

Messiaen, Saint Francis, and the Birds of Faith

CHARLES H. J. PELTZ

I have been asked to deliver a confession of my faith, that is, to talk about what I believe, what I love, what I hope for. What do I believe? That doesn't take long to say and in it everything is said at once: I believe in God. And because I believe in God I believe likewise in the Holy Trinity and [especially] the Holy Spirit.¹

I have read that quotation many times and I am still astounded. I am astounded by the strength in its delivery and the personal submission in its substance. Olivier Messiaen offered it in 1971 to assembled dignitaries upon receipt of the Praemium Erasmianum, an honor acknowledging his status as an artist. Like the irresistible utterances of truth by Daniel to the Babylonians, Paul to the Corinthians, and Christ to the Pharisees, the words were out of fashion for both the moment and the era. As with his biblical predecessors, the career risks were high for a musician of his stature to openly proclaim God. His age was not one of sorting through conflicting passions about God's truth. Rather it was a century of hoping that God would evaporate through disinterest, wherein musicians spent great energy denying the Gott of "Götterfunken."

A composer of some of the twentieth century's most important works, Messiaen was both a giant of music and a devout Christian Catholic apologist. His was a highly original voice marked by an extraordinary use of time and its active offspring, rhythm, and a use of color more vivid than one could have imagined even with his French birthright of iridescent sound. Moreover, Messiaen synthesized rhetorics from the most basic found in nature to the most advanced created by humans, a synthesis so potent and perfect that it makes the resultant new language awesomely clear in its ability to communicate the essence of life.

Messiaen communicated religious ideas through this new musical language, and so his work is best seen as an expression of evangelism. One of Messiaen's evangelical inspirations was Saint Francis of Assisi, whose life inspired the opera that bears the saint's name. By examining each man and his work in light of the other we can illumine that which "touches all things without ceasing to touch God."²

Born in 1908 in Avignon, Olivier Messiaen was the child of two highly literary parents: his father, Pierre, was a scholar and teacher whose work included extensive translations of Shakespeare; his mother, Cecile Sauvage, was a noted poet. By age eight he had memorized great chunks of Shakespeare and Tennyson, whose work he described in adulthood as "superfairytales."³ Self-taught at the piano, he was compelled by his insatiable musical curiosity to beg for scores of Gluck, Wagner, and Mozart as Christmas gifts, and at age nine he composed his first work, *Le Dame de Shallot*. By age eleven he was attending the Paris Conservatory, where for the next eleven years he studied the whole of music from an array of notable teachers, including Dupré and Dukas.⁴ Although the Prix de Rome eluded him, he received virtually all of the Conservatory's honors. In 1930 he left the Conservatory, and one year later accepted the post of organist at La Trinité in Paris, a position he would hold for more than sixty years.

In 1941, after being captured and imprisoned by the Nazis, he wrote in a Silesian stalag his first great work, *Quartet for the End of Time*, depicting the apocalypse from the book of Revelation. Performed in the prison camp for an audience of five thousand enthralled prisoners, this work for clarinet, violin, cello, and piano was a groundbreaking work, a dramatic synthesis of

Messiaen's religiously inspired ideas and musical language.⁵ After his release from the prison camp in 1942, he returned to Paris and an appointment to the Paris Conservatory. His well known students included Boulez, Xenakis, and Stockhausen. The intensity of these musical rebels contrasted greatly with the serenity of Père Messiaen.

Messiaen's musical life unfolded over the next fifty years through compositions for chorus, orchestra (including the sprawling musical landscape *Turangulila-Symphony*), wind and brass ensemble, and organ. All these works culminated in the opera *Saint Francis* (1975–1983), a work of Wagnerian proportions based upon central moments in the life of the Umbrian saint. Messiaen's compositional style evolved over those fifty years, but changed direction very little. As he said about music over the ages, "The music of our time is quite a natural continuation of the music of the past; doubtless there are changes, but no rupture."⁶ His musical path was similar: he adopted various techniques, including aleatory and serialism, but remained faithful to his unique synthesis of languages.

Imagine being a child whose mother writes this as she carries you in her womb: "I carry within me the love of mysterious and marvelous things."⁷ It is what Cecile wrote in a volume of poems to her unborn son titled *L'âme en Bourgeon*. It seems inevitable that the son of such literary parents would in some "mysterious and marvelous" way find language the fuel for his creative engine.⁸ Messiaen created his own fuel, his own language, by interweaving musical language with the languages of many living beings.

