Olivier Messiaen:
Oiseaux exotiques

PETER HILL and NIGEL SIMEONE
University of Sheffield, UK

ASHGATE

Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Gower House
Croft Road
Aldershot
Hants GU11 3HR
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
Suite 420
101 Cherry Street
Burlington, VT 05401-4405
USA

Ashgate website: http://www.ashgate.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Hill, Peter, 1948–
Olivier Messiaen: Oiseaux exotiques – (Landmarks in music since 1950)
1. Messiaen, Olivier, 1908–1992. Oiseaux exotiques 2. Birds – Songs and music
I. Title II. Simeone, Nigel, 1956–
780.9'2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hill, Peter, 1948–
Olivier Messiaen : Oiseaux exotiques / Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone.
p. cm. – (Landmarks in music since 1950)
Includes bibliographical references (p. 117), discography (p. 121), and index.
(alk. paper)
1. Messiaen, Olivier, 1908–1992 Oiseaux exotiques. I. Simeone, Nigel, 1956– II. Title.

ML410.M595H495 2007
785'.361894–dc22

2006032401

ISBN: 978-0-7546-5630-2

Typeset in Times New Roman by Jonathan Hoare, Pinner, Middx
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

Contents

CHAPTER 2

Birdsong and Sketches

The strangest episode in Messiaen's career as a composer occurred between 1949 and the mid-1950s. During these years, with characteristic thoroughness, Messiaen set out to remake his musical language from its very foundations; astonishingly, he did this not once but twice. The first phase, between 1949 and 1952, involved experiment with various types of rigorous process, used both at a local level and as the structural basis for whole sections or movements; for a time Messiaen's work brought him close to the post-war avant-garde. The second phase arose from Messiaen's decision early in 1952 to immerse himself in the study of birdsong. There followed a decade in which his music was inspired almost exclusively by birds, starting with *Réveil des oiseaux* (1953), then *Oiseaux exotiques* (1955–56) and the *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (1956–58). What makes both changes of direction so unexpected is that they follow a decade in which the rich personal language that Messiaen had developed in the 1930s gave rise to an unbroken sequence of magnificent achievements. Despite a critical battering in the musical press, the 1940s was a time when Messiaen's confidence in his powers was at its highest: 'my best decade', he later said.[1]

The 1940s had begun with the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, first performed in January 1941 in the camp near Görlitz where Messiaen had been a prisoner-of-war since his capture by the advancing German army in June 1940. Messiaen was repatriated early in 1941. He returned to Paris in May, resuming his duties as organist of the Trinité and taking up a post teaching harmony at the Paris Conservatoire. Among his first pupils was a 17-year-old pianist and composer, Yvonne Loriod, whose precociously gifted playing inspired Messiaen to write *Visions de l'Amen* for two pianos (1943), the *Trois petites Liturgies de la Présence Divine* (1943–44) with its important concertante piano part, and the solo piano cycle *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* (1944), his largest work to date. The years immediately after the end of the war saw the composition of the so-called 'Tristan trilogy'. The central work, the *Turangalîla-Symphonie*, was Messiaen's first overseas commission, from Serge Koussevitzky, musical director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. On either side came the song cycle *Harawi* and *Cinq Rechants* (for 12 unaccompanied voices), both settings of Surrealist texts by Messiaen himself.

The period of experiment that followed (from 1949) came as a surprise. This was both a break with the past but also an intensive exploration of

1 Personal communication from George Benjamin.

elements already present, or at least latent, in Messiaen's music; one of these was birdsong. Birds had fascinated Messiaen, at least according to family legend, since infancy,[2] and their songs appear early in his music, starting with the second movement of *L'Ascension* (1932). The first important use of birdsong, however, came in the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (1940). In the solo clarinet movement, 'Abîme des oiseaux', birdsong stands for escape from the confines of time. As Messiaen puts it in his preface to the score: 'Birds: they are the opposite of time. They represent our desire for light, for the stars, for rainbows and for jubilant *vocalises*.' Freedom was to become a favourite image associated with birdsong and one that would recur several times in the *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (1956–58).[3] In the opening movement of the *Quatuor*, 'Liturgie de cristal', birdsong evokes the 'harmonious silence of heaven'. For the first time in Messiaen's music the birds are named – 'a blackbird or a nightingale' (the violin plays the nightingale, as is clear from the oscillations; the clarinet is partly nightingale and partly blackbird). The vagueness of Messiaen's identification underlines his rudimentary knowledge of ornithology at the time, and the representation of birdsong is musically somewhat unsophisticated. Nonetheless, Messiaen is clearly attempting to imitate how birds actually sing, and his researches from nature were already under way in 1940: an account by Guy Bernard-Delapierre describes him filling 'any number of notebooks with the astonishing rhythmic and melodic virtuosity of birdsong' (Bernard-Delapierre, 1945).[4]

The quest for a more accurate rendering of birdsong can be traced throughout the works of the 1940s. With the *Vingt Regards* (1944), there is already a significant enriching of Messiaen's birdsong vocabulary. In 'Regard du fils sur le fils' (no. 5) birdsong again represents escape from confinement. The movement opens with the main cyclic theme, the 'Theme of God', unfolding in the pianist's left hand, accompanied by a descant consisting of two strands of harmonies in a strict rhythmic canon; however, at the point at which the 'Theme of God' starts to develop, the canons break off, dissolving into a shower of idealized birdsong, using what Messiaen calls 'characteristic birdsong phrases' (Messiaen 1995, p. 444). In 'Regard des Anges' (no. 14), birdsong is used one more in conjunction with rhythmic canons, this time simultaneously: the birds again break free, their victory provoking dismay in the angels – 'for it was not to them but to the human race that God joined himself' (as Messiaen puts it in his preface to the score). The most significant innovation comes in 'Regard des hauteurs' (no. 8), a movement consisting solely of birdsong. This is far more detailed than anything yet encountered in Messiaen's music. The preface speaks of a medley, with nightingale, blackbird, an unspecified warbler, chaffinch,

2 Interview with Yvonne Loriod in Hill 1995, p. 297.

3 The device of 'framing' a solo, whether or not of birdsong, can be traced back to the second of the piano *Préludes* (1929), 'Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste'.

4 See also Hill and Simeone 2005, pp. 94–6.

goldfinch, Cetti's warbler, canary and, above all, the skylark, clearly evident from a comparison with its use in Messiaen's later music. The exuberant coda is a tutti for 'the blackbird and all the birds'; the piano writing, with the hands moving in unison an octave apart, anticipates *Réveil des oiseaux*, composed nearly a decade later.

In *Harawi* (1945) Messiaen started to distinguish between two types of birdsong, the one imaginary,[5] the other based on observation. 'Bonjour toi, colombe verte' is a love song, with the green dove of the title standing for the beloved. The song has three verses, punctuated by cadenzas of birdsong. These are in Messiaen's 'realistic' style, the music (marked simply 'comme un oiseau') suggesting a hybrid of a blackbird and skylark – the way the latter's song beats against a high note is very characteristic of Messiaen's later portrayal of the skylark, and has already been encountered in 'Regard des hauteurs'. 'Imaginary' birdsong can be heard at the opening of the song as a descant, a foil to the sombre intensity of the main cyclic theme. The descant begins with a swirl up to a repeated high note, succeeded by shimmering broken chords. This is clearly birdsong, but is imagined rather than real, perhaps because Messiaen needed the descant to shadow the contours of the theme. These two distinct styles of birdsong combine in the last verse. Here the theme is given to the voice and piano left hand: the descant of birds is partly 'imaginary' (the shimmering broken chords), partly 'real' (the final flourish, which comes from the second cadenza), and partly a synthesis, in a melody that, though clearly 'imaginary', distils elements from the two cadenzas.

The pendulum swings back to a more stylized representation of birdsong in *Turangalîla*. Its most extended use is in the solo piano part of the sixth movement, the 'Jardin du sommeil d'amour', where the bird is a nightingale (Messiaen 1995, p. 277). In style this is reminiscent of the *Quatuor*, even quoting the 'Liturgie de cristal' at one point.[6] The most forward-looking passage occurs in 'Turangalîla 2' (fig. 3 in the score) in what sounds like a medley of stylized birdsong, though not described as such by Messiaen. In the *Traité* Messiaen identifies only the piano part as birdsong. However, while the instrumental parts may not be birds, they anticipate the tuttis of *Réveil des oiseaux* and *Oiseaux exotiques*, the lines being 'entirely free from harmonic concerns' (Messiaen 1995, p. 293).[7]

But the search for realism was still very much in Messiaen's mind, judging from an interview he gave in March 1948 to the newspaper *France-Soir*. As far as is known, this was the first time Messiaen spoke publicly about the birdsong

5 Messiaen's word was 'vraisemblable' (see Samuel 1986, p. 103).

6 Compare the piano part at fig. 4 with the clarinet in *Quatuor*, 1st movement, second and third bars after letter D.

7 'Ce style contrapuntique absolument libre est devenu par la suite – avec beaucoup plus de liberté et surtout de complexité – celui de mon *Réveil des oiseaux* et de mes *Oiseaux exotiques*.'

in his music. The subject came up when he was asked which great musicians had most influenced him:

> The birds: I've listened to them a lot, when lying on the grass, pencil and notebook in hand.
>
> – And to which do you award the palm?
>
> – To the blackbird, of course! It can improvise continuously eleven or twelve verses, in which identical musical phrases return. What freedom of melodic invention, what an artist![8]

The new direction taken by Messiaen's music in 1949 can be explained in part by the personal crisis caused by the illness of his wife Claire Delbos, who had been suffering from a degenerative mental condition since the early 1940s. It was probably as a result of Claire's illness that Messiaen decided to shelve major projects – the planned opera, for example, which he had revealed in the interview with *France-Soir* – and instead to concentrate on short works for solo forces.

This decision gave Messiaen the opportunity to explore new compositional techniques, and in particular the idea of extending the serial (or in his case quasi-serial) organization of pitch to other parameters (rhythm, dynamics, timbre). All his life Messiaen felt a strong compulsion to intellectualize his art, and to rationalize musical ideas into systematic techniques, and as early as 1944 he had published a primer on his music, *Technique de mon langage musical*. In the second half of the 1940s Messiaen's thoughts can be traced through the jottings in his diary. These include plans for a ballet on the subject of Time, with a 'serial theme giving a series of twelve notes and a series of timbres – one timbre per note, one duration and one nuance per note' (Hill and Simeone 2005, p.178).

The fascination of the period of experiment that began in 1949 lies in the struggle between rigour and spontaneity. The first works to be composed were for solo piano – *Cantéyodjayâ* and the *Quatre études de rythme* – neither of which contain any birdsong (apart from a single phrase in *Ile de feu 1*, the last of the *Etudes* to be written, in the late summer of 1950). In *Cantéyodjayâ* abstract patterns based on strict calculation are set against passages of tumultuous abandon. In the *Etudes* Messiaen set out to explore the same problem but in a less haphazard way. His point of departure was *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités* with its unified grid defining pitch, dynamics, duration and attack. The result is a free-floating abstraction against which the remaining *Etudes* react in differing ways. Battle is most spectacularly joined in the final and climactic *Ile de feu 2*, in which sections using a modified form of the 'mode de valeurs' technique are framed by variations (on a folk tune from Papua New Guinea) of increasing complexity and excitement. The effect of these piano works is of a patchwork

8 Interview with Robert de Saint-Jean in *France-Soir*, 28 March 1948, quoted in Hill and Simeone 2005, pp. 176–8.

of fragments or short sections, brilliantly coloured and characterized. This created a problem of continuity, solved in the short term by patterns of refrains and episodes, and at a deeper level by an intuitive balance between stillness and energy. Both had important consequences for Messiaen's subsequent birdsong language.

In the two organ works that followed – *Messe de la Pentecôte* and *Livre d'orgue* – the 'free' element in the music is increasingly represented by birds. As in *Harawi*, Messiaen uses both 'real' and 'imaginary' birdsongs. In the *Messe de la Pentecôte* (1950) an example of 'imaginary' birdsong comes in the second movement, 'Offertoire' (see the 'Modéré' section on p. 4 of the score),[9] which derives from the lines for flute and clarinet in the 'Jardin du sommeil d'amour' in *Turangalîla*, melodic 'garlands' (as Messiaen calls them) that resemble birdsong in slow motion (Messiaen 1995, p. 277). In 'Communion', subtitled 'Les Oiseaux et les sources', the birdsong is clearly based on observation, and in two cases the species is identified: the nightingale (p. 17) has the repeated notes, abrupt fragments and oscillations that characterize its later appearances in Messiaen's music (as in 'L'Alouette lulu' from the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*); and the extended passage of birdsong in the central section (pp. 18–19) includes the birdsong phrase from *Ile de feu 1*, here identified as a blackbird.

The return of birdsong into Messiaen's music gathers pace in the *Livre d'orgue* (1951–52). Messiaen still employs 'imaginary' birdsong – as he does in the melismas of 'Les Mains de l'Abîme', which again sound like a distant echo of *Turangalîla*.[10] By contrast, the fourth movement, 'Chants d'oiseaux', is impressively detailed, with the songs of four birds – blackbird, robin, song thrush and nightingale – identified and sharply differentiated. The final movement, 'Soixante-quatre durées', sums up the uses of birdsong in this phase of Messiaen's music. The title refers to the inexorable progress of two 'scales of duration', an impersonal process lightened by improvisatory birdsong. At first this is just described as 'chants d'oiseaux', but increasingly the songs become more precisely identified and at the same time more characterful, with Messiaen contrasting the insistent notes of a song thrush and nightingale with the melisma of a blackcap.

