

the lost face of music: olivier messiaen for Merry! Goldberg and Bill Bradbury

What, I wondered, had compelled me to bow to a horned lark?
—Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*

avatar of angels

Composer Olivier Messiaen's devotion is to birds, avatars of angels on earth. For Messiaen, birdsong is the holiest of sounds, a blessing, a message from the heavens. His musical compositions are expansive and radiantly alive.

Birdsong fills the vast spaciousness of his heart.

inconsolable oceans

The abyss is Time, with its sadnesses and weariness. The birds are the opposite of Time; they are our desire for light, for stars, for rainbows, and for jubilant song!

—Quartet for the End of Time

In a letter to Oscar Pollak, Franz Kafka writes to his friend that "a book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us." For Messiaen, birdsong is the axe for our sadness and weariness, our inconsolable oceans of desolation and grief.

quatuor pour la fin du temps

15 January 1941. Stalag VIII A. Silesia. Messiaen writes *Quartet for the End of Time*. A prisoner of war incarcerated in a German camp, he orchestrates the quartet for himself on piano, and for three other inmates who play the cello, violin and clarinet. One of the cello's four strings is missing. The instrumentation is highly unusual for chamber music, but these four instruments are the only ones in the camp.

Messiaen's audience for the *Quartet* are the guards and 5000 prisoners of Stalag VIII A. The weather is so cold on January 15 that several of the upright piano keys become stuck during the performance. Later Messiaen will write that his shivering fellow prisoners were the most attentive and understanding audience he ever had.

The title of Messiaen's piece, *The Quartet for the End of Time*, refers to a text from Revelations: "There shall be Time no longer." In the POW camp, Messiaen wanted, at least for a moment, to banish the temporal, to bring his listeners to an "eternity in space."

abyss

"The human being is flesh and consciousness, body and soul," Messiaen writes. "His heart is an abyss which can only be filled by that which is godly."

Messiaen fills his heart's abyss, and his compositions, with birdsong. In the field, he transcribes the songs of earth's first musicians in traditional musical notations. Concert pianist Yvonne Loriod, his wife, accompanies him with a tape recorder to capture the sonic landscape that inspires his work.

Over the years Messiaen becomes an expert ornithologist, an intimate of the birds he loves.

rainbow

"[I]n my dreams . . . I submit in an ecstasy to a wheeling, gyrating interpenetration of superhuman colours. These swords of fire, these blue and orange lava flows, these sudden stars: here is the jumble, here the rainbows!"

—Messiaen's Preface to The Quartet for the End of Time

The work of the imagination, according to naturalist Barry Lopez, is to bring together what is actual with what is dreamed. In the POW camp, what is actual for Messiaen is hunger, sleep deprivation, fingers swollen with cold. What is dreamed is the ethereal music of his Quartet, his ecstatic and visionary delirium of color.

call and response

Catalogue d'oiseaux, Book of Birds. Thirteen solo piano pieces, one for each bird:

Alpine Chough. Golden Oriole. Blue Rock Thrush. Black-Eared Wheatear. Tawny Owl. Wood Lark. Reed Warbler. Short-toed Lark. Cetti's Warbler. Rock thrush. Buzzard. Black Wheatear. Curlew.

Ever since Messiaen was a small boy, birds called to him and he responded with a body of work intensely devoted to them—more so than any other composer. No sky is uninhabited in Messiaen's music. His work is a tribute to the sheer abundance, virtuosity, and exuberance of the natural world. His birdsong is a flash of flame, a whirl of iridescence, a shattering of glass . . .

cacophony

In Chronochromie's sixth movement, eighteen solo instruments play simultaneously in an extended outpouring of birdsong. When first performed in Germany, Chronochromie's uncaged voices set off howls of protest as Messiaen's shocked and scandalized audience boo his cacophonous aviary.

birdsong

"What he wrote was his imagination of birdsongs."