Birdsong

Oiseaux exotique, the *Exotic Birds*, was composed in 1956. That same year, coincidentally, the English edition of Messiaen's book *Technique de mon langage musical* was published. Written in 1944, this handbook explains the sources and thoughts behind the musical phenomena he created, and it is an invaluable aid in understanding them. He makes clear that this is not a book on how to compose, but rather a guide to the "rhythmic, melodic and harmonic" views of his music.⁹ In addition to this trinity of musical elements, he describes his use of Hindu and Greek rhythms and of birdsongs, influences that figure prominently in *Oiseaux*.

Birds were the world's first musicians, or so goes the cliché. In chapter 9 of *Technique*, Messiaen quoted Dukas: "Listen to the birds! They are great masters." It is to these first musicians that Messiaen turned reflexively for both spiritual inspiration and direct musical material. He collected bird song, as Bartok and Grainger collected folk songs, with an obsession for accuracy. His passion was to notate the primary source, and thereby insure fidelity to that source when recreated by humans. Unlike the nightingale and cuckoo of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, idealized birds à la Watteau, he collected real birds from around the world and unleashed them, à la Hitchcock, in the concert hall: *Musique vérité*.

Now arises one of those heat-creating and light-discouraging arguments that divert the best discourse. Did Messiaen really transcribe birdsong with complete accuracy? Would a cardinal rush inquisitively (or passionately?) to the room of a clarinetist practicing Messiaen? (Quite an image: the two of them—beak to bell—in doomed unrequitedness.) Some assert they can prove (by scientific/acoustical comparisons) that Messiaen was uncannily accurate in the process of transcribing; others think that he fell markedly away from fidelity. Messiaen himself addressed this debate. He said, "I'd like to talk about the musical forms in which I use birdsongs. There are two different forms, one deceitful and one truthful. The deceitful one employs the birdcalls as

raw material after the manner of composers of electronic music, who use birdsongs as a source which they constantly electronically alter.”¹⁰

Matthew Gurewitsch offers a brilliant insight into the near impossibility of a wholly “truthful” collection and notation:

Birds do not sing the way people write music, and transcribing them was like concocting algebra to reproduce calligraphy: it took creativity of no small order. Birdsong moves faster than human fingers; the first thing to go when an instrumentalist mimics a bird is tempo. Also, Western melodies are strung together from notes, well-defined pitches neatly arrayed on scales. Birds sing microtones. Their staccato “notes” are more like jagged shards than human musicians’ points and beads of sound. The timbres and attacks are often energetic to the point of harshness, yet to our ears in the wild they may sound ineffably sweet. For the piano and for instruments of the orchestra Messiaen invented ways of clustering and combining notes to produce, often with uncanny verisimilitude, an impression of the real thing. Call it *trompe l’oreille*.¹¹

The argument about Messiaen’s fidelity to nature is an unhelpful and distracting exercise. Gurewitsch articulates the view that complete fidelity to nature is often impossible. Messiaen says that when complete fidelity is possible he is “truthful”; when it is not, he uses the birdsong as primary raw material to be crafted into “*trompe l’oreille*.”

Messiaen realized that sometimes a single instrumental voice could not represent the complex timbres in a bird call. In a 1968 panel discussion he said: “Then comes a further difficulty: the reproduction of timbres. These tone colors are so extraordinary that no musical instrument can reproduce them. One needs combinations of instruments and still more combinations or complexes of pitches.”¹² He is not despairing here, nor overwhelmed by the limitations of instruments. Instead he is compelled by the timbral problem to find sonic solutions ranging from the truthfully real to the deceptively surreal. Take for example the piano solo from another piano and orchestral work, *Reveil des oiseaux* (1953). Here the bird song is confined to the treble register, nearer that of a real birdsong, a reasonably “truthful” choice. On the other hand, a piano excerpt from *Oiseaux* shows Messiaen’s use of the bass clef of the piano, a register impossible among birds in nature. Why this surreal extension of range? The answers are manifold, but two may suffice. One answer comes from the composer as artist: an expanded tessitura broadens the musical palette immensely, and that breadth once established can be referred to repeatedly. Another answer comes from the composer as evangelist: a surreal range is possible in a divinely and miraculously recreated nature. Messiaen suspends natural law in order to create a musical version of divine creation, a deeper version God might wish us to hear.