The early months of 1952 were a watershed. In March Messiaen composed his only piece for tape, *Timbres-durées*, based on a rigorous structural template inhabited by somewhat whimsically chosen noises. Another new departure, infinitely more significant, was the composition of *Le Merle noir*, commissioned for a flute competition at the Paris Conservatoire and the first of his works to be entirely derived from birdsong. *Le Merle noir* is poised between Messiaen's past and future. The opening cadenza, for flute alone, is Messiaen's most detailed and realistic birdsong to date, while the reflective melody that follows

9 *Messe de la Pentecôte* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1951), plate no. A.L. 20,906.

10 Compare *Livre d'orgue*, p. 8 line 4 and p. 9 line 2, with *Turangalîla*, 6th movement, fourth and fifth bars after fig. 1.

is a backward glance, again to *Turangalîla*. The coda, like 'Soixante-quatre durées' from the *Livre d'orgue*, is a synthesis of calculation and freedom. The flute is given the song of the blackbird, while the piano follows a strict pattern of rhythmic permutations (combined with 12-note rows), with a binary structure in which right and left hands swap material half way. What is new is the relationship between the two. In 'Soixante-quatre durées' the rigorous process had been the predominant strand, ornamented by the birdsong. But in *Le Merle noir* the opposite is the case: the birds are in the foreground, and it is the process in the piano part that is subsidiary, with the rhythms too close in register (the high treble) and too blurred by pedal to be experienced as anything more than a texture.

In April 1952, a month after the composition of *Timbres-durées* and *Le Merle noir*, Messiaen took what proved to be a decisive step. At the suggestion of his publisher Leduc he paid a short visit (15–17 April) to Jacques Delamain, a leading ornithologist and prolific author. Delamain lived in south-west France, his house at Gardépée set in large wooded grounds midway between Cognac and the neighbouring town of Jarnac, where the Delamain family firm still produces brandy. Delamain's tuition enabled Messiaen's knowledge of ornithology to catch up with his musical aspirations. In particular, he learned to identify birds solely through their songs or cries: 'It was [Delamain] who taught me to recognize a bird from its song, without having to see its plumage or the shape of its beak. Or its flight, so that I no longer mistook a blackcap for a chaffinch or a garden warbler!'.[11] It seems odd that Messiaen had tolerated for so long a situation in which he was unable to tell one species of bird from another. One might also wonder why he had not thought earlier of consulting an expert in ornithology, or of using gramophone records, since excellent anthologies of birdsong had been available at least since the 1930s.[12]

However this may be, the visit to Delamain proved a life-changing experience. Delamain inspired Messiaen to pursue his researches in a more systematic way. The results can be seen in the surviving birdsong notebooks, the *Cahiers de notation des chants d'oiseaux*,[13] in which Messiaen started to collect his observations from nature. Each song was meticulously annotated, with Messiaen adding descriptions of plumage, colouring, timbre and musical character, and keeping a record of place, time and date. The evocations of habitat and landscape in the margins are spontaneous outpourings that formed the basis of the prefaces to Messiaen's birdsong pieces, especially the *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (1956–58).[14]

11 Preface by Messiaen to the 1960 edition of Jacques Delamain's *Pourquoi les oiseaux chantent*, recalling his first meeting.

12 Ludwig Koch's *Songs of British Birds* was released in 1936.

13 Now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département de la musique (hereafter abbreviated to BnF-musique).

14 Although Messiaen gave the dates 1956–58 for the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, its origins go back at least as far as 1954. The work was first performed in its entirety in April 1959.

The earliest surviving *cahier* dates from May–June 1952. All the notations were made in the forests to the west of Paris, at St-Germain-en-Laye, with the exception of a blackbird heard in Messiaen's garden in the 19th arrondissement. Among the earliest entries is one, dated 30 May, in which Messiaen records a trio of birds singing simultaneously: a song thrush ('the timbre trumpet-like, authoritative'), a robin ('murmuring, virtuoso') and a nightingale ('liquid and tender'). At this early stage Messiaen mainly reserved the *cahiers* for fair copies: his field notes must have been kept separately and have not been found. The early *cahiers* do have occasional examples of rough work, however. These show the shorthand Messiaen devised so that he could cram down birdsong at speed, with dots to represent the pitches, and the rhythm implied by the spacing on the page; in the fair copies details of rhythm, dynamics and accentuation are fully notated.

Six *cahiers* survive from the period between May 1952 and July 1953, when *Réveil des oiseaux* was researched and composed. Almost certainly there were many more. The majority of entries were made either at St-Germain-en-Laye or at nearby Orgeval, which became Messiaen's favourite haunt during the early summer of 1953. A particularly productive *cahier* covers Messiaen's return visit to Delamain,[15] in June 1952, which yielded a large amount of material for *Réveil*. Messiaen also started to sketch birdsong on his foreign travels: in Darmstadt where he taught on the summer course in July 1952, and in Stuttgart the following April where he gave the premiere of *Livre d'orgue*.

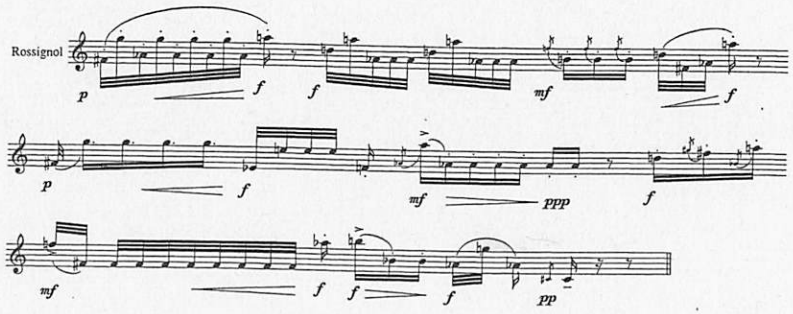
Réveil des oiseaux

> In *Réveil des oiseaux* [...] there's really nothing but bird songs [...], without any added rhythm or counterpoint, and the birds singing are really found together in nature; it's a completely truthful work. It's about an awakening of birds at the beginning of a spring morning; the cycle goes from midnight to noon: night songs, an awakening at four in the morning, a big tutti of birds cut short by the sunrise, forenoon songs, and the great silence of noon. (Messiaen, in Samuel 1994, p. 131)

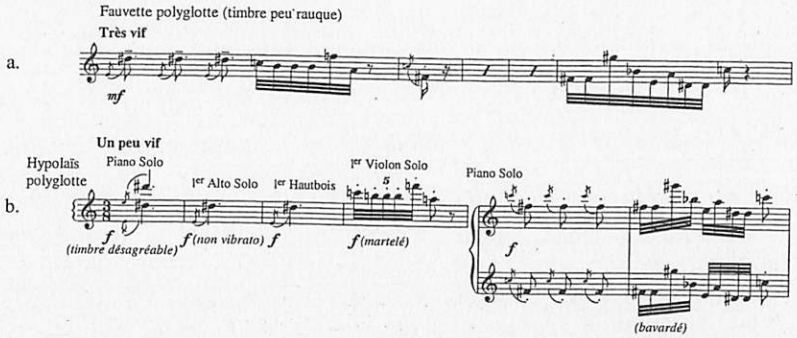
The first composition planned after the visit to Delamain was noted in Messiaen's diary: 'Piano Concerto – birdsongs'. *Réveil des oiseaux* is usually seen as a completely new departure; but in approach, at least, it belongs to the period of experimentation. In *Réveil* the nature of the experiment was to try to create music within a strict framework of rules. The principle was nothing new: in *Mode de valeurs*, as we have seen, the rules had been the vocabulary of pitch, duration, attack and so on, laid down in the preface to the

15 BnF-musique, MS 23079.

Example 2.1 Nightingale notated at St-Germain-en-Laye, 27 April 1953



Example 2.2 a. Melodious warbler notated at Gardépée, 12 June 1952; b. *Réveil des oiseaux*, figs 13–14

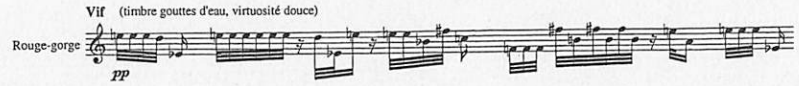


piece. In *Réveil* the rules were to be those laid down by nature: the birdsong, as notated direct from nature by Messiaen, was to be transferred into the score with minimum alteration; and the formal plan of the piece was to follow the sequence of birdsong as it actually occurs in a dawn chorus. In the preface Messiaen described the birdsong as 'entirely authentic'. A comparison between the *cahiers* and the finished score shows what he meant.

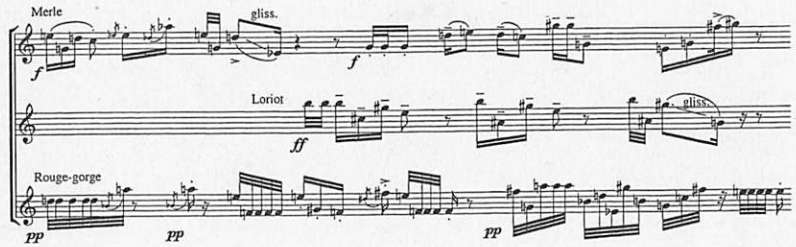
Ex. 2.1 shows part of a notation of a nightingale made by Messiaen at St-Germain-en-Laye on the evening of 27 April 1953. This corresponds with the final phrases of the opening piano cadenza from *Réveil* (ending at fig. 3 in the score).[16] Messiaen simply copied the notation: transcription and finished piece are identical down to the smallest nuance, the only difference being the doubling of the line at the octave, a standard procedure in the piano writing in *Réveil*.

16 *Réveil des oiseaux* (Paris: Durand, 1955), study score, plate no. D. & F. 13,772.

Example 2.3 Robin notated at St-Germain-en-Laye, 2 June 1952



Example 2.4 Sketches for *Réveil des oiseaux*, the *grand tutti* after fig. 18



Ex. 2.2a is from a solo for the melodious warbler (figs 13–14 in the score) notated at Gardépée on 12 June 1952. The main difference comes in the scoring – a witty *Klangfarbenmelodie* for piano, solo viola, oboe and three solo violins (Ex. 2.2b). The *cahier*'s 'timbre peu rauque' translates in the score into 'timbre désagréable', and the tempo in the score is slower, 'Un peu vif' instead of 'Très vif'.

Ex. 2.3 corresponds to the beginning of the long piano cadenza (fig. 16) that introduces the central section, a robin transcribed at St-Germain-en-Laye on 2 June 1952. Changes between notation and score are again slight: the addition of the octave doubling, staccatos on the semiquavers that end each motif, and the instruction 'rapide, mais doux et confiant'.

The piano solo expands into the *grand tutti* that starts (according to Messiaen's preface) after 4 in the morning. Throughout the tutti the piano part is an exact copy of the *cahier* (apart from the octave doubling and a few added expression marks). The original notation, which covers two closely written pages of the *cahier*, is used in its entirety but runs out midway through the tutti (at fig. 22). Messiaen's solution is simply to go back to the beginning, repeating the material exactly as before; remarkably, even the dynamics remain unchanged, despite the fact that the piano is now in competition with the full orchestra.

At the start of the *grand tutti* (fig. 17) the piano is joined by other instruments representing birds of the dawn chorus – a solo violin and celesta. Again, the score follows the *cahier* closely, with one or two additions of dynamics, and with both the violin and celesta playing an octave higher than the original *cahier* notation. Although the rhythms are exactly as in the *cahier*, the beamings are

Example 2.5 Blackcap notated at Gardépée, 12 June 1952

Example 2.6 Turtle doves notated at Gardépée, 13 June 1952

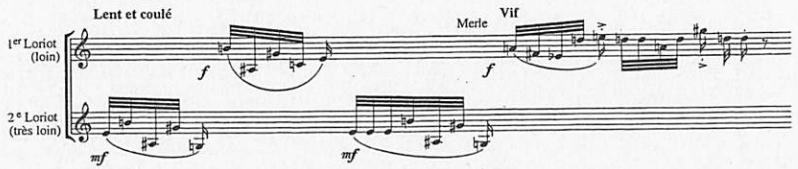
altered in order to fit with the 4/8 time signature imposed by Messiaen to aid coordination. Ex. 2.4 shows part of an early notation for the tutti, made at Gardépée on 14 June 1952. In the score the blackbird is played by the violin (four bars after fig. 18) and the robin by the celesta (the second bar of fig. 18). The golden oriole was reserved for later in the tutti (after fig. 20) with a *fortissimo* entry on two horns, and in this case there are differences between score and *cahier*, with the line slightly adapted and broken into short phrases, perhaps to give the effect of a fanfare.

Ex. 2.5 is the notation on which the next piano cadenza (fig. 28) is based, a blackcap collected at Gardépée on 12 June 1952. The pianist could just as well play from the *cahier*, since the only additions (apart from the octave doubling) are a few markings of *poco rallentando* added in parentheses. Incidentally, the opening phrase (B–B–E–C♯–B) bears a resemblance to the main theme of the 'Séquence du Verbe', second movement of the *Trois petites Liturgies* (1943–44).

