

H-France Review Vol. 9 (January 2009), No. 5

Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Olivier Messiaen: Oiseaux exotiques* [Landmarks in Music since 1950]. Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2007. xii + 128 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, notes, and compact disc. \$69.95 U.S. / £35.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 978-0-7546-5630-2.

Review by Jonathyne Briggs, Indiana University Northwest.

Alex Ross, the resident music critic for *The New Yorker*, recently asserted the continued importance of contemporary music in twenty-first century by tracing its cultural history through the twentieth century and connecting transformations in composition with shifts in Western political culture.[1] Ross's narrative darts across the space of Europe but certainly spends a great deal of time in Paris, reminding readers that the City of Light rivaled Vienna as the capital of modern composition during the 1910s and 1920s. Even after the Second World War, Paris was important as a haven for the experimental music of post-serialism and *musique concrète* due to the stature of composers such as Pierre Boulez, Iannis Xenakis, and Pierre Schaeffer. Capitalizing on the international renown of Boulez, the French government eventually would construct a sound laboratory, the IRCAM, during the nineteen-seventies to ensure the continued development of contemporary music in Paris. The prestige of the IRCAM lent gravity to the cultural policy envisioned by the late President Georges Pompidou.

But prior to the establishment of the IRCAM, French contemporary composition had another critical center: the classes taught by Olivier Messiaen at the Paris Conservatory and for a brief stint at Darmstadt in West Germany, the dynamic locus of postwar contemporary composition. Messiaen's students included Boulez, Xenakis, and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Much of Messiaen's important creative work, including *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, had been composed either prior to or during the war, and his position as instructor has been seen as a great influence on the direction of modern composition.[2] While his importance in shaping the aesthetics of several of the most important composers of the second half of the twentieth century should not be overlooked, Messiaen continued to compose and experiment. Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, authors of a recent biography on Messiaen, take a different approach in this work and offer a reassessment of his work from the 1950s by examining the 1956 piece *Oiseaux exotiques*, which the authors argue was a critical juncture in the reinvention of Messiaen's compositional technique and a measure of his continued place in the French avant garde.[3]

Messiaen's postwar work combined his compositional style with his increasing fascination with ornithology. The sounds of nature had become the primary muse for the composer. In order to develop pieces from these sources, Messiaen had spent time doing field work, in particular taking notes of bird songs he heard in various locales in France. He had attempted to replicate these sounds in some of his earlier compositions, beginning with *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* in 1944, but by the postwar period he had developed a more sophisticated technique. As Hill and Simeone observe, birdsong was evident in earlier works as well, but it was during the period of the 1950s that Messiaen placed his avian inspiration at the center of his soundscapes. His decision to integrate various birdsongs together in a manner that was physically impossible (birds of different continents singing together) reveals Messiaen's move away from ornithological concerns towards what he was seeking to create for composition: a new musical language. In the creation of *Oiseaux exotiques*, the influence of technology was apparent as well. Despite the naturalist approach initially favored by the composer, Messiaen's use

of recorded birdsongs allowed him to make more sophisticated sketches to integrate into the working score. Hill and Simeone stress the importance of birdsong recordings in transforming the aesthetic that had informed the early drafts of *Oiseaux* (p. 32). More than just an exhibition of birds (as Hill and Simeone argue that the concerto *Réveil des oiseaux* was) *Oiseaux* offers, in Messiaen's words, "an imaginary museum" in which birds that would never meet intersect in the musical world.[4] In moving away from mimicking the sounds of birds, Messiaen approaches the ideas of the postwar avant garde while remaining distinct from it.

Hill's and Simeone's analysis of Messiaen's work combines cultural history, musicology, and sociological theory in a novel fashion. Breaking their study up into distinct parts—Context, Commentary, First Performance, Interpretations, etc.—the authors move with fluidity between the different styles, using the appropriate tools in each section. The context section is critical not only in establishing Messiaen's compositional pattern prior to the 1950s but also in stressing the dearth of performances of contemporary music in postwar Paris. This lacuna was briefly but successfully solved by Boulez's *Domaine musicale*, for which *Oiseaux* was "commissioned" (p. 76). The *Domaine musicale* set the precedent for the development of the Parisian compositional scene in the 1960s and 1970s, and the authors reveal the importance of Messiaen as a valuable contributor to a number of these concerts.

But the real value of Hill's and Simeone's work is found in the sections that compare Messiaen's various drafts of *Oiseaux*. While other scholars have noted the difference between *Oiseaux* and other birdsong works, Hill and Simeone illuminate the process of this transformation.[5] With close attention to musical detail (Hill's skills as a pianist who studied under Messiaen shine through here), the two show how Messiaen's aesthetic evolved through subsequent drafts just before the performance. Their close reading also reveals the late influence of the bird exhibition, the VIe salon des oiseaux, which showed in Paris in November 1955. Although the language of this section can be a bit technical for the non-musicological set, this potential problem is remedied by the inclusion of a compact disc that allows Hill's and Simeone's comparisons to be understood clearly. Hill's piano performances on the CD suggest how the sketches became more plastic and flexible, or more correctly artistic, in interpretation as the performance date loomed. The compact disc also contains the first performance of *Oiseaux*, with Messiaen student Yvonne Loriod on piano, in its entirety, which again permits readers unfamiliar with the work to experience the important first performance from 1956.

In subsequent chapters, Hill and Simeone explore other performances of *Oiseaux*, working from a series of recordings of the work dating between 1956 and 1988. Here, the authors use Messiaen's work to discuss a limitation within contemporary composition, what they term "a puritanical, self-denying approach" to the music (p. 101), perhaps helping to explain the varied reception of the piece and the difficulties of establishing a canon of contemporary works.[6] While identifying that many of the interpretations of Messiaen's piece suffers this problem of catholicism, the authors also provide evidence of dynamic interpretations and are optimistic about the continued life of his compositions.

Ultimately, Hill and Simeone show the importance of *Oiseaux exotiques* as both a defining moment in Olivier Messiaen's career as a composer and as a refreshing example of the possibilities of contemporary composition. *Oiseaux* appears as a much more optimistic work in comparison to other compositions from its period, a difference undoubtedly explained by the personal life of the composer. Messiaen would continue to experiment with birdsong for the remainder of his life but this work crystallized his understanding of the value of birdsong as a method of freeing musical form.[7] Hill's and Simeone's book also reminds scholars of contemporary France of the vitality of French composition in the postwar period prior to the IRCAM and the need to recognize the place of such music in French cultural studies.[7]

## NOTES

[1] Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

[2] See Mary Breatnach and Eric Sterenfeld, "From Messiaen to MC Solaar: Music in France in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century," in *Contemporary French Cultural Studies*, William Kidd and Sián Reynolds, eds. (London: Arnold, 2000), p. 245. On Messiaen's work prior to the Second War, see Jane Fulcher, "The Politics of Transcendence: Ideology in the Music of Olivier Messiaen in the 1930s," *Musical Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (Fall 2002):449-471.

[3] Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005).

[4] Olivier Messiaen, *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, E. Thomas Glasow, trans. (Portland, Ore.: Amadeus Press, 1994), p. 140.

[5] Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 122-3.

[6] Messiaen, p. 131.

[7] For an examination of this phenomenon in contemporary French composition, see Pierre-Michel Menger, *La Condition du compositeur et le marché de la musique contemporaine* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 1980).

[8] On the IRCAM, see Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

Jonathyne Briggs  
Indiana University Northwest  
jwbriggs@iun.edu

Copyright © 2009 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172