Oiseaux suspends another natural law: these fifty-odd birds, from around the world, would never in nature be found together in one place. They are brought together here by a great human re-creator, their supernatural migration making a more perfect community. Here is a magnificent Christian concept: whether it is the Pentecostal speaking in a multitude of foreign tongues (Acts 2:4) or the uniting of nations as recorded in Matthew 25:32, an invisible Creator brings together all living things in a world perfectly created to inspire declamations of life and joy.

In the twenty-minute *Oiseaux*, Messiaen employs non-birdsong music and from this music

creates a world in which his birds exist: his second preface to the piece lists the birds that nest between the double bars of *Oiseaux*. In order to create this aviary he cast the following instruments as birds: solo piano, piccolo, flute, oboe, E-flat clarinet, two B-flat clarinets, bass clarinet, bassoon, two horns, trumpet, glockenspiel, and xylophone. (There are other percussion instruments whose function will be explored later.) He had two reasons for emphasizing winds and excluding strings from this roster. First and most simply, wind instruments create sound as birds do: air activating a vibrating surface. Second—and here Messiaen joins other twentieth-century composers such as Varèse in affirming an unsentimental musical aesthetic—strings have an identity rooted in the sentimental nineteenth century, a romantic and pretty sonic perfume best dissipated by the bracing rush of wind.

Harmony. Messiaen's reference to the need for "complexes of pitches" in addition to "combinations of instruments" opens the door to a discussion of harmony. The melody as sung by any single bird is a horizontal affair. Simultaneous horizontal voices create polyphony, which in turn creates vertical phenomena. Polyphonic phenomena create much of Messiaen's harmony, although vertical harmonies, placed by him independently of counterpoint, are often present. These second harmonies are the branches upon which the birds rest. Messiaen remarked on harmony in the *Technique*: "All these investigations ought not to make us forget the natural harmony: the true, unique, voluptuously pretty by essence, willed by the melody, issued from it, pre-existent in it, having always been enclosed in it, awaiting manifestation."¹³ Using this idea Messiaen harmonizes birdsong. He illumines specific birdsongs more than merely accompanies, much like a stage light in which an actor moves. This harmony is "willed" (inspired) "by the melody" (birdsong).

To understand Messiaen's harmony we must look at how he deals with pitch. Messiaen often created "modes of limited transposition"¹⁴ unrelated to the church modes and other scales in common use. The series of half and whole steps in these modes makes up both the melody and harmony when he creates new music. The particular sonority created when certain notes of a mode are stacked on top of one another has multiple implications for Messiaen, of which the first is the unique function of harmony illuminating melodic material, harmony as an essential light and particular color.

An essential point must be made here: Messiaen heard all music in color. "The second drama [of my life] consists of my telling people that I see colours whenever I hear music, and they see nothing, nothing at all. That's terrible."¹⁵ The modal harmonies are a base color for the music, colors often very specifically described: mode 3 is colored "orange in a halo of milky white, speckled with a little red like an opal"; more prosaically, mode 4 is "dark purple."¹⁶ He changes the base color by "added notes" (his technical term) outside of the mode, often in the order of a sixth, seventh, ninth, and tritone.¹⁷ The addition of these notes results in harmonies that can be narrowly thought of as tone clusters, but, by identifying the essential modal aspects first, we hear these non-mode tones as carefully chosen added tones. There is always a sense that each composite color is a vivid mix, never a sonic "brown" resulting from the indiscriminate piling on of colors/notes.

In *Oiseaux* the modes are used to harmonize many musical moments, especially when the polyphony of birdcalls is less dense. In the first measure we have the call of the mainate hindou in the winds and trumpet. It is a prime example of harmonizing a singular bird call. On the first vertical color in the score we have the pitches C-sharp, D, E-flat, G, A-flat, A. Given in this order

we have the interval set 0, 1, 2, 6 (plus added tones of 7 and 8) from mode 4 starting on C-sharp instead of C. If we start with G, A-flat, A, C-sharp, D, E-flat we have 0, 1, 2, 6 (added 7 and 8). This 0, 1, 2, 6 combination will be the basis of much of the vertical material of the piece. In bar two the combination is extended over 2 beats; the added E (9) now is a new color.

