectly, but forcing oneself to be as independent from the keyboard as possible can improve one's sense of relative pitch immensely. Having a good sense of relative pitch not only makes singing contemporary repertoire less difficult from a pitch standpoint, it makes a singer more independent in any piece of music.

But more challenging than the musical complications is the interpretation of the song. Each section of the song asks a singer to portray completely different vocal styles ranging from stately to wild and fearsome to heartbreakingly tender. The A sections ask a singer to sing in a grave way, enumerating horrific images. The B section asks for a wildness of spirit. The challenge here is to communicate desperation without melodrama, which can be a difficult question of taste for many singers. The C and D sections are undoubtedly the most difficult. The C section requires tenderness of emotion while pleading. The *fortississimo* dynamic might influence a singer to sing high notes that penetrate a listener as a laser might. But the dynamic marking in this instance likely more represents fullness of sound and of heart, an overflowing of joy and gratitude. Displaying these attitudes, instead of a specific volume, will more accurately express the text. The D section asks for almost the opposite of a singer. Here the vocal line must be perfectly contained at a volume that is *pianissimo*, but with feeling in the heart as large as the *fortississimo* of the C section. Here softness and tenderness must be expressed and at

the same time mixed with a bittersweet pining. Simplicity of presentation is important here, as again, melodrama will spoil the moment.

The vocal challenges of rhythm, pitch, and interpretation in “Minuit pile et face” are significant. The song is best reserved for advanced singers of a decently mature age in order to appropriately convey the subject matter, for one cannot still be a child and long for childhood. “Minuit pile et face” is the turning point of the cycle. Having now run the gamut of emotions about marriage, parenthood, and sin, the man can now look forward with his family to the future—to resurrection.

“Résurrection”

Poetry

Having removed himself from the torment of sin, in “Résurrection,” Messiaen speaks a beautiful testimony of Christ and the resurrection. The song is dedicated to Easter, also known as the festival of the Pasch, from which Pascal’s name was derived. In alluding again to his son, Messiaen reminds one of the purity and innocence each human has as a child and in discussing resurrection he testifies of the opportunity to return to a state of pureness and holiness. There is likely no better or stronger way Messiaen could have chosen to affirm again his faith, after the cycle has traversed marriage, parenthood, and loss of innocence, than to joyfully sing praise to Christ for providing the gift of resurrection to all.

Of all of the texts in the cycle, “Résurrection” is the most richly ornamented with symbolism and biblical allusions. “Sept étoiles d’amour” references Revelation 1:10-16, 20.⁸³ Revelation 1:20 offers the simplest explanation: “The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.” “Un ange: Sur la pierre il s’est posé” references the angel that sat by Jesus’ tomb once he had arisen.⁸⁴ This allusion comes from Matthew 28:6, where Mary and Mary Magdalene go to Christ’s tomb. The tomb is empty but an angel is perched on the stone and tells the women, “He is not here, for he is risen.” “Parfum, porte, perle” refers to the heavenly scent, the entrance to the Eternal City, and the pearl with which the gates

⁸³ Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Explorations of Love and Death*, 99.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

to the city are made.⁸⁵ “Nous l’avons touché, nous l’avons vu. De nos mains nous l’avons touché” is an allusion to the story of Thomas (commonly called “doubting Thomas”).⁸⁶ The story of Thomas comes from John 20:24-29, and is a powerful lesson on faith. Thomas was one of Christ’s disciples during his time on Earth. When the resurrected Lord appeared to his disciples for the first time, Thomas was not there. When the other men recounted the story for Thomas, he stated, “except I shall see in his hands the prints of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.” Eight days later, Christ returned again to his disciples, this time with Thomas present as well. Christ invited Thomas to come and feel his wounds and to “be not faithless, but believing.” Thomas immediately hailed him, calling him “my Lord and my God.” Jesus then gently rebuked Thomas, saying, “Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they who have not seen, and *yet* have believed.” The final biblical allusion in the text comes close to the end of the song, with “Du pain. Il le rompt et leurs yeux sont dessillés.” Here Messiaen makes an adaptation of John 21:1-13.⁸⁷ Jesus, concealing his true identity, came to the disciples seeking food, but they had been unable to catch any fish. Jesus then told them where to cast their nets and they found a multitude of fish. Upon returning to the shore after gathering all the fish in their nets, Jesus invited them to dine with him, sharing fish and bread. “And none of the disciples durst ask him, Who art thou? knowing that it was the Lord.”