Ex. 2.6 represents two turtle doves (Gardépée, 13 June 1952). The orchestration (between figs 29 and 30) produces a delicious effect, with flutter-tongue tremolos on three flutes, and trills on three violins. Tiny alterations to the notes are matters of practicality: for example, the low G♯ in the third harmony (beyond the flute's compass) is raised to an E.

A later duet shows Messiaen for once prepared to improve on nature. The passage in question begins (fig. 41) as a dialogue between a golden oriole and a blackcap; then come two phrases for a wood pigeon ('tendre et caressant, roucoulé', and wrongly identified in the *cahier* as a turtle dove), and the section ends with a dialogue between two golden orioles, one more distant than the other, and a figure ('joyeux') for the blackbird. *Cahier* (see Ex. 2.7) and score are the same, apart from a tidying up of the rhythmic notation, but there is one

Example 2.7 Two golden orioles and a blackbird notated at Orgeval, 15 June 1953



significant change, with Messiaen sharpening the sense of call and echo by increasing the dynamic of the first golden oriole to *fortissimo*, and reducing that of the other ('très loin') to *piano*. The idea of the spatial relationship of the birds was a potentially valuable device, one that Messiaen later exploited in 'La Chouette hulotte' from the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*.

Finally, the long final piano cadenza (figs 43–4) just before the end of the work puts together a blackbird notated in Messiaen's garden on 30 April 1953 with a robin notated at Orgeval six weeks later (15 June). Even when combining two different birdsongs collected at different locations, Messiaen felt no need to go beyond minimal interventions in fitting them together, limiting himself mainly to transpositions to avoid doubling or repeating pitches used by the other bird.

What these examples reveal is an extraordinary approach to composition. It was as though Messiaen saw *Réveil* as a 'translation' from what was already music – birdsong – into a medium understandable by human listeners. And he seems to have had an almost superstitious belief that his first impressions were the truest. As far as Messiaen was concerned, the birdsongs and the order of events – and even the long silences – were all faithful to the originals: 'entirely authentic'. It was as though the birds themselves were the creators of the music, and when Messiaen sent his programme note to Heinrich Strobel (who had commissioned *Réveil* for the Donaueschingen Festival), he underlined the point, insisting that there should be no biography of himself: 'I'm anxious to disappear behind the birds' (see Hill and Simeone 2005, p. 208).

All this helps to explain the air of objectivity in *Réveil*, with little of the drama that marks Messiaen's later birdsong music. The somewhat monochrome effect arises because the songs are much less characterized than they would become. In the *Catalogue* the songs of the nightingale and the robin are dramatically different; here they sound oddly similar. All this would change as Messiaen's knowledge of birds increased and as he enriched the vocabulary with which he transcribed their songs. But the change would be driven by a new approach that was much more interventionist. In *Réveil* Messiaen's dramatic instincts are not entirely suppressed – there is the handling of the golden oriole, for example – but for the time being he was content with truth-to-nature, with birdsong faithfully rendered rather than 'interpreted'.

The Sketches for *Oiseaux exotiques*

The first sign of a work on 'exotic birds' came in the autumn of 1953. Messiaen was in Donaueschingen for rehearsals of his new work, *Réveil des oiseaux*, which was to receive its premiere on 11 October. A few days earlier, on 6 October, Messiaen took the opportunity to visit the Black Forest to collect birdsong. That evening he heard the cry of a tawny owl, recording above his notation the place, the time ('Baden-Baden, Forêt Noire, pleine nuit, 20h') and a brief description: 'vociférations douloureuse et lugubre'.[17] Then, in the lower half of the same sheet of manuscript paper, he compiled a list of birds classified according to 14 different habitats: birds of the high mountains, birds of the vineyards, sea birds, and so on (see Hill and Simeone 2005, pp. 210–11). In the margin one can just make out, in Messiaen's faint pencil, that the songs of these birds would be composed as pieces for solo piano. Among them is a single entry representing birds from beyond France: 'Oiseaux exotiques'.

The page from Messiaen's notebook stirs the imagination. One may picture the composer in the chill of an autumn night, among the fallen leaves, struck by a sudden inspiration: that out there in nature, in the fields, forests and mountains, exists a limitless supply of music (if only one has ears to hear it); and, moreover, that he himself had the means to realize this vision – to translate birdsong into human music – thanks to his own growing ornithological expertise and an indomitable interpreter, Yvonne Loriod, who a month earlier had memorized and mastered the solo piano part of *Réveil* in less than a week. Never one to do things by halves, Messiaen sketched a project that might have occupied him for the rest of his life. It was a defining moment.

The disappointing reception of *Réveil des oiseaux* at its premiere on 11 October 1953 was the start of a difficult time. Messiaen's wife Claire was now gravely unwell and had to be placed in a nursing home. Moreover, until the approach by Boulez at some point in 1954 for what became *Oiseaux exotiques*, Messiaen was without any commissions. But one advantage of this fallow year was that the composer could redouble his birdsong researches. He could also expand their scope, supplementing fieldwork around Paris by listening to birdsong recordings. The use of recordings for *Oiseaux exotiques* was a fundamental difference from *Réveil* that was to have far-reaching consequences. Messiaen's source on records was an anthology of six 78-rpm discs of *American Bird Songs*, recorded for the Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell University and released in 1942.

The recordings introduce a problem of dating. When working in the field directly from nature, Messiaen invariably dated each notation; with recordings, however, he felt that this was unnecessary. Thus, exactly when Messiaen made his notations from the Cornell records is uncertain, for we do not know how

17 BnF-musique, MS 23001.

or when he came by the set; an intriguing possibility is that he may have acquired the anthology on one of his two trips to the United States in 1949 and that the contents had been simmering in his imagination ever since. At first his interest in the recordings seems to have been largely ornithological. His brief transcriptions, neatly copied, are laid out in the exact order in which they appear on the records, with the names and the classifications ('Birds of Northern Gardens and Shade Trees', and so on) carefully copied in English.

If one were to suggest a possible date for these notations, then early 1954 would seem likely, the reason being the next development: a series of notations in rough handwriting jotted in the pages at the back of the same *cahier*.[18] According to notes in the *cahier*, the composer made these at an aviary of exotic birds owned by a Mme Billot, who lived at St-Cloud on the western edge of Paris. Messiaen went there twice, and the *cahier* records the dates – 18 and 25 May 1954. The St-Cloud collection seems to have been large and varied, including among its tropical birds a shama and a red-billed mesia, both of which would appear in *Oiseaux exotiques*. What really caught Messiaen's ear and eye, however, was a magnificent Virginia cardinal, which gave him several pages of song to add to the brief extract for this bird in the Cornell anthology. The appeal of Mme Billot's birds seems to have been more musical than ornithological. Messiaen was much more selective than he had been with the records. Many of the notations are perfunctory and were evidently too uninteresting for him to bother making a fair copy. But two of the birds – the Virginia cardinal and the shama – were neatly copied into a fresh *cahier*, the cardinal given pride of place, with a very long notation that covered seven pages.[19]

Messiaen returned to *American Bird Songs*, probably over the following winter (1954–55), after receiving a request from Boulez for a new piece to be given at the Domaine musical. With his usual thoroughness he began by reworking each excerpt, developing each bird in the order it appears in the anthology. An obvious drawback of the recordings was that each excerpt lasted under half a minute; but this was more than compensated for by the huge range of birds – 72 in all. An even more valuable advantage over working from nature was that Messiaen could check and refine his transcriptions with repeated hearings; in the case of the mockingbird, for example, he made at least six notations, rating them for accuracy with a comment in the margin. The handwriting reveals how difficult the work was, and the speed at which Messiaen had to work to keep pace with the birdsong, with phrases jumbled together and a shorthand of arrows with scribbled ideas for instrumentation.

The third and final stage of transcribing *American Bird Songs* came with neatly written versions of 24 of them. Some are fair copies made from the second wave of transcriptions, others are further developments.

18 BnF-musique, MS 23036.
19 BnF-musique, MS 23088.

The Sketches Made from Recordings

What follows is a selection from the American birds used in *Oiseaux exotiques*. The music examples may be listened to on the CD accompanying this book, prefaced in each case by the original birdsong as Messiaen heard it on the Cornell University records. In addition, the CD includes four further birds from the Cornell set, followed by Messiaen's transcriptions played on the piano (see the full tracklisting of the CD on pp. 123–4). The page references below are to the study score, for those readers wishing to consult it.[20]

It is clear that Messiaen began his researches with the same ideal of truth to nature as in *Réveil*. As he delved deeper into the birdsong, however, the search for musical counterparts to represent what he perceived in the birdsong inspired Messiaen's creativity. Imperceptibly, and probably unconsciously, the artist took over from the ornithologist. In most cases the final sketch seems overwhelmingly a matter of artistic licence, and in a few cases (the olive-backed thrush, for example) the transformation is so radical that the final version is hardly recognizable when compared with the original recording.

Wood Thrush

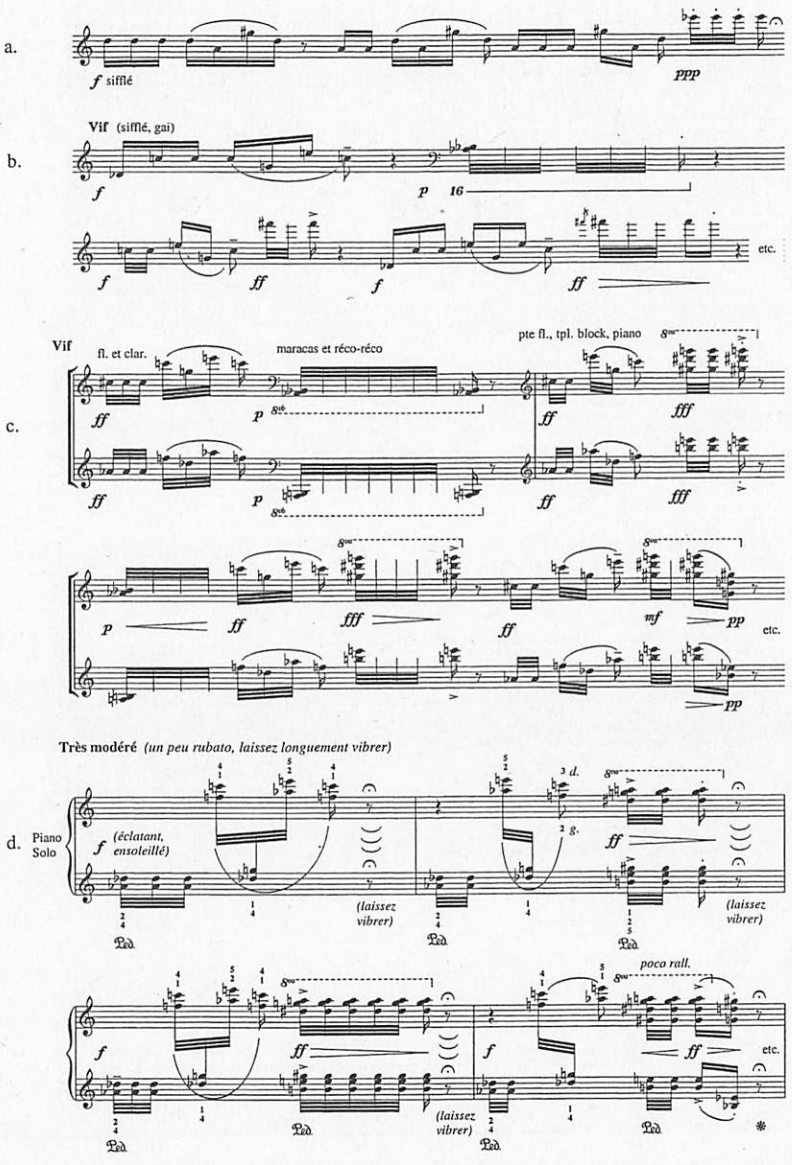
It is easy to hear the lyricism in the recorded song of the wood thrush, and to recognize why Messiaen gave it such eloquent solos in *Oiseaux exotiques*. The composer's first transcription is shown in Ex. 2.8a. His second version, Ex. 2.8b, reworks the recording in detail. Messiaen went to great trouble to get the phrases in the correct order, with a tangle of inserts added during repeated listenings. Also new is the shaping of the melody through harmony – the C major arpeggio with the D♭ that gives a first hint of the bitonal harmonies of the finished version. The final sketch, Ex. 2.8c, is scored for instruments, as were all the piano cadenzas; the decision to give the piano a solo role – so that *Oiseaux exotiques* is 'almost a piano concerto'[21] – may well have been taken very late on. Another difference in the finished score (p. 5), part of which is given in Ex. 2.8d, is the tightening of the structure. At the same time, the impact of the song is simplified, and given unalloyed radiance, by the omission of the low tremolo. Most importantly, the finished score shows that the way Messiaen imagined the bird has changed: far more spacious ('Très modéré' instead of 'Vif', and with long pauses between phrases) and more richly sonorous (*éclatant*, *ensoleillé*), the harmonies sustained by the pedal so that they resound like bells.[22]

20 *Oiseaux exotiques* (Vienna and London: Universal Edition, 1960), plate no. UE 13,154. Later impressions, which include Messiaen's 1985 revisions, have identical pagination.