This small sample of a harmonic system reveals Messiaen the innovative composer. And as the evangelist? Consider his harmony an illumination of divine work. God gives the world a perfect phenomenon (in this case birdsong, but it could be, say, the gift of grace). To illumine a creation already perfect we use divinely given human powers. Here the divine gift is birdsong, and the human powers to illumine that gift are Messiaen's innate creativity leavened with his systemic rigor. Grace might be illumined by gifted preaching. Human powers are never required to understand God's gift because God gives understanding as well, but human powers can shed light on something to make clearer what God has created.

Rhythm. And now to time and rhythm, the nuclear core of Messiaen's music. Messiaen said in his lecture at the Brussels conference of 1958:

Let us not forget that the first and most essential element in music is rhythm, and that rhythm is first and foremost the change of number and duration. Suppose that there were a single beat in all the universe. One beat: with eternity before it and eternity after it. A before and an after. That is the birth of time. Imagine then, almost immediately, a second beat. Since any beat is prolonged by the silence which follows it, the second beat will be longer than the first. Another number, another duration. That is the birth of rhythm.¹⁸

In *Oiseaux*, rhythm manifests itself in many ways. There are first the rhythms of the birdcalls, which make up a fast-moving and rhythmically spontaneous fabric. Shortly thereafter, the percussion instruments engage in a discourse of pointillistic transparency. These rhythms are based not on birdsongs or on standard Western rhythms (although in *Technique* chapters 3–7 he gives his ideas on manipulation of those rhythms in various configurations) but on another of Messiaen's passionate interests, Hindu rhythms from both northern (Hindustani) and especially southern (Karnatic) Indian tradition. He was attracted to Indian classical music not only for its rhythms but also its devotional quality. This respect for the devotion found in Hindu music, however, in no way undermined his belief in the primacy of the Christian God. "I have a great admiration for Hindu rhythms, but only for the rhythms—not for Indian philosophy."¹⁹

In the appendix of his first treatise, and in his posthumous opus, *Treatise on Rhythm, Color and Birds*, Messiaen refers to the *Devi Talas* of Carnagadeva, a thirteenth-century Hindu theorist. Messiaen renders one page of Carnagadeva's work in chapter 4 of his *Treatise*, in which a fundamental rhythmic component of Indian classical music is described: namely, the *talas*. These are made up of long and short values, and they involve beats of durations both odd and even. Each is given a name unique to its rhythmic profile. While Western rhythmic motives are so often subservient to melody, gestural, and non-narrative, these Hindu rhythms are in themselves self-completing and often narrative, strung together cyclically, each tala being repeated a number of times until a clap or other signifying gesture is made. This gesture not only provides an opportunity to align the upper melodic and lower rhythmic elements, but can produce a new tala as well. Since talas often are not in the same rhythmic proportions as the simultaneous melodic material, they propel this music independent of the melodic stresses above them.

The Gajalila tala is present in *Oiseaux*. As the music progresses, the tala, clearly labeled on the score by Messiaen, is used in a way reminiscent of Indian music where two layers soar above the tala: the punctuating sixteenths in the instruments in the middle of the score, and the explosive melismatic figures above those (birdcalls).

Alongside these Hindu rhythms are the rhythms of Greek poetry. One can see how Messiaen would be attracted to these rhythmic forms: they are both poetic. He was a word-nurtured child, developing a love for the essential rhythms created by words perfectly set. Greek poetic rhythms are created by the length of words and syllables first, and by spoken word stresses second (although scholars disagree on the balance of these two factors). The numerous rhythms, based on “longum” and “breve,” are each given specific names including (as those with Dalcroze training will quickly recognize) iambic, trochaic, dactylic, and anapestic.²⁰ Two examples, the asclepiadean and sapphic patterns, are faithfully rendered in *Oiseaux* by Messiaen.

