

DLA thesis abstract

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The late period of Olivier Messiaen

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[28th Doctoral School of Art and Cultural History]

Budapest

2013

I. Antecedents of my research

The oeuvre of Olivier Messiaen, which covers approximately seventy years, includes a plentiful amount of works. On the one hand it means a variety of methods, on the other hand means a permanence in the repertoire of methods. Although his repertoire of methods could be regarded constant at the first sight, nevertheless, we should examine his very unified system in order to get to know to what extent we could consider Messiaen's works as parts of any periods, early or late.

Messiaen's later period is hardly mentioned by most of the literature, with the exception of Christopher Dingle's book on the composer's final works. Though the so called late period could be regarded in its entirety, it cannot be considered a mere summary, which it seems at the first sight. The reason is that Messiaen regularly used his elements (which often seem evident), and tried to re-systematize them again and again.

In the last couple of years I have been doing research on the oeuvre of Messiaen. The biggest experience was to discover his later works, perhaps because he did not make any alternation in his repertory of methods in his later period either. Messiaen's repertory of methods is a group of several possibilities, of which any of the components could appear at any moment. This could be regarded as a motionless condition which could change in a fraction of a second, assume a new form and make new relations, because its components are known from elsewhere. That is why the time of any of their appearances (temporary topicality) becomes more important than their individuality, unexpectedness and novelty.

The literature most of the time fails to throw light on this, only creates a catalogue of Messiaen's compositional elements. I also want to remark that in his later works Messiaen refreshes his musical language when he puts his already well tried techniques into an unusual environment. This is increased by periodical returnings of certain elements, which could be regarded as a typical feature of Messiaen's later works where he re-enumerated his methods. Messiaen's method of thinking is a kind of deciphering, as special elements used by him (rhythm, metre) are recognizable, nevertheless only their specific context creates the totally closed system of his works.

As a pianist, I have been working systematically on some of his piano works. In connection with my pedagogical activity I consider the efficient research of this totally consistent and traditional disciplines - based system very important.

II. Sources

The most important documentation of Messiaen's methods is undoubtedly the *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie*, published by Leduc, in seven volumes. Considering that it is the most important among all of the sources, every future research on Messiaen's works should be based on that book written by the composer himself. The other summary written by Messiaen is the *Technique de mon langage musical* in one volume. This is substantially different from the *Traité* in its content, nevertheless this is the first in which Messiaen collected his own methods thematically. Besides these, there are a lot of published lectures of Messiaen which are available. Messiaen's own prefaces were also essential sources of my research.

As Messiaen's oeuvre is very well-treated, a lot of books were written on the composer's life and work. The most important monographies were written by Christopher Dingle (*The life of Messiaen*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Peter Hill, Nigel Simeone (*Messiaen*. New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 2005) and Robert Sherlaw-Johnson (*Messiaen*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975). Besides these, some books that research certain works of Messiaen were also very helpful to my research, first of all Dingle's book on Messiaen's later period (Christopher Dingle: *Messiaen's Final Works*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013). Some books of conversations with the composer were also published. The most substantial of them are the books by Goléa and Claude Samuel (Antoine Goléa: *Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen*. Paris: René Julliard, 1960; Olivier Messiaen: *Musique et couleur. Nouvelles entretiens avec Claude Samuel*. Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1986).

III. Method

Although in the works of Messiaen's last period he used the same principles as before, he is much bolder in formal innovations and more concise in composition. Prominently the formal structure always has primary importance in Messiaen's music, because of the consistent use of his methods and phenomena which influences his music. One of my main ambitions with my dissertation is that by analysing his later works, his earlier works could also be more intelligible. My analyses are based on those similarities which exist in all of his works.

An important part of my dissertation is a couple of detailed analyses of Messiaen's later works. My aspects of analyzing follow the composer's main principles used in his own analyses of his and other composers' works.

In the dissertation I try to answer how we could define any period in Messiaen's oeuvre, as well as to what extent any development exists in the chronological order of his works. Furthermore I examine how we could or could not establish any preference among his works and his systematically ordered principles used by him, or whether the interactions of these elements could primarily become a basic mechanism in his pieces.

During my work I made an effort to establish to what extent consonant chords (which are one of the most important features of his later period) used by him could be considered as real consonants, considering that all of them could be extracts from his typical modes with limited transpositions. I examined to what extent altered notes and alterations could be regarded as real alterations within any set of notes in certain modes with limited transpositions. As if they are real alterations, it would not make any sense to use certain modes with determined pitch sets. Thus within the modes with limited transpositions we cannot speak about passing through between the modes. Any basic mode could be regarded as a prerequisite of formation of chords, as an embryonic appearance of them. My further aim was to understand why Messiaen recalls certain definite elements and structures (rhythmical or melodic) again and again, especially in his later works.

IV. Result

During my research I was firmly convinced that with the constant use of modes with limited transpositions - which is a main feature of Messiaen's works -, the tonal uncertainty makes the presence of different tonalities simultaneously possible, if the composer authorizes certain keys with individuality without any polytonality at an environment of different tonalities. Despite this *ubiquité tonale* (tonal omnipresence) both consonants and dissonants could be any real consonants or dissonants in a common sense, as they could result in the same physical effects both in the performer and in the audience the same way like in any other diatonic music.