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Music

Musically, “Résurrection” is stunning. It is virtuosic for both singer and pianist, and is the closest thing to a vocal showpiece Messiaen ever wrote. Messiaen uses a melodic style of plainchant throughout the song,⁸⁸ creating his own version of a hymn of praise. The use of alleluias and melismatic passages further references religious topics. The song is sure and triumphant in its musical expression of faith in resurrection.

Bruhn notes that the layout of the song is simple and yet unusual: it consists of two halves that correspond with one another in structure, texture, and rhythm but differ almost throughout in melodic detail and harmony.”⁸⁹ Each section begins (m. 1 and m. 23, respectively) with two alleluias, separated by rhythmic, regal chords on the piano. It is interesting to note that in m. 3 the piano chords provide an example of one of Messiaen’s “chords on the dominant” in three inversions.⁹⁰ Following the alleluias, the voice begins a quasi-recitative section (m. 7 and m. 29) in the style of pseudo-plainchant. The lines gradually become more elaborated and melismatic, with the piano making interjections. This gives way into a new section (m. 12 and m. 33), in which the voice flows in melismatic lines above held chords in the piano. Following a bridge (mm. 18-19) by the piano, the voice and piano together accomplish a final declamatory passage that ascends to stunning high notes. These final passages (m. 21, 42) are grander versions of the ascents at the end of each major section of “Bail avec Mi” (see m. 6 and 19), linking the first song with the last in another theological allusion.

There are several examples of musical symbolism in the song. The focus on ascending vocal lines draws an obvious connection between vocal ascent and rising from

⁸⁸ Johnson, *Messiaen*, 60.

⁸⁹ Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Explorations of Love and Death*, 112.

⁹⁰ Johnson, *Messiaen*, 15.

the grave in resurrection. The high tessitura of the vocal line in many passages (such as mm. 33-38, with the repeated G#5s) also reinforces this. As has already been mentioned, the use of alleluias and plainchant is done to symbolically and literally praise God. In the ending passages, the piano flourishes in m. 21 and m. 42 are described by Messiaen as being in “bird style,”⁹¹ which he uses to demonstrate God’s love in nature.⁹² It is also notable that the entire second section of the song carries a key signature of six sharps, which one will recall represents God’s love, according to Siglind Bruhn. Further, the song encompasses in a microcosm the ascent to A#5 that all of the other songs have pointed towards. The first section has G5 as its highest pitch, the second G#5, and then the final note of the song is a triumphant A#5, Messiaen’s long-reached for note of love. Bruhn points out that the final chord on the last syllable of the last word, “Vérité,” is symbolic in and of itself, with the chord being complete in the sense that it contains all 12 tones, and it is topped with the A#; “This is a beautiful musical interpretation of the concept of Resurrection.”⁹³

Vocal Matters

It is precisely what makes “Résurrection” beautiful and brilliant that also makes it difficult to perform. Melismas in nontraditional patterns and passages at a sustained high tessitura can lead to vocal tension, fatigue, and frustration. However, these difficulties make the piece an excellent work with which to train the voice.

Any exercise that promotes vocal freedom will be beneficial for the melismas of “Résurrection.” A good place to start would be vocalises that are scalar in nature, but

⁹¹ Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 85.

⁹² Johnson, *Messiaen*, 41.

⁹³ Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Explorations of Love and Death*, 114.

perhaps skipping a note or two so that the pattern becomes less familiar (for example, doing five-note scales with scale degree three removed from the pattern). As comfort with patterns within the major and minor scales increases, then the individual melismas of the song should be excerpted as exercises, and done at several pitch levels. It is probably easiest to start on narrow vowels, as most of the melismas in the song either go through or dip into the *passaggio*. W. Stephen Smith's exercise known as "The Wobble" is also very helpful for increasing vocal freedom.⁹⁴ The exercise is to alternate between pitches a fourth apart first on quarter notes and then sixteenth notes in a strict rhythm. The exercise should be done ascending and descending on several vowels. By using such a wide interval, the voice is unable to grip and still sing the pitches. Phonation then becomes passive and free. "The Wobble" is an exercise, and any additional exercise that supports free movement of the voice will also be beneficial for the melismatic writing in "R surrection."

Ridding the voice of vocal tension will help with the potential issue of vocal fatigue in regards to florid passages, but what of fatigue from sustained sections at a high tessitura? Here again, the *mesa di voce* is an incredibly valuable exercise. Practicing long tones with dynamic control on high pitches is one of the best ways to find the support necessary for higher pitches, to find the space and freedom of the mechanism necessary to comfortably sustain such pitches, and to build stamina to sing more of them for a longer period of time. Having certainty of pitch while singing will also help one to avoid fatigue. If the vocal musculature is searching for the next pitch because the ear is unsure, muscular gripping will occur. Tuning the ear and then the voice to a line will prove to be fruitful work.