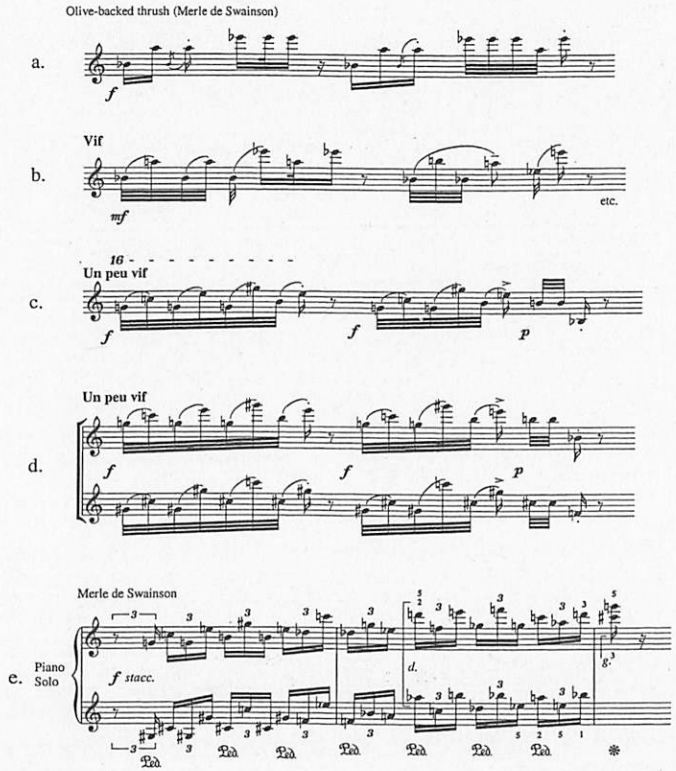
21 See 'Author's First Preface' in the score.

22 The process is carried a stage further in Messiaen's 1985 revisions to *Oiseaux exotiques*, with the tempo slowed from ♪ = 100 to ♪ = 80. See Chapter 4, note 19 for more details of these revisions.

Example 2.8 Wood thrush from *American Bird Songs*, from first notation to finished score (CD, tracks 1–2)



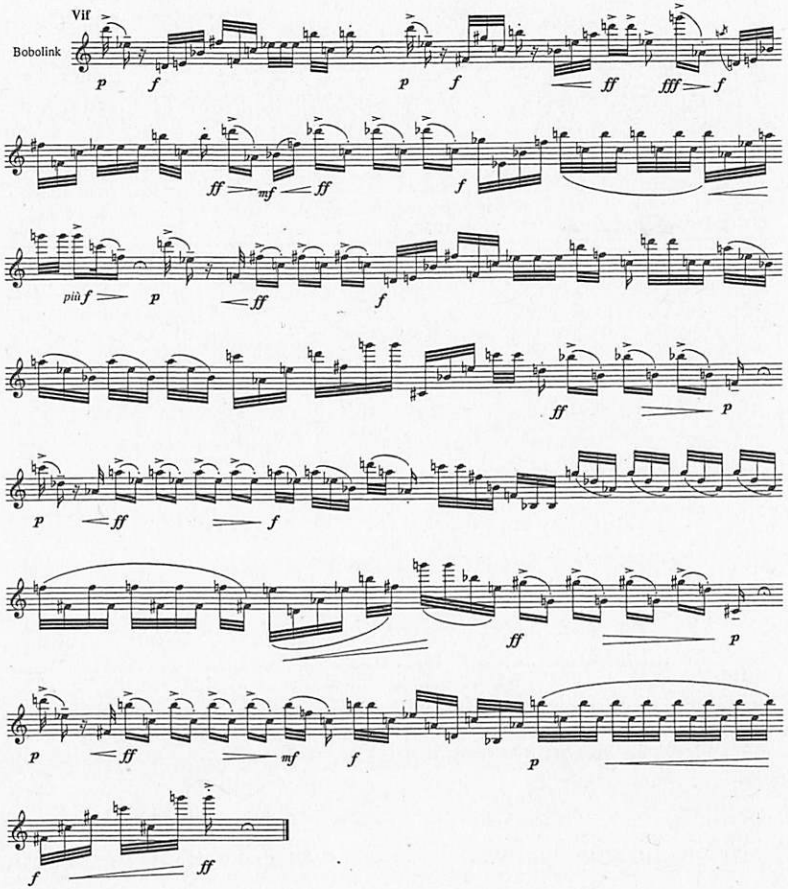
Example 2.9 Olive-backed thrush from *American Bird Songs*, from first notation to finished score (CD tracks 3–4)



Olive-Backed Thrush

From the unpromising beginning of Messiaen's first notation (Ex. 2.9a) the sketches chart a spectacular transformation. The second stage (Ex. 2.9b) uses similar pitches to the first, but this time with the song transcribed in its entirety. More importantly, Messiaen started to pick out the oscillations he heard in the song. The next development (Ex. 2.9c) altered the pitches to broken chords of C and E major. On the same page of the *cahier* Messiaen sketched the first two phrases of this new version with a not-quite-parallel lower line, which highlights many of the same pitches (Ex. 2.9d), in a scoring for E flat and B flat clarinets. The finished score (p. 19) transfers the motif to solo piano, as with the wood thrush. Messiaen extends the upward movement (and alters the rhythm to triplets) to create a zigzag rampaging in an upward spiral that will slice through the dense textures of the central medley (Ex. 2.9e).

Example 2.10 Bobolink from *American Bird Songs* (CD tracks 5–6)



Bobolink

The bobolink appears in duet with the catbird, forming the long piano cadenza two-thirds of the way through the work (pp. 62–5). The song is varied and immensely rapid. Messiaen made fair copies selected from two of his many rough attempts.

Ex. 2.10 shows one of these fair copies, which forms the basis for the first half of the cadenza (pp. 62–3). The second half is based (rather more loosely, but still recognizably) on another notation. In this way the cadenza forms a binary structure, with one version of the bobolink's song followed by its variant or 'double'. (Other instances of similar binary forms will be mentioned

in Chapter 3.) Messiaen's notes on the bobolink show the lengths he was prepared to go in order to define the song as precisely as possible:

> In *pp* and *p*, the timbre is soft and lamenting, in the style of a robin. In *mf* and *f*, twittering, the timbre is rather grating, like a softer version of a minah, with some notes like the song thrush. In *ff*, the sounds are brassy, with a sonorous halo that is almost bell-like. Its renowned virtuosity is incredible, and when loud is *brilliant*.[23]

Virginia Cardinal

The original transcription, Ex. 2.11a, is a potent blueprint for the final version, complete with a binary shape (formed by the repeat of the 'A' section). The repeat was Messiaen's invention, however, not being apparent in the birdsong. Subsequently, Messiaen made two further transcriptions, one of which is reproduced in Ex. 2.11b. The final sketch, Ex. 2.11c, is virtually identical to the finished score, apart from one accidental, and the use of pauses instead of measured silences between phrases. Once more, the detailed instrumentation of what would eventually become a piano cadenza is astonishing – a jangling of keyed percussion, reinforced by woodblock and 'perhaps the piccolo and E flat clarinet'.[24] Intriguingly, there are indications of piano fingering on some of the arpeggios. Very possibly, trying this passage at the keyboard revealed to Messiaen its pianistic qualities.

Mme Billot's Virginia Cardinal

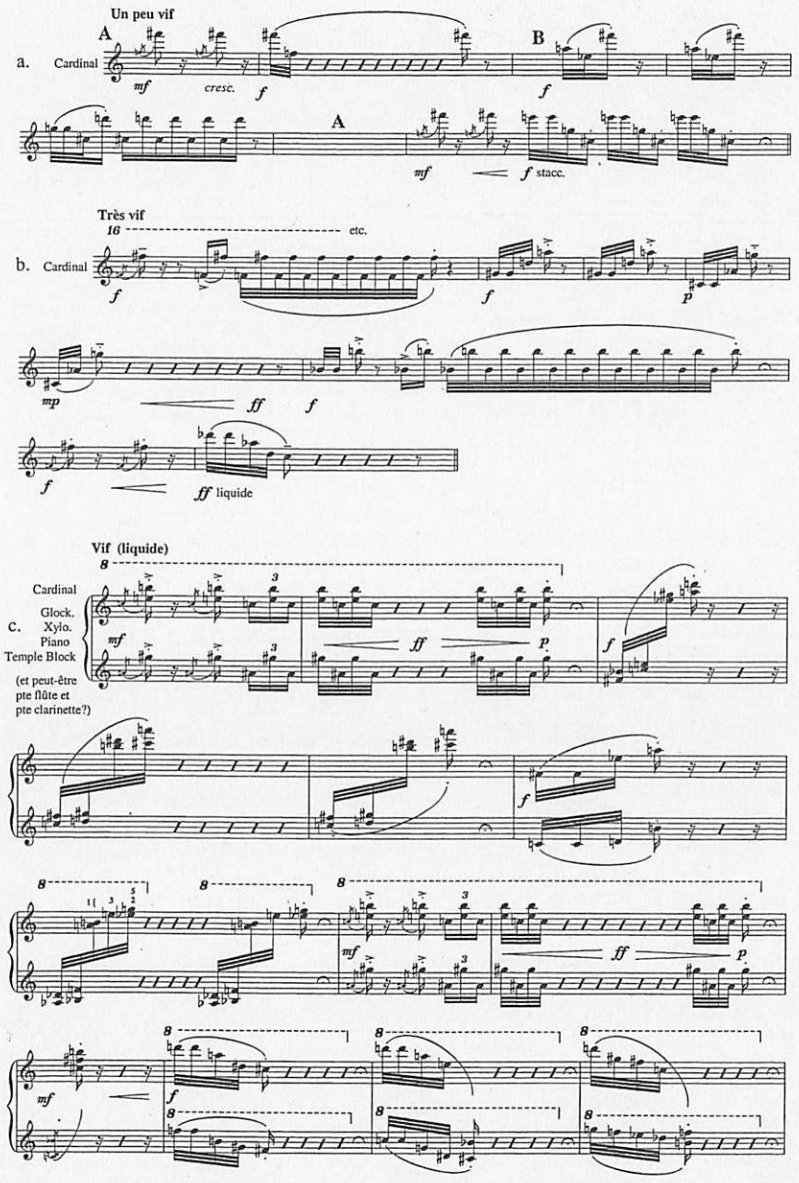
Messiaen's two visits to Mme Billot's aviary produced numerous notations of her Virginia cardinal. These were then reordered in a fair copy covering six pages in a sequence of nine subsections (each representing one of the bird's different 'solos').[25] The way in which Messiaen exploited this rich quarry of material shows important differences from his working method in *Réveil*. Where in *Réveil* the composer was faithful to the long unbroken notations of each bird's song, here he cherry-picked, selecting and developing only the most promising passages. Whole swathes of song were ignored, including even the opening flourishes, presumably because this aspect of the cardinal's song had already been covered when he made the transcription from the American anthology. The chosen fragments of Mme Billot's cardinal were used to create the important concertante piano part in the second half of the central medley (pp. 28–38). Ex. 2.12a shows the opening of this passage (p. 28), followed by the relevant excerpt from the *cahier* (Ex. 2.12b). Part of the piano's role in

23 BnF-musique, MS 23036.

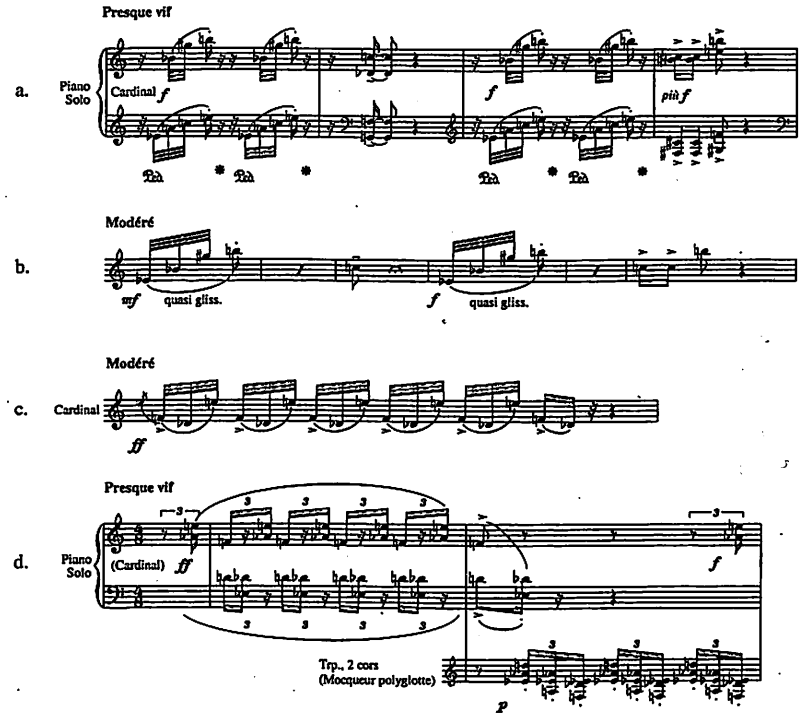
24 BnF-musique, MS 23036.

25 The first of these transcriptions is in BnF-musique, MS 23036; the reordered version is in MS 23088.

Example 2.11 Virginia cardinal from *American Bird Songs*, from first notation to final sketch (CD tracks 7–8)



Example 2.12 Virginia cardinal from Mme Billot's aviary, comparing the finished score with Messiaen's first notations (CD track 9)



this section is to set up exchanges with other instruments. Ex. 2.12c shows a fragment from the *cahier*, with its realization for the piano, and the imitation (appropriately by the mockingbird) on the brass, Ex. 2.12d (pp. 34–5).