Both the Indian and Greek rhythms are man-made rhetorical devices, the former musical, the latter linguistic. In their setting here does each represent a unique spiritual cultural concept revealed by the rhythms of rhetoric? Does one culture declaim clarity and focus while the other explores the un-tethered, the mystically obscure? In *Oiseaux* one notes two Greek-based rhythms and sees that these rhythms are focused in one instrumental timbre and provide a pulse-affirming rhythmic clarity, even when syncopated. As the rhythm of the Gajalila traverses the gong parts one finds a different idea. The Hindu rhythms here work to obscure beats, to plasticize the foundation, and to sound in one timbre. The Greek and Hindu rhythmic ideas exist in the same time frame, and exercise different intents, yet complement each other in serving a larger whole.

That larger whole is conceived from Messiaen’s love and use of plainchant (see chapter 8 of *Technique*) and its abundant progeny, the motet. This love is evident in how these lines of rhythm work with the rest of the music traveling above. These rhythms act as a subtle cantus firmus as they support and inform the rigorous working out of the birdsong polyphony. *Oiseaux* lives much like an isorhythmic motet: a medieval/renaissance Western polyphonic texture built on a hierarchy of activity beginning with a long note value as a base, topped by a more active moderate level, topped yet again by one or two more levels of increasing activity, all somehow related to that essential base level.

Messiaen has in his use of these rhythms turned upside down the dominion hierarchy of nature and humankind, one with humankind at the top. The man-made rhetoric, Greek and Hindu in very simple realization, serves a foundational but subordinate role. Above the human labors soars the elaborate and free fantasia of God’s creation—birdsong—almost oblivious to the underlying efforts. Human rhetoric pales in comparison to the vivid rhetoric of God’s most freely living creations.

The large form. We have explored the basic compositional elements of *Oiseaux*: birdsong, harmony, and rhythm. However, the most crucial issue to consider is the large form. Certainly performers need to track the basic elements making up a work, but that tracking can fall into mere accountancy if it is not in the service of discovering the large form and the musical trajectory through that form.

Oiseaux exotiques is constructed on two levels. The first level is one of “moment form,” roughly

defined as the form of a work made up of a string of events sequenced not necessarily for a progressive, organic narrative flow but for how each event is perceived singularly as it occurs. Stockhausen says of moment forms, "They are forms in a state of always having already commenced, which could go on as they are for an eternity."²¹ And Jonathon Kramer says this about moment form in Messiaen: "Like Eastern music which deals with quality of mind, Messiaen's music does not ask to be followed as consistent, continuous thought. Instead, it creates conditions for mental excitation or reflection. If conventional Western music is narrative in its integrated, goal oriented planning, Messiaen's is by contrast liturgical: structured in self-contained blocks, proceeding by statement rather than development, by exposition rather than argument" (ibid., 283).

Many feel that the sequence of alternating sections of solo piano and ensemble parts in *Oiseaux* constitutes moment form and is sufficient to conclude a discussion of its large scale form. However, there is a larger view: closer inspection reveals the shadow of a form that goes far back in music history: the palindrome. There is a case to be made that the explosive beginning returns at the very end by way of a mirror image of the progression that leads from the beginning up to the middle. Hence that middle material is not only a climax, it is a turning point from which we return to our origin by an eerily similar path. Although by no means perfectly symmetrical, the pattern revealed is musically compelling, and even more compelling when considered evangelically. This palindrome reveals a musical diptych hinged in the middle, a picture of the human life cycle in which "all come from dust, and to dust all return" (Ecclesiastes 3:20). It is this large-scale form, this modern sonic counterpart to the sacred diptychs of medieval artists, that makes *Oiseaux* a singularly significant work.

Saint Francis of Assisi

Between 1975 and 1983 Messiaen engaged in a labor of ultimate synthesis: a bonding together of his intense belief, religious devotion, musical skill, and lifelong quest for his own *gesamtkunstwerk*. The result was *Saint Francis of Assisi*, his only opera (or "stage play" as he called it to invoke a descriptor less culturally-burdened).²² It is no coincidence that the Umbrian saint became the chosen focus of Messiaen's final large, and arguably most representative, work.

Messiaen knew well the legend of Francis, who was born circa 1181 to Pietro and Pica Bernardone, and named Giovanni at his christening; his name was changed to Francis in childhood, possibly as a nod to his father's successful textile trade with the French, or to his mother's Provençal heritage. Francis indulged heartily in the life of a prodigal son, but did exhibit the virtue of charity, mainly by paying for his friends' shares of their earthly vices.²³ At about age twenty, after enlisting to fight the Perugians, he was captured and imprisoned. His awareness of spiritual issues was intensified about this time by two events that he experienced in captivity. The first was a bout of dangerous fever, which caused him to dramatically confront his mortality; this was followed by a dream that he was surrounded by armor emblazoned with crosses, in which he heard the words, "These are for you and your soldiers." This dream compelled him to pursue knighthood, to the medieval mind a wedding of military honor with spiritual piety (186).