⁹⁴ W. Stephen Smith, *The Naked Voice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 94.

Though it can take a great deal of effort, learning to sing “Résurrection” is a very satisfying experience for a singer. The improvements in vocal freedom, and thus flexibility, and improved stamina will make many other works more attainable. The virtuosity of the song also makes it more accessible to audiences in a way, as its showmanship is akin (a distant relative, though family nonetheless) to the familiar fireworks of opera. The song excerpts well and is a worthy addition to any soprano’s repertoire.

Conclusion and Advocation

Messiaen devoted his life and work to evangelism. His faith in the Catholic Church directed all of his musical compositions, and accounts speak of how his faith directed how he lived his life as well. Through performance of his works, musicians have a wonderful opportunity in spreading the gospel themselves, if they so choose to use the music for such. Either way, Messiaen's vocal works, specifically *Chants de terre et de ciel*, offer tremendous opportunities for musical growth. Vocal improvements in pitch, rhythm, dynamic control, aural skills, vocal freedom, and interpretation can all be made through careful study of Messiaen's works.

Messiaen is just one of several composers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries whose works get cast aside by many who deem them as too difficult, inaccessible, or unworthy of study. Yes, many of his vocal works are difficult to sing, as many songs in *Chants de terre et de ciel* are. But students of voice need to be challenged. The potential improvement in aural skills alone makes these pieces worthy of study, even if they are never formally performed. Many singers today suffer from a lack of independence from accompanying instruments. This prevents them from being able to perform a wide variety of repertoire, and as these singers become tomorrow's voice teachers, a vicious cycle begins in which the canon of popular vocal repertoire shrinks over time. It is the duty of voice teachers to expose students to a broad variety of vocal repertoire and to support the continuous composition of new works. If teachers and performers do not perform new works and support composers of today—and of the recent past, such as Messiaen—music will cease to be a living art form.

Such a belief in the promotion and performance of contemporary music and music of the recent past first led the author of this paper to seek out the vocal works of Messiaen. What began one day as a curiosity in undergraduate studies has now become a multi-year love affair that promises to continue for a lifetime. Everyone should have such a composer whose music they believe in and connect with, whether or not it is Messiaen. When one's heart and soul can commune with the music one is singing, it is an experience that cannot be matched.

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Selected Discography: Recordings of *Chants de terre et de ciel*

An attempt has been made to exclude duplicate issues of the same performance.

Chants de terre et de ciel. Contains *Chants de terre et de ciel* by Olivier Messiaen and *Cinq poèmes de Charles Baudelaire* by Claude Debussy. Colette Herzog, soprano, and Jean Laforge, piano. Paris: Office de radiodiffusion-télévision française 995 020, 197-?. LP.

Chants de terre et de ciel. Janet Fairbank, soprano, and Henry Jackson, piano. USA: RCA Victor EO-LQB-13077, 1950-59?. Compact disc.

Mélodies. Ingrid Kappelle, soprano, and Håkon Austbø, piano. Leeuwarden, Netherlands: Brilliant Classics, 7448, 2004. Compact discs.

Messiaen Edition. Maria Oràn, soprano, and Yvonne Loriod, piano. Warner Classics 2564 62162-2, 2005. 18 Compact discs.

Messiaen, Olivier. *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Suzie Leblanc, soprano, Lawrence Wiliford, tenor, Laura Andriani, violin, and Robert Kortgaard, piano. Montréal, Québec: ATMA Classique ACD2 2564, 2008. Compact disc.

Messiaen, Olivier. *Mélodies*. Michèle Command, soprano and Marie-Madeleine Petit, piano. Paris: EMI Classics CMS 7 64092 2 (CDM 7 64093 2-CDM 7 64094 2), 1991. Compact discs.

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Centenaire de l'opéra de Vichy 2001-2003. Contains *Poèmes de Baudelaire* by Claude Debussy and *Harawi* by Olivier Messiaen. Marcelle Bunlet, soprano. Paris: INA IMV044, 2002. Compact discs.

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Entretiens avec Olivier Messiaen. With Anton Golea, producer and interviewer; Olivier Messiaen, composer, pianist, and interviewee; Yvonne Loriod, pianist; Marcelle Bunlet, soprano; and others. Paris: Radiotélévision française (producer) and Institut national de l'audiovisuel (distributor): 1957. Compact discs.

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