This was the point that Messiaen's preparatory work had reached by the time he actually started composing, on 5 October 1955, the date given at the front of the published score. Two things about this date are extraordinary. First, that Messiaen should have allowed so short a time before the announced premiere of a complex work like *Oiseaux exotiques*, especially when one bears in mind that this was not the summer vacation (his normal time for composing) but the busiest period of the year for teaching. Also remarkable is that when Messiaen began composing, he still had not yet collected the tropical birds that are of such importance in *Oiseaux exotiques*.[26] This vital piece of research was not

26 Of the nine tropical birds used in the work, seven came from the VI[e] salon des oiseaux held in November 1955, and one from Mme Billot (the red-billed mesia); where Messiaen collected the other bird, a lesser green leafbird, is unknown.

accomplished until mid-November 1955, when Messiaen paid three visits to a bird exhibition in Paris, the VI[e] salon des oiseaux, sponsored by the Ligue pour la protection des oiseaux and the *Journal des oiseaux*.[27] The dates are confirmed by a note in Messiaen's handwriting on the cover of the *cahier*: 'All the songs of exotic birds contained in this *cahier* were heard at the bird exhibition on 11, 12 and 14 November 1955, in Paris. I have also noted what I saw of the plumage.'[28]

It is inconceivable that someone as methodical as Messiaen should postpone such important work until the last moment. The conclusion must be that he had a radical change of mind while in mid-composition: having planned a work on American birds, he visited the bird exhibition in mid-November, was amazed by what he found and heard, and altered course – a significant gamble, with less than four months before the announced date of the premiere.

Minah

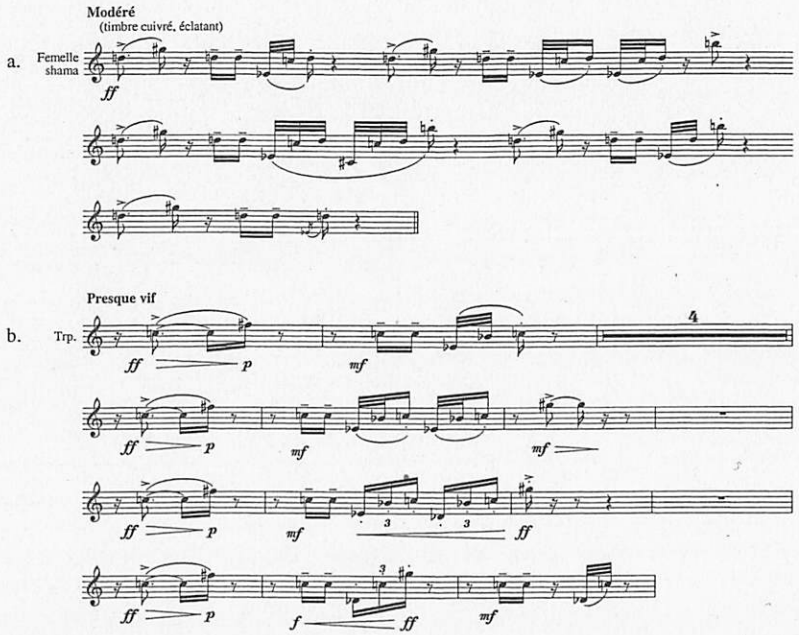
The page in the *cahier* devoted to the minah was awarded 'two stars' by Messiaen, a sign of exceptional approbation.[29] It is curious, then, that very little of the minah's eventual music involved direct quotation from the *cahier*. The one passage that can be traced to the notations made at the bird exhibition is the strand for E flat clarinet (pp. 43–54). Despite varied transpositions (and a number of omissions), the general line of the original notation is preserved. However, the first piano cadenza (pp. 4–5), which is almost entirely for the minah, contains only one or two fragments recognizable from the *cahier*. Instead, this cadenza is a free fantasy that is content to capture the style and swagger of the original transcription, the shape of its motifs and the extremes of its shrill outbursts and muffled bass percussions. The other important use of the minah is in the orchestral introduction (pp. 1–3), which is recalled briefly at the end (p. 85). In both passages the traits of the song are dissected as if in slow motion, in weirdly microscopic detail.

Himalayan Laughing Thrush, or White-Crested Laughing Thrush

This bird inspired a description in Messiaen's *cahier* that is a typical blend of exactly observed detail and hyperbole: 'Crested head with a white breast. Huge black flash over the eye making a terrifying mask. Like a ghost, with a grey-black cloak, the size of a pigeon [...] Its voice is awesome, the song vociferous'.[30] In the introduction and again in the coda, the Himalayan laughing

27 The authors are grateful to Robert Fallon for this information.
28 BnF-musique, MS 23039.
29 BnF-musique, MS 23039.
30 BnF-musique, MS 23039.

Example 2.13 Shama notated at Mme Billot's aviary, compared with the finished score



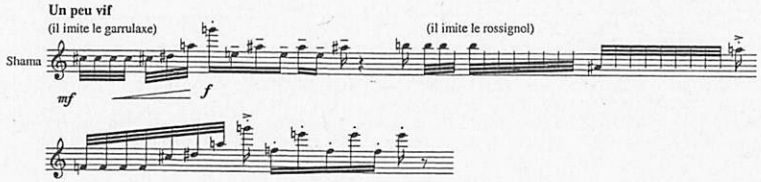
thrush is represented by tintinnabulation, a forerunner of the slow motion that became a favoured form of ending – a sort of reminiscence – in the *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (see, for example, 'Le Merle bleu', 'Le Traquet stapazin' and 'La Chouette hulotte').

Shama

The Indian shama was by far the most extensively used of the tropical birds. One shama had already been notated the previous year at Mme Billot's aviary (Ex. 2.13a). Her shama was the source of the music scored for brass that forms an insistent motor, helping to drive the first half of the central medley, Ex. 2.13b (pp. 21–7). Messiaen followed the birdsong closely, apart from slight alterations of pitch and the overall transposition down a tone. The resulting shape is very characteristic of the composer, as is the balance between 'fixed' and 'mobile' motifs – the static incantation, and four phrases that develop to a climax (at the high G♯, *ff*). The laconic echo (p. 27, b. 1) is also typical of Messiaen; it is interesting that at this point he tightens the structure by omitting the shama's fifth incantation.

Example 2.14 Shama notated at the VI[e] salon des oiseaux, Paris, November 1955

Example 2.15 Shama notated at the VI[e] salon des oiseaux, Paris, November 1955

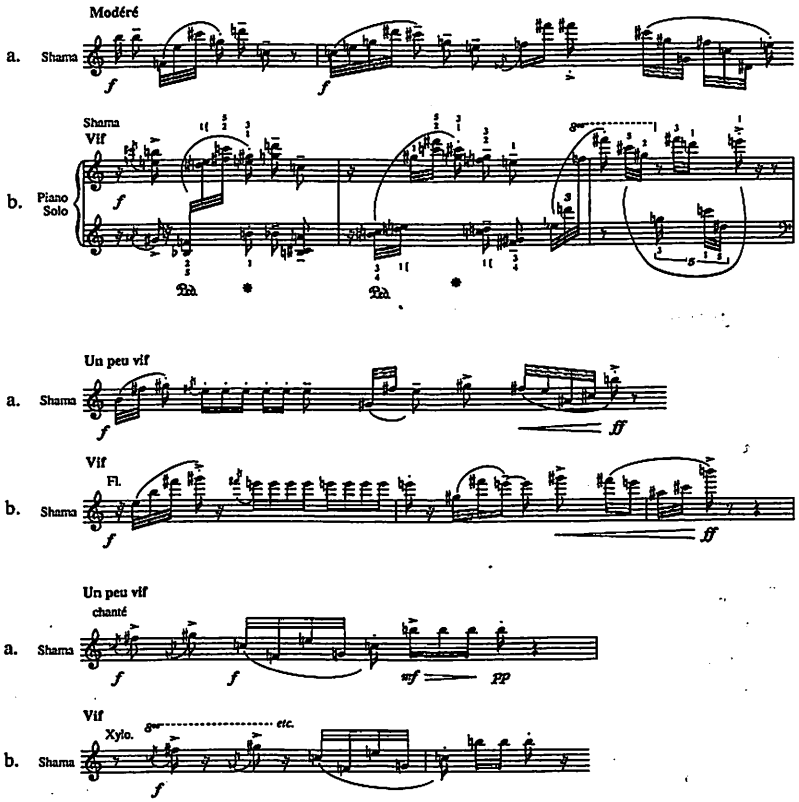


Of the alterations to detail, the most significant are to rhythm. In the central medley Messiaen committed himself to a time signature of 4/8. No doubt a regular metre was to aid coordination (rather as in *Réveil*). But the pulse followed by the players is clearly audible also to the listener, and there is even a sense of a four-in-a-bar march rhythm, established by the Himalayan laughing thrush at the start of the central medley (p. 16). Within this context Messiaen gave the shama added punch by syncopating its first two notes. At the same time, he smoothed the demisemiquavers into triplets, much as he did with the zigzag of the olive-backed thrush.

Of the seven tropical birds collected at the exhibition, the shama was by far the most important, its notations occupying 12 of the 18 pages used in the *cahier*. The very first notation, labelled 'chant en fanfare', was to become the climactic motif of the entire work (Ex. 2.14). Indeed, the shama became a powerful counterweight to the Virginia cardinal, the showiest of the American birds. The contrast between cardinal and shama is embodied by the piano part in the central medley. The first half is given to the cardinal, the second (pp. 40–50) to the shama, whose solo starts with a series of brilliantly coloured exclamations.

Messiaen's *cahier* is a spontaneous record of the birds as they were singing around him at the exhibition, with the long solos for the shama interspersed with interruptions from other birds. At one point (Ex. 2.15) Messiaen notes that the shama is imitating the Himalayan laughing thrush, identifiable in the score by the rocking ostinato figure, two bars after fig. 17 (p. 40). Later, the shama imitates a nightingale: the result can be heard in the tremolos towards the end of this solo (pp. 49–50). These shama observations must have sparked Messiaen's interest in developing the motivic connection between different birds that is such a feature of *Oiseaux exotiques*.

Example 2.16 Shama notated at the VI[e] salon des oiseaux, Paris, November 1955, compared with the finished score



The songs of shamas dominate the final medley in a scintillating kaleidoscope. Composing at speed, as he must have been, Messiaen dipped here and there into his enormous reservoir of material. The piano part is a patchwork of five snippets: for instance, Ex. 2.16.1a from the sketch and 1b from the score (pp. 74–5). Turning to the instrumental parts, we can follow the flute at the opening of the final medley, Ex. 2.16.2a–b, or the xylophone in a trio with piccolo and E flat clarinet, Ex. 2.16.3a–b (both on p. 68).

If the whole process of the research and development for *Oiseaux exotiques* is reviewed, the revolution in Messiaen's thinking is strikingly clear. Partly, the change was a result of his using recordings for the first time. Messiaen's search for authenticity, which caused him to study each recorded excerpt in microscopic detail, led to much more imaginative ways of translating birdsong into music, greatly enlarging his language. The paradox is that the search for ever more accuracy led to greater freedom; and once Messiaen's imagination was let off the leash, the birds seemed more real – more faithful to nature – than in *Réveil*. Also liberating was the process of reworking each birdsong from the recordings, which must have convinced Messiaen that no single notation could be definitive.

Finally, Messiaen's new approach was confirmed by his decision to incorporate at a very late stage a whole new source of birdsong from the bird exhibition. By November 1955 pressure of time meant that the methods used in *Réveil* were out of the question: painstaking refinement had to be replaced by inspired spontaneity. The other consequence was that *Oiseaux exotiques* could not follow the unities of time and habitat observed in *Réveil*. Without the restrictions of an ornithological programme, or even of a single continent, Messiaen was free to create. The price from Messiaen's point of view was a break with the principles established in *Réveil*, as he explained somewhat apologetically to Claude Samuel: 'So there's [...] a certain element of composition in the "birdsong material", since I've randomly placed side by side birds of China, India, Malaysia, and North and South America, which is to say, birds that never encounter each other' (Samuel 1994, p. 131).

undated but are identified as '2e épreuve' and stamped 'Corrigé – Bon à tirer' at the top of the first page, and almost certainly date from mid-1959. As well as corrections of wrong notes and other minor errors, there is a more interesting category of changes: numerous small modifications to the dynamics, which are different from those that Buchardt must have engraved from Messiaen's manuscript. Most are subtle – from *mf* to *f*, *f* to *mf*, or *mp* to *p* – and several raise the dynamics a notch in the two B flat clarinet parts in the music for the American robin; all this shows us just how attentive the composer was to such details, presumably in the light of live performances of the work. Buchardt carefully transcribed all Messiaen's changes and the result is the text as it appears in the first edition of the study score, published in December 1960.[17] This was reprinted without changes in 1964 and several times subsequently. In 1985 Messiaen made some further revisions to dynamics and – more importantly – to metronome markings, which are reflected in reprints of the work from 1995 onwards.[18] Among these are two important changes: first, the marking 'Plus Lent' and the very much slower metronome mark of ♪ = 72 one bar after fig. 2 and again two bars after fig. 32 (the *vociférationimplacable* and its reprise at the end of the work); second, the changed metronome mark, from ♪ = 100 in the first edition to ♪ = 80, at the appearance of the wood thrush on page 5 and again on page 84. Messiaen also adjusted the estimated duration of the work: from '13 to 14 minutes' in the first edition to 'around 16 minutes' in the revision.[19]

although some may well come to light in due course.