—Composer Pierre Boulez

In The Principles of Art, R.G. Collingwood writes that Cezanne's trees are not what trees actually look like, they are what trees feel like. I

imagine Messiaen's birdsong is not so much what birdsong sounds like, as much as what bird song feels like to him.

unblinded eye / unbounded ear

Albert Einstein wrote that we can choose to live our lives in one of two ways. First, we can live our lives as if nothing is a miracle; or second, we can live as if everything is. Clearly, Messiaen chose to live his life awash in the miraculous.

birdsong

I chose the birds. . . .

—Messiaen

A bird's song is something extraordinary," Messiaen writes, "an absolutely impenetrable chaos, a prodigious entanglement." For Messiaen, the "greatest musicians on our planet," sing with an "extraordinary virtuosity that no tenor or coloratura soprano could ever equal." Every bird is a "living leitmotif." The song of the meadowlark is "extremely jubilant and alleluia-like." The wood thrush's song is "full of sunlight, almost sacramental." The song of the virtuoso warbler is "Debussy rewritten by Stockhausen."

"For me the only real music has always existed in the sounds of nature," Messiaen writes. "The harmony of wind in trees, the rhythm of waves on the sea, the timbre of raindrops, of breaking branches, of stone struck together, the different cries of animals, are the true music as far as I am concerned."

field guide

Possessed and entranced by the natural world, Messiaen's musical soundscapes evoke the habitats of the birds whose voices he transcribes—field and cloud, stone and lake, leaf and light, peak and sky. "The slow, sad tremolos, chromatic scales, savage trills, and glissando call of the gray curlew. . . ." Like ever changing streams, Messiaen's ebullient birds never sing the same song twice as they perch amidst the dense foliage of his multi-layered notations.

our unfurnished eyes

Not 'Revelation'—tis—that waits/But our unfurnished eyes.

—Emily Dickinson

Messiaen composes music for our unfurnished ears. His task is to help us hear, to widen the range of our auditory perceptions into a deeper comprehension, a more embracing love.

our unfurnished ears

Open wide the ears of your heart.

—First rule of the Order of St. Benoit, the Gregorian chanters

According to a Talmudic saying, we do not see things as they are; we see them as we are. Messiaen sees, and hears, the world as expansive, passionate, exalted. "I am the musician of joy," Messiaen explains, and he hears joy everywhere, especially in the songs of those "little servants of immaterial joy" he so loves. His birds "sing to the glory of God, and he himself wanted to sing as they do," his wife Yvonne Loriod said. "All his life Messiaen believed in joy."

grace notes

Messiaen travels throughout the French countryside collecting bird songs. At night he sleeps in barns and haystacks so he can awaken in time to hear the dawn chorus.

Composer Pierre Boulez said it was not so much that the birds, rocks, colors, landscapes, and mountains inspired Messiaen, but that nature actually dictated to him. Messiaen's music, then, is a transcription from the natural world, a gift of inexplicable beauty, of unfathomable truth.

intimate reciprocity

One critic wrote that he was no longer sure if it was Messiaen singing like the birds, or birds singing like Messiaen.

via negativa

Essayist Jane Hirshfield writes that for Catholic mystics, the via negativa is a path to empty the self of will, desire, and knowledge in order to allow the soul to be filled by God. To follow the via negativa is to surrender to something larger than ourselves—the infinite dawn, an exultation of birdsong, our own unconditional span of wings.

grace catches fire

Whether the soul meets a loved human being or a wild landscape of heaped-up stones—from this human being, this heap of stones, grace catches fire.

—Martin Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions*

In 1972, Messiaen travels to the redrock canyonlands of southwestern Utah. In the precipitous silences of the canyons, he cultivates that emptiness of soul necessary "to perceive the inner conversation of the Spirit," an emptiness in which the divine voice can be heard.