I experienced exactly the same when researching the basic keys of certain pieces. In Messiaen's music we can observe the changing tonality which is totally independent of any affinity or repulsion between different keys. What is particularly important, that any consonant chord in a traditional sense gathered every times by modes, so the untielessness of the set of notes could enable the very improvisative and colourful use of certain elements.

His very closed system never loses its improvisative character which means an unexpected use of certain elements. Messiaen created his specifically closed method so as to be able to reason its elements, with which he could encode his musical language in a very special way. In his later works there are further methods which are different from the earlier ones. Those are explained in my dissertation, although a couple of them are enumerated here below. While in earlier works all inversions of certain distinguished chords appear in an idealized, schematic way, in later works these chords could be explained not only in any row of interversions but one by one. Not only the colours of certain chords are important of their own, but their succession becomes also important, and a subject of interpretation. The structure of these chords is determined by the differences of their colours. During my research it became clear that the periodically returning formulas of rhythm and melody used by Messiaen could be regarded as closed entities and they could influence the formal structure, too. These self-quotations could also be considered as *objets trouvés*. The composer's self-quotations are never made with any autotelic mechanism but they could also renew with every appearance in a neverending variability. With their frequent appearances, every single appearance refers to the importance of the moment of its own appearance.

The quotations used by Messiaen could become symbolic only by the recalled memories at the moment of their appearances. In my point of view these hide a much stronger symbolical meaning than all of his plainchant or birdcall quotations.

In the last chapter of my dissertation I tried to find solutions for certain pianistic problems and also put forward proposals for them. I am listing some examples: playing symmetrical rhythms without any weakness of straightening in playing; transparent chord- playing at the piano; disciplines in performance in order to keep different musical levels in their individuality; imaginary scores; orchestral sound; etc.

V. Activity connected with the topic of the thesis

(The list contains all the concerts when I played pieces of Messiaen.)

11st March 2008; Gödöllő, Great Hall of the Premonstratensian Grammar School (as a part of a concert with Gabriella Gémesi - viola) – Messiaen: Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus – No.11., No.15., No.19.

7th June 2008; Budapest, Ferenc Liszt Academy of Music, Smaller Concert Hall (centennial recital as a part of my doctoral studies) – Messiaen: Vingt regards... – No.10., No.17.

8th December 2008; Budapest, Central European University (centennial recital) – Messiaen: Vingt regards... – No.10., No.11., No.15., No.19.

10th December 2008; Budapest, Nádor Hall (centennial recital) – Messiaen: Vingt regards... – No.10., No.11., No.15., No.19.

14th December 2008; Budapest, Old Academy of Music, Chamber Hall (centennial chamber music concert organized by the doctoral school) – Messiaen: Vingt regards... – No.10., No.17., Pièce pour Piano et quatuor à cordes (with Emese Gulyás and Katalin Varró – violins, Éva Novák – viola and Orsolya Mód – cello)

16th December 2008; Rákoshegy, Bartók Memorial House (centennial recital) – Messiaen: Vingt regards... – No.1., No.2., No.3., No.4., No.10., No.11., No.13., No.15., No.17., No.19.

23rd May 2009; Budapest, Ferenc Liszt Academy of Music, Smaller Concert Hall (concert as a part of my doctoral studies) – Messiaen: Petites Esquisses d’oiseaux – No.2., Vingt regards... – No.20

20th November 2009; Budapest, Italian Institute, prizewinner’s concert of the Haydn-Mendelssohn National Piano Competition (live broadcast) – Messiaen: Vingt regards... – No.10

15th March 2010; Bratislava, Primate’s Palace (live broadcast, recital) – Messiaen: Le nombre léger (prelude), Vingt regards... – No.5.

11st June 2010; Budapest, French Institute (as part of chamber music concert with Orsolya Mód - cello, organized by the doctoral school) – Messiaen: Vingt regards... – No.5.

9th December 2010; Budapest, Marble Hall of the Hungarian Radio (recital, live broadcast) – Messiaen: Vingt regards... – No.5, No.10., No.14., No.20.

11st January 2011; Bratislava, Dvorana Hall (recital, live broadcast) – Messiaen: Vingt regards... – No.10.

28th October 2012; Budapest, FUGA (chamber music concert with Anna Várföldi – violin) - Messiaen: Thème et variations (with Anna Várföldi – violin), Quatre Études de rythme

9th February 2013; Budapest, 6th Studio of the Hungarian Radio (live broadcast) – Messiaen: Quatuor pour la fin du Temps (with Milan Pala – violin, Lajos Rozmán – clarinet, Balázs Kántor – cello)

21st February 2013; Budapest, Marble Hall of the Hungarian Radio (live broadcast) – Messiaen: Quatuor pour la fin du Temps (with Eszter Krulik - violin, András Horn – clarinet, Balázs Kántor – cello)

14th March 2013; Budapest, Marble Hall of the Hungarian Radio (live broadcast) – Messiaen: Quatre Études de rythme, Cantéyodjayâ