17 Interestingly, in the second proofs Buchardt's name is printed at the lower right corner of the final page, but for some reason this does not appear in the published score.

18 A notice on the verso of the title page reads 'Les corrections d'auteur 1985' (and see Fallon 2004).

19 The revised score (plate no. UE 13154, the same as that of the first edition) is a corrected reprint of the original edition. Pagination and rehearsal figures remain unchanged, but other additions and changes include: (1) p. ii: duration 'about 16 minutes', changed from '13 to 14 minutes'. (2) p. 3, fig. 2, b. 2: 'Plus Lent (♪ = 72)', a completely new addition at the *vociférationimplacable*, drastically modifying the opening tempo of ♪ = 69; a footnote (referring to the *vociférationimplacable*) reads: 'Let the gongs resonate throughout this passage. Stop the resonance at the silence'. (3) p. 5, l. 4, b. 1 (appearance of the wood thrush): metronome mark ♪ = 80, changed from ♪ = 100. (4) p. 16, fig. 10: 'Vif (♪ = 144)', changed from 'Presque Vif (♪ = 152)'. (5) p. 60, 1 bar before fig. 23 & fig. 23, b. 4: pauses added to both bars; tam-tam crescendo from *ppp* to *fffff*, changed from *pp* to *ff* with no pauses; added footnote reads: 'Very long pause, going from *ppp* to *fffff*. Stop the resonance at the silence so that the woodwind can be heard (the same thing second time)'. (6) p. 66, fig. 25: 'Presque vif (♪ = 132)', modified from 'Vif' (metronome marking is unchanged); the xylophone part includes new (double) notes in the glissandos, and dynamics have been raised from *f* to *fff*; an added footnote explains that the glissando is a quadruple glissando to be played with four sticks, and should be played the same way every time the passage recurs. (7) p. 69, fig. 26, b. 3: horn dynamics have increased to *f* from *mf*. (8) p. 84, fig. 31: metronome mark ♪ = 80, changed from ♪ = 100. (8) p. 85, 2 bars after fig. 32 (reprise of the *vociférationimplacable*): 'Plus Lent (♪ = 72)' is again a completely new addition; the added footnote reads: 'Let the gongs resonate throughout this passage. Four semiquavers before the silence, begin to damp the resonance of the gongs and the tam-tam so that there is no sound during the silent [final] bar'.

While Messiaen enjoyed long (and sometimes fraught) relationships with two French firms – Durand and Alphonse Leduc – he always seems to have had a special affection for Schlee and for Universal Edition: it was for them that he wrote his only piece dedicated to a publisher, the *Pièce pour piano et quatuor à cordes* (1991), composed 'pour le 90e anniversaire d'Alfred Schlee et d'Universal Edition'.

An American Symphony of the Birds

In this discussion of the context in which *Oiseaux exotiques* was composed, it is worth mentioning an intriguing coincidence: another musician, working the other side of the Atlantic and with similar or even the same recordings, produced a musical work at just the same time. James (Jim) Fassett (1904–86) was appointed assistant director of CBS Radio's music department in 1936 and director in 1942. He was also fascinated by the musical potential of birdsong, and with the help of Peter Paul Kellogg, Professor of Ornithology and Biological Acoustics at Cornell University, he made a 10-inch LP with the title *Music and Bird Songs: Sounds from Nature, with Commentary and Analysis*. On this record, songs such as those of the song thrush are slowed down to half, quarter and even one-eighth speed, with commentaries by Fassett. It was issued by Cornell's Comstock Publishing, the same firm that had produced the records used by Messiaen in his preparations for *Oiseaux exotiques*. Following this experiment, Fassett began to see the possibilities of transforming and manipulating recordings of birdsong into a coherent musical composition, and the result, in 1955, was his *Symphony of the Birds*, a three-movement work for tape based entirely on birdsong recordings, and made with the assistance of Mortimer Goldberg, a sound engineer at CBS Radio. This was first heard as one of Fassett's intermission broadcasts from the New York Philharmonic, and a record with spoken introductions by the composer was released in 1957.[20] From the perspective of *Oiseaux exotiques*, it is interesting to examine the contents of this disc. After Fassett's explanations comes the Symphony itself: *Andante e lirico*, *Buffo* and *Misterioso*. This is followed by additional tracks that include several birds familiar from *Oiseaux exotiques*: Virginia cardinal, mockingbird, catbird, robin, summer tanager, song sparrow, vesper sparrow,

20 Ficker Records C–1002. Details of both of Fassett's records, including soundclips, may be found at <http://www.whistlingrecords.com/birds_and_training/birds_and_training.htm>, accessed 10 October 2006. The *Symphony of the Birds* album was reissued on CD in Japan by EM records, EM–1044.

Carolina wren, indigo bunting and purple finch. For both Messiaen and Fassett the source material was the original field recordings made by Jerry and Norma Stillwell for Cornell University's Ornithology Laboratory and issued by Comstock Publishing.

The *Catalogue d'oiseaux* and Later Messiaen at the Domaine musical

Messiaen's largest and most original piano work, the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, was introduced at the Domaine musical during the course of three concerts. The first, in the Salle Gaveau on 30 March 1957, had the title 'Tendances, une nouvelle écoute', and, as the final work in the programme, it announced 'Sept pièces pour piano (1957) *création* (extraites du *Catalogue d'oiseaux*)'. In fact, only six were played, as 'La Rousserolle effarvatte' was not finished in time for Loriod to have this enormously demanding piece ready. So the first pieces from the *Catalogue* to be performed in public were 'Le Chocard des Alpes', 'L'Alouette lulu', 'La Chouette hulotte', 'Le Loriot', 'L'Alouette calandrelle' and 'Le Courlis cendré'. 'La Rousserolle effarvatte' was first heard the following year, on 25 January 1958. The entire set of 13 pieces was the major Messiaen event that season: a special concert given by Loriod at the Salle Gaveau on 15 April 1959, 'Hors abonnement', 'pour le cinquantième anniversaire d'Olivier Messiaen', five months after the composer's actual birthday on 8 December 1958.

The Domaine musical continued to put on orchestral concerts as well as smaller events. For example, the 1958–59 season opened formally on 14 November 1958 with the first performance in Paris of Stravinsky's *Threni*, conducted by the composer. A fortnight earlier, on 28 October, an invitation concert 'Orient–Occident' had taken place featuring music from India played by Ravi Shankar and two works by Boulez – the first Paris performance of *Improvisation sur Mallarmé* and another outing for *Le Marteau sans maître*.

Over the next few years, after the first complete performance of the *Catalogue d'oiseaux* to celebrate Messiaen's fiftieth birthday, further important Messiaen events were to follow at the Domaine musical. Jean-Louis Barrault moved to the much larger Théâtre de l'Odéon in 1959, and the Domaine musical concerts started to be held there from the end of the same year. The tenth season was celebrated with a concert on 31 October 1962 that included a repeat performance of *Oiseaux exotiques*, now conducted by Boulez, but with two of the original soloists – Loriod and Deplus – and, like the world premiere, this occasion was recorded. The Théâtre de l'Odéon, with its seating capacity of over a thousand, is not one of the 'small halls' for which the work was specifically designed, but this must have been a memorable occasion. In addition to the music (*Oiseaux exotiques*, Stockhausen's *Kontrapunkte*, Berio's Serenade and Boulez's *Le Marteau sans maître*), Messiaen gave a speech about

Boulez and presented him with a gift. Loriod recalls that it was 'a glorious and triumphant evening'.[21]

On 16 December 1964 the first performance in Paris of *Couleurs de la Cité céleste* was given at the Odéon, with Yvonne Loriod, the percussionists from Strasbourg and the Ensemble du Domaine musical; the same players had given the world premiere two months earlier (17 October 1964) at Donaueschingen. Finally, on 12 January 1966, *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* made its first appearance in a concert hall.

Oiseaux exotiques continued to be championed by Pierre Boulez. In Cleveland in 1970 he conducted three performances, on 19, 20 and 21 November, with Philippe Entremont.[22] He repeated the work on 5 December, again in Cleveland, during the first of his 'Informal Evenings' in Severance Hall, and this time with another pianist (and veteran of the Domaine musical), Paul Jacobs. This concert, which was devoted entirely to the music of Messiaen (*Oiseaux exotiques* and *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum*), included (according to the programme) an introduction to *Oiseaux exotiques* by Boulez, a complete performance, then 'explanations, demonstrations and specific questions about this piece from the audience'. The programme book also includes an essay 'written expressly' by Boulez in which he discusses Messiaen's musical language, in particular that of *Oiseaux exotiques*:

> The first observation that becomes essential is that Messiaen's music ceases, without ignoring it, to consider the 'European' tradition as the only valid one, as the exclusive current that we must follow. He knows profoundly the musical literature that is familiar to us, and also that which is less so; he understands its meaning, and is able to follow its evolution through the centuries. But to be willing in our time still to consider our own musical civilization as 'privileged' in relation to others, seems to him singularly narrow-minded. That is why he has tried to discover, in time and in space, other modes of musical thinking which could enrich his personality, his viewpoints and consequently his musical language, his own ideas. [...] The second phenomenon immediately evident in Messiaen's work is the diversity of the sonorous material he uses. Thus he possesses an entirely personal language. Yet it is not a lack of cohesion that I wish to imply. What is noteworthy is that he transforms a certain number of materials which have very different correlations, [...] and he integrates them into a work the diversity of which astonishes. Thus it is with bird-song, for example. I note his predilection for birds: for their songs, of course, but also their colors and their life habits. [...] No one is obliged, of course, to follow him into the field of ornithology. As far as I am concerned, for example, the world of birds has no particular attraction, and I do not believe that even Messiaen's music has brought me around on that score. But what can, what must interest a musician is the manner

21 Yvonne Loriod, personal communication.

22 This was issued on disc in the Cleveland Orchestra's 75th anniversary set (see Chapter 5 and Discography).

CHAPTER 6

Postscript

Messiaen always maintained that the birdsong in his music was accurate (Samuel 1994, p. 94). Yet this has been questioned, both by ornithologists, who are unable to identify the species in Messiaen's music, and by musicians, who point to the unlikely coincidence that Messiaen's birds appear to sing only in his style (an objection answered half-jokingly by Paul Griffiths with the suggestion that the birds Messiaen heard most often – around his Alpine summer home – perhaps reflected his music-making in their songs).[1] Messiaen admitted a degree of subjectivity in his notations: 'obviously I'm the one who hears, and involuntarily I inject the reproductions of the songs with something of my manner and method of listening' (Samuel 1994, p. 94). He argued, however, that the main differences between birdsong and its realization in his music arose from his very individual method of transcription:

> Birds are able to sing in extremely high registers that cannot be reproduced on our instruments; so I write one, two, or three octaves lower. And that's not the only adjustment: for the same reasons I'm obliged to eliminate any tiny intervals that our instruments cannot execute. I replace those intervals, which are of the order of one or two microtones, by semitones, but I respect the proportions of the different intervals, which is to say that if a few microtones correspond to a semitone, a whole tone or a third will correspond to a real semitone; all are enlarged, but the proportions remain identical. As a result, what I restore is nevertheless exact. It's a transposition of what I heard, but on a more human scale. (Samuel 1994, p. 95)

The composer's explanation of his transcriptions as an exact science is at best an oversimplification, as will be readily apparent from the material presented in this book: the recordings of birdsong together with the notations, and the refinements and elaborations from Messiaen's notebooks. Some birdsong does indeed occupy a register impossibly high for human musicians (and perhaps also for human hearing): of the common European birds the skylark is an obvious example. But much birdsong is within our range, and the difficulty in adjusting its intervals to the tempered scale of instruments is not insuperable. Of course, the sheer speed of some birdsongs can be a problem for the transcriber,

1 Griffiths 1985, p.173: 'One must therefore postulate either a high degree of harmonic concurrence among the birds of Petichet (which is not perhaps wholly absurd given the composer's presence in their midst) or else a substantial involvement of personal inclinations in the particular intervallic expansions Messiaen chooses to employ.'

and the examples of the bobolink and catbird show how tenaciously Messiaen worked to untangle the detail from what at first seems a confused blur. A more intractable problem is the aspect of birdsong that can only be described as noise – the prairie chicken, for example[2] – and here we can admire Messiaen's resourcefulness in devising harmonies that stand as equivalents:

> each note [of birdsong] is provided with a chord, not a traditional chord but a complex of sounds intended to give the timbre of that note. There are as many invented chords as there are notes, which is to say, for a bird piece comprising one or two thousand notes, there are one or two thousand invented chords. It's an enormous task for the imagination. (Samuel 1994, pp. 94–5)

Messiaen argued that his birdsong transcriptions were as accurate as he could make them within the limitations of human musical resources. But at some point in the composition of *Oiseaux exotiques* he crossed the line from transcription to creative intervention. A study of the sketches shows this to have been a gradual and probably unconscious process. Very possibly, in the wake of *Réveil des oiseaux*, this development in Messiaen's thinking would have occurred naturally; but in *Oiseaux exotiques* it was accelerated by two special circumstances. One was Messiaen's use of recordings for the first time in preparing a composition, allowing him to revise and refine his notations, and as a result to make rapid progress in developing a varied and flexible birdsong language. Allied with this are the circumstances of the composition of *Oiseaux exotiques*. When Messiaen started work in October 1955, his material had come almost entirely from gramophone records. From the outset, therefore, *Oiseaux exotiques* must have been intended as a collage of birdsong, independent of time, place or habitat – very different from *Réveil des oiseaux*. Added to this was the discovery of a new source of birdsong at the Paris bird exhibition, and the decision to include oriental and tropical birds in a work that until then had been almost exclusively about North American birds. This created an ornithological impossibility, thereby giving Messiaen a free hand. As a result, in its conception, *Oiseaux exotiques* is entirely imaginary. As Messiaen conceded to Claude Samuel: 'There's [...] a certain element of composition in the birdsong material, since I've randomly placed side by side the birds of China, India, Malaysia, and North and South America, which is to say, birds that never encounter each other' (Samuel 1994, p. 131).