The seed of faith had been planted and Francis was changing. His response to his mates' chiding regarding marriage was, "Yes, I am about to take of wife of surpassing fairness," a reference to his "Lady Poverty." In rather quick succession events drew Francis into a devoted, self-sacrificing

life. His divinely inspired embrace of a leper was a first step towards a life of caring intimately for the infirm and destitute. His father, enraged by Francis's religious zeal, disinherited and abandoned him. Francis met rage with joy; he was now unburdened by earthly wealth. This series of revelations ended as Francis received divine commands to rescue chapels and churches from disrepair, his first in a lifetime of calls to action (187–99). Other men followed the charismatic friar, considered by most to be mad owing to his intense spiritual passion and hermit-like lifestyle. Collectively these followers became Francis's papally-sanctioned formal order: the Friars Minor. This is the origin of the Franciscan Order we know today, dedicated to charity, kindness, and evangelism through example, with adherents conscripted to the freeing joys of poverty.

Through twenty years of selfless toil Francis went on crusade to Spain and the Middle East, preached in piazzas, on church steps, in fields, and passionately devoted himself to Catholic dogma and leadership. Through the biography of Saint Francis written by his contemporary Friar Thomas of Celano, and the *Fioretti di Santo Francesco d' Assisi* (anecdotes from Francis's life written by others who knew him), a picture emerges of a divinely inspired man who lived in great contrast to the withdrawn, forbidding, and venally selfish clergy that populated the medieval Christian landscape. Francis was gregarious, charming in his eccentricities, and passionate to incorporate all of God's creatures into a church that included the whole of a God-made creation.

Messiaen and Saint Francis. How did these two gifted men respond to their manifold personal gifts, gifts that made them both world-renowned?²⁴ Both men were exceedingly humble in harvesting the fruits of their gifts. Messiaen had an extraordinary reputation for humility, and Saint Francis's gestures of humility are extensively chronicled. Both men lived out humility in their daily labors: Messiaen continued as a parish church musician after worldwide fame was his, and Francis served the destitute until his death.

Along with humility, Saint Francis and Messiaen shared a similar, seminal life experience: a loss of freedom through imprisonment in young adulthood. Freedom is a complex idea in Christian theology. Freedom without God—human freedom—is quite often a curse, an opportunity to ignore or squander the deeply important gifts of life. It often brings solitude rather than companionship, wealth but not fulfillment. In his wartime loss of human freedom, clearly Messiaen was divinely inspired to compose his extraordinarily clear and passionate synthesis of art and faith. Francis's imprisonment made him an immobile target for the divine spark; his loss of human freedom was replaced by a freedom in God's care.

What links Francis and Messiaen? Most obvious is the role of birds in the lives of both men.

For Francis, the words of Christ (Matthew 6:26) regarding poverty and birds must have been both reassuring and liberating. The birds do not starve, says Jesus, because the Father takes care of them; so will he then take care of the friars of the Order. These creatures enjoy a surpassing freedom to simply live, and to live simply, because of their reliance on God. The following part of the Franciscan legend would forever make inseparable Saint Francis and birds:

Saint Francis lifted up his eyes, and saw on some trees by the wayside a great multitude of birds...and the substance of the sermon [to them] was this: "My little sisters the birds, ye owe much to God, your Creator, and ye ought to sing his praise at all times and in all places, because he has given you liberty to fly

about into all places; and though ye neither spin nor sew, he has given you a twofold and a threefold clothing for yourselves and for your offspring; besides which, he feeds you, though ye neither sow nor reap. He has given you fountains and rivers to quench your thirst, mountains and valleys in which to take refuge, and trees in which to build your nests; so that your Creator loves you much, having thus favoured you with such bounties. Beware, my little sisters, of the sin of ingratitude, and study always to give praise to God.” As he said these words, all the birds began to open their beaks, to stretch their necks, to spread their wings and reverently to bow their heads to the ground, endeavouring by their motions and by their songs to manifest their joy to Saint Francis. And the saint rejoiced with them (234).