A moment that encapsulates Messiaen's new and more imaginative way came with the music of the wood thrush. Messiaen's first notation and the two subsequent elaborations could be described, if not as accurate, at least as accurate equivalents. But the final step goes much further: an inspired simplification, with its spacious tempo and timing, and harmonies drenched in pedal. This is certainly not a transcription, or even a creative reconstruction, but the song of the wood thrush as Messiaen wished to imagine it. And Messiaen

2 Recorded examples on CD tracks 15 and 16.

was well aware of the sea-change in his approach. For all the talk of fidelity to nature, there was another way, as he made clear in the following exchange with Claude Samuel:

> C.S. Your concern for precision astonishes me; I find it to be more the preoccupation of a man of science than the concern of a composer who might consider bird songs as raw material placed at the disposition of his imagination.
> O.M. I've adopted both attitudes; I've written 'exact' and 'imaginary' pieces whose form respects the succession of songs and silences during the hours of day and night. But I've also manipulated birdsongs as material for some of my pieces; in them, a song undergoes all kinds of transformation in the manner of electronic music and *musique concrète*. It's a less honest approach vis-à-vis nature but perhaps more reasonable for the work of a composer. I think both approaches are valid. (Samuel 1994, p. 95)

Oiseaux exotiques is therefore a turning point in Messiaen's career, and it left an indelible mark on the music of the last 35 years of his life. One might not realize this, however, from Messiaen's own accounts of his next birdsong composition, the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*. This is an encyclopedic cycle of 13 piano pieces celebrating the birds of France. Each piece is accompanied by a detailed preface in which Messiaen describes the birds and the habitats where their song has been collected. When the composer explained to Claude Samuel that the *Catalogue* is the purest expression of his philosophy of truth to nature, he was quietly suppressing the imaginary alternative he had described when talking about *Oiseaux exotiques* (Samuel 1994, p. 94). One thing Messiaen never made clear was the extent to which recordings were used in the birdsong research for the *Catalogue*. In the *Traité* Messiaen mentions recordings only briefly, acknowledging their value while emphasizing that birdsong has to be experienced in nature.[3] In fact the *Catalogue* is based almost as much on recordings as it is on Messiaen's researches in the wild.

The *cahiers* show that recordings continued to play a central role in Messiaen's birdsong research long after *Oiseaux exotiques*. About 65 *cahiers* survive from the 1950s, of which no fewer than 13 are largely or entirely filled with notations made from recordings. Three anthologies were particularly useful to Messiaen in his researches for the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*: Ludwig Koch's *Songs of British Birds* (1936), Jean-Claude Roché's *Oiseaux en Bretagne*, and Sture Palmér's *Radions fågelskivor* (see Boswall 1964, p. 21). The last of these was a huge collection of 183 species on sixty-four 78s. During 1955–56 Messiaen compiled a *cahier* with over 60 pages of notations from what he called 'Swedish discs',[4] and he used material from this *cahier* throughout the *Catalogue*. The recordings were particularly helpful to him in

3 Messiaen 1999, pp. 19–20 and Messiaen 2000, pp. xxiii–xxiv. See also Samuel 1994, p. 89: 'a phonograph recording is an incomplete tool inasmuch as it only gives us a portion of a song, just as a photograph conveys a snapshot of a single individual'.

4 BnF-musique, MS 23045.

laying the foundations for birdsong that he had yet to encounter in the wild. One such bird was the ortolan bunting,[5] which was to have a prominent role in 'Le Traquet stapazin', a piece inspired by Messiaen's visit to the Mediterranean in the summer of 1957, a year or so after he made the notation from the Swedish discs.

In *Oiseaux exotiques* the individual species had been researched either from recordings or in the wild, but not both; the sole exception, as we have seen, was the Virginia cardinal. In the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, however, Messiaen used recordings and live notations to enrich each other. How this affected his compositional method can be seen in the case of 'L'Alouette lulu' ('The Woodlark'). The finished piece has a ternary form, the outer sections elaborating the song of the woodlark ('poétique, liquide, irréel'), while the middle part contrasts the woodlark with a nightingale, an idea that may well have come from the words of Jacques Delamain: 'Another voice, perhaps even lovelier, remains earthbound and responds in the darkness. This is the nightingale, hidden in a bush in a woodland clearing.'[6]

The first notation for 'L'Alouette lulu' was made in 1955–56 from the Swedish discs.[7] The recording gave Messiaen the descending motifs that open the piece. The process of composition started immediately, on the same page of the *cahier* as the notation from the recording. Messiaen began by adding harmonies to the last phrase he had notated, and then introduced the idea of two woodlarks, singing in parallel an octave and a semitone apart. At the bottom of the same page are sketches for the nightingale; these are in very rough handwriting but are exactly as they would appear in the finished score, with a system of lettering to indicate their order. The work from the Swedish discs actually preceded Messiaen's encounter with the woodlark in the wild, which occurred (according to his diary) on 14 July 1956, a moment described so evocatively in the preface to the score (see Hill and Simeone 2005, pp. 218–19). The final stage in composing 'L'Alouette lulu' was to embed the birdsong in a poetic evocation of darkness, the idea for which came to Messiaen at the end of a trip to Brittany in September 1956. The rough notes in the *cahier*, probably written on the train back to Paris, show the chorale of chords representing 'la nuit', with arrows indicating where the birdsong from the Swedish discs was to be inserted.[8]

'L'Alouette lulu' is typical of the way Messiaen built on the experience of *Oiseaux exotiques* to create birdsongs that were sharply differentiated from one another and had precise musical functions. The key to this – as it had been in *Oiseaux exotiques* – was a highly selective approach to using the material

5 BnF-musique, MS 23045.

6 Jacques Delamain, *Portraits d'oiseaux, 2e série* (Paris: Stock, 1952), quoted in Messiaen 1995, p. 183.

7 BnF-musique, MS 23044.

8 BnF-musique, MS 23044.

collected in the *cahiers*. In *Oiseaux exotiques*, as we have seen, Messiaen abandoned the practice he had followed in *Réveil* of quoting his notations at length and with minimal intervention. Instead, with the shamas from the Paris bird exhibition and with the Virginia cardinal from Mme Billot's aviary, he edited the birdsong, highlighting particular phrases for further development while disregarding whole swathes of song. This new approach continued in the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*.

The extent of the change in Messiaen's thinking can be illustrated by comparing the birds in *Réveil* that were given long piano cadenzas – the nightingale and blackcap, for example – with the same species as they occur in the *Catalogue*. In 'L'Alouette lulu' the nightingale provides the maximum contrast to the lyricism of the woodlark: its song is jaggedly abrupt and focuses on three elements, described by Messiaen as 'brillant, mordant – comme un xylophone', 'comme un clavecin mêlé de gong' and 'lointain, lunaire'. Similarly, the blackcap in the *Catalogue* loses the bright chatter of its solo in *Réveil* and takes on a more specialized role, with graceful melismas that provide descants and codettas in 'La Bouscarle'.

Messiaen was especially selective in his use of material from recordings. On the Swedish discs the excerpts are much longer than those of *American Bird Songs*, the source he used for *Oiseaux exotiques*. In a few cases the whole notation was followed exactly: the reed warbler's first solo from 'La Rousserolle effarvatte' is based almost verbatim on the *cahier*. More typical, however, is the song thrush from 'La Buse variable', for which a page of notations was reduced to a few motifs; the eloquent effect is similar to that of the wood thrush in *Oiseaux exotiques*.

Messiaen's guiding principle seems to have been his perception of the bird's 'character'. This anthropomorphism – assigning human attributes to birds – was a foible of which Messiaen was well aware, as he admitted in conversation with Peter Hill.[9] No doubt he was aware that this aspect of his birdsong music was considered naïve by his students at the Conservatoire, and by his younger contemporaries. But anthropomorphism is an essential part of the blend of rigorous observation and intense personal inspiration that went into Messiaen's *style oiseau*.

The same drive to give personality to birds applies to Messiaen's evocations of their habitats. Landscape is a new ingredient in the *Catalogue* and required a new imaginative vocabulary. The *cahiers* show how hard Messiaen worked at this. Arriving at a location for the first time, he was concerned less with the birds than with cramming down his first impressions of the place. In September 1956 the composer visited the island of Ouessant (Ushant) off the western extremity of Brittany, covering his notebook with jottings – musical notations for the sound of waves, sketch drawings of the cliffs, and obsessively detailed

9 See also Samuel 1994, pp. 88–9: 'Yes, you'll excuse my use of human terms; it's an old fault of mine: being anthropomorphic, despite myself.'

verbal descriptions. A 'chaos' of rocks resembled 'the teeth of a lion, the snout of a hippopotamus, the jaws of crocodiles', while one particularly weird rock formation was a 'veritable cathedral', reminding Messiaen of dinosaurs or fantastic ghostly figures.[10]

It is typical of Messiaen's complex personality that he should have expressed landscape not impressionistically but through highly wrought musical metaphors. These came from an unlikely source, the quasi-serial writing that had occupied him between 1949 and 1952. Permutations of note-rows may stand for the eddying of the sea (in 'Le Courlis cendré'), or for orbiting flight (in 'La Buse variable'), while a vast 'scale of durations' similar to that in the 'Soixante-quatre durées' of the *Livre d'orgue* represents rock formations (in 'Le Merle de roche'). Perhaps the most striking example is in 'La Chouette hulotte' ('The Tawny Owl'), where Messiaen borrowed the pointillist technique of *Mode de valeurs* (from the *Quatre études de rythme*) to make an ominous symbol for darkness, the backdrop to the calls of hunting owls. The way Messiaen transforms abstract technique into powerful metaphor parallels the way his imagination gets to work on the birdsong notations. One of the owls in 'La Chouette hulotte' is a long-eared owl, notated from the Swedish discs. In the *cahier* the cries of the owl alternate with low bass notes (*staccato* and 'très sec'), which are the sounds of the owl's wings beating.[11] In the finished score, however, Messiaen overruled ornithological accuracy. The motif has nothing to do with the owl; instead it becomes a stuttering pulsation labelled 'Fear'.

Finally, the most important legacy of *Oiseaux exotiques* was a new willingness to adapt birdsong so that it served structural functions. Many of the formal devices found in *Oiseaux exotiques* resurface in the *Catalogue*: symmetries, binary structures with varied second halves, variations, refrains-and-episodes. An impressive aspect of the *Catalogue* is that structures reflect the way a piece is imagined. In 'L'Alouette calandrelle' ('The Short-toed Lark') the shape of the piece – a set of developing variations encased in a static framework – expresses the relationship between the bird and its harsh, desert-like environment. 'La Bouscarle' ('Cetti's Warbler') takes this principle a stage further. As in *Oiseaux exotiques*, the outer layers of the piece suggest symmetries within which the music moves forward through varied refrains-and-episodes. A third element in 'La Bouscarle' is a harmonized melody representing the even flow of the river. This establishes a harmonic point of reference and a goal to which the music will return after moving away in the centre of the piece (in what Messiaen described as a 'modulation to the dominant').[12] There are obvious parallels here with the harmonic organization already observed in *Oiseaux exotiques*.

10 BnF-musique, MS 23044.
11 BnF-musique, MS 23045.
12 In conversation with Peter Hill.

While the 1950s are rightly known as Messiaen's birdsong decade, birds never lost their central place in his music. The influence of *Oiseaux exotiques* continues in the orchestral works of the early 1960s. In *Chronochromie* (1959–60) Messiaen created a medley of extreme complexity in the 'Epôde', scored for 18 solo strings, a movement that provoked outrage at early French performances. Another idea that followed the example of *Oiseaux exotiques* was that of counterpointing birdsong against an abstract rhythmic scheme. This technique was also important in the *Sept Haïkaï* (1962), a work that reflected Messiaen's passionate ambition to enlarge his ornithological horizons, incorporating birdsong collected in Japan in 1962. *Couleurs de la Cité céleste* (1963) is a step towards the stylistic synthesis found in Messiaen's music from here on, with birdsong reunited with Christian and biblical symbolism.

Throughout the 1960s there was hardly any slackening in Messiaen's birdsong researches, the surviving *cahiers* totalling about 60, only five fewer than in the previous decade. There is a more significant diminution in activity in the 1970s and 1980s, with Messiaen tending to concentrate his collecting on important trips overseas. The visit to Utah in 1972 inspired *Des canyons aux étoiles...*; the opera *Saint François d'Assise* was researched in and around Assisi and on the Pacific island of New Caledonia between 1975 and the early 1980s; the *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, Messiaen's last organ work, uses birdsong collected in Israel in 1984; and his last major orchestral work, *Eclairs sur l'Au-delà...*, includes birdsong collected on a six-week tour of Australia in 1988.

Messiaen regarded his birdsong *magnum opus* as the 'Sermon to the Birds' in *Saint François d'Assise* (scene 6). This introduces a novel technique for co-ordinating birdsong, solving a problem that went back to the medleys in *Réveil* and *Oiseaux exotiques*. In these Messiaen had employed regular time signatures, which made it relatively easy to keep the ensemble together but at the price of imposing a straitjacket on the non-metrical rhythms. In *Saint François* the solution was to allow a looser co-ordination, with each instrument entering at a signal from the conductor. Elsewhere in the opera, birdsong is used as the logical outcome of Messiaen's anthropomorphism, with each singer characterized by a birdsong that acts as a leitmotif. The last significant change in Messiaen's birdsong style came in a modest set of piano pieces, the *Petites Esquisses d'oiseaux* (1985); these are a return to completely 'abstract' birdsong, with a mosaic of motifs expressed in a new kind of piano writing remarkable for its crystalline textures.

Given this legacy, the importance of the trail blazed by *Oiseaux exotiques* can hardly be exaggerated. The years of experiment that came before, and to which *Réveil des oiseaux* can be understood to belong, were a necessary interlude. Inevitably, the musical achievement of the experimental works is uneven, or so Messiaen thought: *Cantéyodjayâ* had to wait five years for its

first performance,[13] the tape piece *Timbres-durées* was withdrawn, and the *Quatre études* were dismissed by the composer as minor works.[14] The organ works *Messe de la Pentecôte* and *Livre d'orgue* escaped Messiaen's censure, perhaps because of their religious themes. By the time of *Oiseaux exotiques* the changes in language brought about by experiment had taken root. Messiaen's music had become recognizably more modern in sound and spirit, stripped of excess emotional baggage (a world away from *Turangalîla*), with sharply sculpted ideas and concentrated structures. Most of all, *Oiseaux exotiques* was the work in which birdsong ceased to be an end in itself and became the starting point that challenged Messiaen's creative imagination. The result is that colour and vitality floods back into Messiaen's music, which exudes confidence and mastery for the first time since the 1940s.

The great birdsong project that occupied Messiaen in the 1950s might have left him isolated, distanced from the avant-garde world of which he had briefly been part. Programme music was deeply out of fashion, and Messiaen's aesthetic provoked some derision in progressive circles.[15] Amazingly, however, *Oiseaux exotiques* became a modernist classic, acclaimed at its Domaine musical premiere, the doubters won over by the music's brilliance and integrity. The last word, then, may be given to Alexander Goehr, one of Messiaen's students who was present at the first performance. He and the other members of the class had their doubts about Messiaen's new work, and were unconvinced by a lecture from the composer on birds and birdsong that was characteristically evasive about the music itself. Perhaps Messiaen's reticence was a sign of confidence. *Oiseaux exotiques* could speak for itself, and at the concert the sceptics stayed to cheer. They had heard a firecracker of a piece, unmistakably Messiaen, yet unlike anything he had written before.

> I could not imagine how one could, as it were, compose nature without falling into bathos, analogous to Strauss's *Symphonia Domestica* or Honegger's *Pacific 231*. Messiaen retorted, in answer to my ignorant tittering, that for his part he certainly would not take me for a walk in the forest, as my giggling would upset the birds. But I had to realize the superficiality of my view when it came to the première at Boulez's Marigny concerts of *Oiseaux exotiques* [...] The students in the class asked Messiaen to tell us something about his new piece, a thing he immediately refused to do. [...] He arrived at the following class with an even larger mountain of books than he normally brought with him. These turned out to be ornithological treatises of various sorts, and the lecture, lavishly illustrated at the piano, was a factual description of the countries of origin, habitat, physical appearance and song of a large number of

13 By Yvonne Loriod on 23 February 1954 at the second of the Petit Marigny concerts.

14 In conversation with Peter Hill, Messiaen expressed irritation at the 'exaggerated importance' attached to the *Quatre études*.

15 André Hodeir, for example, asked, 'Why can't the birds and their marvellous songs be left at peace in the forest?' (Hodeir 1961, p. 118).

> birds. Some pages contained Red Cardinals, Blue Popes and a 'Singer from South America' which, as I recall, aroused some mirth among us. However, when the performance came, we realized he had taken us at our word, and provided us with what he thought an appropriate introduction to his new work. [...] But he could not really be drawn about the music itself. I was bowled over by the piece then (as I am now), not only because of the extraordinary colours and the masterly instrumental writing, but also more conventionally, by the continuity and form, which seemed quite original. [...] I learned an important lesson about composition here. Messiaen liked to pretend that he was merely transcribing what he heard when he went to the forests, and I believe we were being encouraged to do likewise. In reality it hardly mattered musically which particular bird he thought he was transcribing; his inventiveness and supreme musical personality revealed itself in the way he set down his transcriptions. (Goehr 1998, pp. 49–51)

serin des Canaries (p. 38)	canary
pinson à ailes baies (p. 39)	vesper sparrow
colin de Californie (p. 40)	California quail
pinson à gorge blanche (p. 41)[1]	white-throated sparrow
dindon sauvage (p. 42)	wild turkey
sturnelle à collier (p. 46)	meadowlark
oiseau-chat (p. 62)	catbird
doliconyx ou bobolink (p. 62)	boblink
tangara de la Louisiane (p. 68)	Western tanager
troglodyte de la Caroline (p. 71)	Carolina wren
viréo aux yeux rouges (p. 73)	red-eyed vireo
alouette oreillarde (p. 73)	horned lark
grive rousse (p. 73)	brown thrasher
roselin pourpré (p. 74)	purple finch
viréo gris-olive (p. 74)[2]	warbling vireo
viréo à front jaune (p. 77)	yellow-throated vireo
pape lazuli (p. 78)	lazuli bunting
viréo à tête bleue (p. 78)	blue-headed vireo

1 Omitted from Messiaen's list of birds in the 'Author's Second Preface' to the score.

2 The usual French name for the warbling vireo is *viréo mélodieux*. It does, however, have olive-green colouring.

Bibliography

Manuscript Sources

Messiaen, Olivier, *Cahiers de notation des chants d'oiseaux*, Département de la musique, Bibliothèque nationale de France [BnF-musique], deposit by Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen.

—— Messiaen's pocket diaries, Messiaen Archives, Paris.

Books and Articles

Aguila, Jésus (1992), *Le Domaine musical: Pierre Boulez et vingt ans de création musicale* (Paris: Fayard).

Barrault, Jean-Louis (1954), 'Pierre Boulez', in *La Musique et ses problèmes contemporains*, Cahiers de la Compagnie Madeleine Renaud–Jean-Louis Barrault, 2ème année, 3 (Paris: René Julliard), pp. 3–6.

Bernard[-Delapierre], Guy (1945), 'Souvenirs sur Olivier Messiaen', *Formes et couleurs* [Lausanne], 3–4, unpaginated [10 pp.].

Boivin, Jean (1995), *La Classe de Messiaen* (Paris: Christian Bourgois).

Boswall, Jeffery (1964), *A Discography of Palearctic Bird Sound Recordings*, special suppl. to *British Birds*, 57.

Boulez, Pierre (1970), 'Olivier Messiaen: an essay', in Cleveland Orchestra programme, 5 December, unpaginated.

Carter, Elliott (1959), 'Current chronicle: Italy', *Musical Quarterly*, 45 (4), 530–41.

Demarquez, Suzanne (1956), 'Domaine musical (Petit Théâtre Marigny: 10 mars)', *Guide du concert*, 23 March, p. 867.

Fallon, Robert (2004), 'Various Messiaen editions', *Notes*, 60 (3), 795–801 [incl. discussion of Messiaen's 1985 revisions to the score].

—— (forthcoming), 'The record of realism in Messiaen's *Oiseaux exotiques*', in Christopher Dingle and Nigel Simeone (eds.), *Messiaen: Music, Art and Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate), pp. 115–36.

Goehr, Alexander (1998), 'The Messiaen class', in Derek Puffett (ed.), *Finding the Key: Selected Writings* (London: Faber), pp. 42–57.

Goldbeck, Frederick (1949), 'Current chronicle: France', *Musical Quarterly*, 35 (2), 312–15.

Goléa, Antoine (1954), *Esthétique de la musique contemporaine* (Presses universitaires de France).

—— (1958), *Entretiens avec Pierre Boulez* (Paris: René Julliard).
—— (1960), *Entretiens avec Olivier Messiaen* (Paris: René Julliard).
—— (1965), 'French music since 1945', *Musical Quarterly*, 51 (1), 22–37.
Griffiths, Paul (1985), *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (London: Faber).
Henderson, R.L. (1961), 'Opera and concerts in London: concerts', *Musical Times*, 102 (July), 426–7.
Hill, Peter (ed.) (1995), *The Messiaen Companion* (London: Faber).
—— and Nigel Simeone (2005), *Messiaen* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press).
Hodeir, André (1954): untitled concert programme note, Petit Théâtre Marigny, 13 January.
—— (1961), *Since Debussy: A View of Contemporary Music*, trans. Noel Burch (London: Secker and Warburg).
Jameux, Dominique (1991), *Pierre Boulez*, trans. Susan Bradshaw (London, Faber).
Johnson, Robert Sherlaw (1989), *Messiaen*, rev. edn (London: J. M. Dent).
Lompech, Alain (1991), 'La mort de Suzanne Tézenas', *Le Monde*, 12 May.
Menasce, Jacques de (1948), 'Current chronicle: France', *Musical Quarterly*, 34 (4) (1948), 613–16.
Messiaen, Olivier (1959), 'La nature, les chants d'oiseaux', *Guide du concert*, 229 (3 April), pp. 1093–4.
—— (1995), *Traité de rythme, de couleur et d'ornithologie*, vol. 2 (Paris: Alphonse Leduc).
—— (1999) *Traité*, vol. 5/1: *Chants d'oiseaux d'Europe* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc).
—— (2000) *Traité*, vol. 5/2: *Chants d'oiseaux extra-européens* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc).
Myers, Rollo H. (1954a), 'Notes from abroad: Paris', *Musical Times*, 95 (February), 94.
—— (1954b), 'Notes from abroad: France', *Musical Times*, 95 (March), 149–50.
—— (1955), 'Notes from abroad: France', *Musical Times*, 96 (May), 270.
—— (1956a), 'Notes from abroad: France', *Musical Times*, 97 (February), 95.
—— (1956b), 'Notes from abroad: France', *Musical Times*, 97 (May), 268.
Nattiez, Jean-Jacques (ed.) (1993), *The Boulez–Cage Correspondence*, trans. Robert Samuels (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
Rostand, Claude (1952), *La Musique française contemporaine* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France).
Saint-Jean, Robert de (1948), 'C'est le merle noir et non le rossignol qui inspire Olivier Messiaen. A quarante ans, le musicien se prépare à écrire l'opéra dont il rêve depuis son enfance', *France-Soir*, 28–9 March [interview in which Messiaen declares that, after completing the *Turangalîla-Symphonie*, his next work will be an opera].

Samuel, Claude (1986), *Olivier Messiaen: Musique et couleur. Nouveaux entretiens avec Claude Samuel* (Paris: Belfond)
—— (1994) *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color. Conversations with Claude Samuel*, trans. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland OR: Amadeus) [Eng. trans. of Samuel 1986].
—— (2005a), Disc notes for *Pierre Boulez: Le Domaine musical*, vol. 1, Accord/Universal 476 9209.
—— (2005b), 'Interview with Pierre Boulez, September 2005', in Samuel 2005a [Eng. trans. of the original Fr. interview that appears on an extra disc in the set].
Shaw, George Bernard, *Music in London, 1890–94*, vol. 3 (London: Constable, 1932).
Simeone, Nigel (1998), *Olivier Messiaen: A Bibliographical Catalogue* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider).
Weissmann, John S. (1960), 'Reports from abroad: Cologne', *Musical Times*, 101 (February), 102–03.

CD Track List

Recordings and Notations

Pianist Peter Hill
Recording engineer Adrian Moore

1 Wood thrush from *American Bird Songs*
2 Wood thrush: three notations plus the finished score (see Ex. 2.8)
3 Olive-backed thrush from *American Bird Songs*
4 Olive-backed thrush: four notations plus the finished score (see Ex. 2.9)
5 Bobolink from *American Bird Songs*
6 Notation of the bobolink (see Ex. 2.10)
7 Virginia cardinal from *American Bird Songs*
8 Virginia cardinal: two notations plus the final sketch (see Ex. 2.11)
9 Virginia cardinal from Mme Billot's aviary (see Ex. 2.12)
10 Baltimore oriole from *American Bird Songs*
11 Baltimore oriole, first notation
12 Baltimore oriole, second notation
13 California thrasher from *American Bird Songs*
14 Notation of the California thrasher
15 Prairie chicken from *American Bird Songs*
16 Notation of the prairie chicken
17 American robin from *American Bird Songs*
18 Notation of the American robin

Oiseaux exotiques

Tracks 19–27 are a complete recording of the premiere (10 March 1956) given by the ensemble Domaine musical conducted by Rudolf Albert with Yvonne Loriod, piano. This recording, originally issued by Véga, is used by kind permission of Accord/Universal, France. Page numbers are those of the study score.

19 Introduction (pp. 1–3)
20 Cadenza (pp. 4–5)
21 Medleys and cadenzas (pp. 6–13)
22 Interlude (pp. 14–15)

23 Central medley (pp. 16–57)
24 Interlude (pp. 58–61)
25 Cadenza (pp. 62–5)
26 Final medley (pp. 66–83)
27 Coda (pp. 84–6)

Index