The legendary tale of the birds makes up act 2, scene 6 in Messiaen’s opera. In the opening of the scene one can hear the birds of Messiaen’s 1956 *Oiseaux exotique* brought together again for *Saint Francis* in 1983. Francis and his brother Masseo discuss the meaning of the birds. Does the meaning of the birds to Francis have bearing on Messiaen?

Birds, unencumbered by human or sectarian strife, praise in easy and immediate response to the gifts of life from God. In a panel discussion of June 1972, Messiaen said this: “I don’t belong to any kind of school; I’m neither a follower of serial music, nor am I a composer of a ‘new sound,’ nor do I champion the cause of any special modes.”²⁵ Messiaen thus defines his freedom to praise, his non-sectarian position among composers. Messiaen is indeed sectarian in his unwavering belief in the Creed and Catholicism: his works offered “at the service of the dogmas of the Catholic faith” are “the only [works] perhaps I will not regret at the hour of my death.”²⁶ However, in his use of God-given compositional gifts, his sectarian impulse gives way to a freeing, universal Christian praise, as free and universal as birdsong.

The metaphor and reality of birdsong extend further. As Messiaen chose not to define himself by a school of composition, Francis chose not to encourage narrow schools of thought or structured theology in proclaiming his Gospel message. Rather, he communicated ideas directly from Scripture as they passed through his heart. Francis and Messiaen were compelled to proclaim messages that were straightforward. (A new listener to Messiaen might mistake the novelty, and the busy-ness, of his music for complexity. We have seen how the music is in reality a synthesis of many simple elements of nature.) Messiaen felt he composed as Francis preached: “in words few and chaste,” just as birdsong is art pure and simple.²⁷

Finally, there is something shared between these two men that may transcend all: a belief that their works would be accepted and embraced by non-believers, and the seeds of their belief would be planted in new ground. Messiaen advocated that his music be performed in many venues, not exclusively, or even primarily, in churches. He emphasized that “God is present everywhere,” and so he felt that his musical message should be heard over a wide world.²⁸ Francis, by preaching at every crossroads and piazza, ensured that all would hear the Word.

Mysticism. Despite their similarities there is an important way in which these two men differed, and that has to do with their perspectives on mysticism. Messiaen’s music is often described as mystical. When asked whether he considered himself a mystic he replied:

Personally, I deeply distrust the word. It doesn’t suit me at all and I’d like to say why not. As soon as one starts talking about mysticism, people think of a

diseased state, of a neurotic who has vague sentiments and ecstasies. I don't like that, I am a devout man and I love the sound, solid gifts of faith. There were real mystics with real visions and ecstasies...such things existed. But no one is a mystic of his own will...²⁹

Francis, on the other hand, was a true mystic. His experiences with the Holy Spirit, including receiving the stigmata, connected him to the real God and dictated his actions here on earth. Comparison of the two men highlights how the lack of mystical experience seemed to lead Messiaen to attempt to transcend earthly bounds, to lead us a few rungs closer to the Divine. Francis truly encountered the mystical, and was compelled to get closer and closer to earth in order to manifest the mystical revelation. Messiaen painted for us the celestial city without actually seeing it, and Francis, having encountered it, attempted to recreate its beneficent face on earth.

And then, finally, what of our directive for this Colloquium? Have we today tackled "inculturation"? Messiaen and Francis both serve as examples of broadly directed evangelism. Current thinking increasingly insists that cultures embrace their identity. This search for cultural self often, one hopes unintentionally, actually inspires cultural division. Francis and Messiaen ignore division of cultures and instead bring them together. By mixing global birdsong with Indian and Greek voices, medieval European and contemporary classical musical styles, Messiaen elevates all elements by equating all elements in the process. Francis did the same: all strata, all God's creation, with joyous disregard for rank and wealth, can contribute to the richness of Christian devotion. By never elevating one singly, the sum is raised up. How marvelous for us that God joined together these two humble, imaginative, zealous evangelists to proclaim His creation.

ENDNOTES

1. "Olivier Messiaen: Address Delivered at the Conferring of the Praemium Erasmianum on June 25, 1971 in Amsterdam," in *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen: with Original Texts by the Composer*, ed. Almut Roessler (Duisberg: Gilles and Francke, 1986), 39.
2. Carla Huston Bell, *Olivier Messiaen* (Boston: Twayne, 1984), 11.
3. Claude Samuel, "Conversation 1," in *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, trans. Felix Aprahamian (London: Stainer and Bell, 1976), 18.
4. Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, "Childhood and the Conservatoire: 1908–1929," in *Messiaen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 9–24.
5. Idem, "Messiaen's War: 1940-1944," in *Messiaen*, 99–100.
6. Claude Samuel, "Conversation 7," in *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, 115.
7. Bell, *Olivier Messiaen*, 1.
8. See Olivier Messiaen, *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, trans. E. Thomas Glasgow (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1994), 13–14.
9. Olivier Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, trans. John Satterfield (Paris:

Alphonse Leduc, 1956), 7.

10. "Encounters with Olivier Messiaen," in *Contributions*, ed. Roessler, 33.

11. Matthew Gurewitsch, "Messiaen: An Audubon in Sound," *The Atlantic Monthly* 279/3 (1997), online edition.

12. "Encounters with Olivier Messiaen," in *Contributions*, ed. Roessler, 32.

13. "Natural Harmony," in *The Technique*, 52.

14. Robert Sherlaw Johnson, "The Development of Messiaen's Musical Language," in *Messiaen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 16.

15. "Conversation with Olivier Messiaen on December 16, 1983, in Paris," in *Contributions*, ed. Roessler, 122.

16. Bell, *Olivier Messiaen*, 30.

17. Johnson, *Messiaen*, 19.

18. Bell, *Olivier Messiaen*, 5.

19. "Conversation with Olivier Messiaen on April 23, 1979, in Paris," in *Contributions*, ed. Roessler, 97.

20. James W. Halporn, et al., *The Meters of Greek and Latin Poetry* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963).

21. Jonathan D. Kramer, *The Time of Music: New Meanings, New Temporalities, New Listening Strategies* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1988), 201.

22. "Conversation with Olivier Messiaen on December 16, 1988, in Paris," in *Contributions*, ed. Roessler, 119.

23. Regis Armstrong et al., eds., "The Life of Saint Francis of Assisi by Thomas Celano: The First Book," in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* (New York: New City Press, 1999), 183–84.

24. Thomas Celano observed that "I saw a great multitude of people coming at us.... I seemed to see highways filled with this multitude...from every nation..." (ibid., 206).

25. "Platform Discussion on June 11, 1972, in the Bach Hall of Saint John's Church," in *Contributions*, ed. Roessler, 54.

26. Madeleine Hsu [Forte], "Messiaen in His Time," in *Olivier Messiaen, the Musical Mediator* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1996), 25.

27. Regis Armstrong et al., eds., "The Later Rule," in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* (New York: New City Press, 1999), 105.

28. Messiaen, *Music and Color*, 147.

29. "Conversation with Olivier Messiaen on April 23, 1979, in Paris," in *Contributions*, ed. Roessler, 89.

Additional Reading

Bruhn, Siglind, ed. *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love*. New York: Garland, 1998.

Englebrecht, Omar. *Saint Francis of Assisi: A Biography*. Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1979.

Galli, Mark. *Francis of Assisi and His World*. London: Lion Publishing, 2002.

Green, Julien. *God's Fool: The Life and Times of Francis of Assisi*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983.

Griffiths, Paul. *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

Holcomb, Paula K. *Oiseaux Exotique: A Conductor's Score Study Guide*. DMA diss., Northwestern University, 1992.

Messiaen, Olivier. *Conférence de Notre-Dame: prononcée à Notre-Dame de Paris le 4 décembre 1977*. Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1978.

Messiaen, Olivier. *Conférence de Bruxelles en 1958*. Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1960.

Messiaen, Olivier. *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie*. 7 vols. Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1994.

Sabatier, Paul. *The Essential Biography of Saint Francis*, annotated by John Sweeney. Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2003.

Charles Peltz is on the faculty of the New England Conservatory where he directs the wind ensemble and teaches graduate conducting. He is the music director of the Glens Falls Symphony Orchestra, a professional orchestra in upstate New York, and is a regular guest conductor of the Orquesta Nacional de Colombia in Bogotá. He records for MODE records.