For Messiaen, every bird is a "theophany or appearance of God." The songs of scrub jays, clark's nutcrackers, swallow and swifts in the bloodrock cliffs, caves, pinnacles, spires, grottos and otherworldly outcroppings sets his already bird-haunted imagination on fire.

namaste

"We're surrounded by innumerable unexplainable events that reveal an invisible power, greater than ours," Messiaen writes, "to which we must bow." Messiaen bows to the unknown; he bows to the unknowable.

des canyons aux étoiles

After returning to France Messiaen composes *Des canyons aux étoiles*, From the Canyons to the Stars, what he has termed a geological, ornithological, astronomical, and theological composition. A sonic bridge between his heart and the heavens, *Des canyons* is a testament to Messiaen's dazzling vision of the infinity of God. In its "power of revelation and of ecstasy," his music "enters the realms of the holy."

interstellar call

Some music opens on to a room. Other music opens on to a temple or cathedral. Messiaen music opens on to the cosmos.

The third movement of *Des canyons* is devoted to the stars. Messiaen identifies with Aldebaron, the most brilliant star in the Taurus constellation. Aldebaron always follows the Pleiades, the constellation of Seven Sisters whose name means "flock of doves."

cedar breaks

In "Cedar Breaks," the fifth movement of *Des canyons*, Messiaen prefaces his score with a quotation from Ernest Hello's *Parole de Dieu*: "To replace fear by awe opens a window for adoration."

Composer Richard Steinitz describes Messiaen's *Des Canyon* as a work of breathtaking adoration, a window for us to soar through the wild solitudes of our feathered hearts.

bedrock redrock bloodrock

There is no silent color. The universe is a lyre.

There is no invisible sound. The universe is a prism.

—George Sand, aka Aurora Dudevant

For Messiaen's synaesthetic imagination, the deep heart's core of nature is a dazzling and luminous lyre, a resonate and reverberating prism. In *Des Canyon*, the key of E major corresponds to the red color of the canyon walls. Just as the light changes, the bloodrock of Messiaen's *Des Canyon* metamorphoses into red-violet glissandos, red-orange allegros, incarnadine chords and vermillion progressions.

life list

Messiaen, eighty years old, arrives in Australia to launch the Messiaen Festival, organized to honor him. Before the first performance, he vanishes into the Australian outback, searching for the bellbird.

ululation

Those who know have wings.

—Pancavimsa Bramana

Composer Peter Hill writes that Messiaen would vocalize birdsongs for his students, his expression suffused with enchantment. Intoxicated with the sounds, he then would take down his ornithological reference books to point out an illustration of the plumage of a particular bird.

the visible and the invisible

Language itself, philosopher Merleau-Ponty writes, “is the very voice of the trees, the waves, and the forests.”

And the birds, Messiaen would add. Messiaen understood that our comprehension of the world is enhanced by immersing ourselves in landscapes that speak to us in more-than-human voices.

invocation

Deliver me, intoxicate me, dazzle me forever. . . .

—St. Francis of Assisi

A long solo of a skylark. A mistle thrush. A black cap. A blackbird. A songthrush. In Messiaen’s last opera, St Francis of Assisi, the humble saint understands the language of the birds and speaks to them. The sixth movement, The Sermon to the Birds, ends in a blazing and ecstatic delirium of birdsong as Messiaen’s uncaged birds soar into the sky.

I am the wild embrace of unbroken wings.
I am the transfigured face of devotion.

“The divine is not in space, but in love,” Emanuel Swedenborg writes. Messiaen loves birds in a way no one has thought to love them before. “I believe I’m the first composer to have taken an interest in bird songs.” In his understated manner, Messiaen is speaking of his deep and life-long devotion to birdsong and to birds.

lost face of music

“In my hours of gloom, when I am suddenly aware of my own futility . . . what is left to me, but to seek out the true, lost face of music somewhere off in the forest, in the fields, in the mountains or on the seashore, among the birds.”

Messiaen stares into that unflinching and mysterious lost face of music all his life.

wild blue perfection

[An] unknown fragrance, an unsleeping bird, music of stained glass church windows, a whirl of complementary colours, a theological rainbow.

—Messiaen describing his music

Messiaen dies in the wild embrace of unbroken wings at the age of eighty-three. Yvonne Loriod commissions a sculpture of a bird as a headstone for his grave. His biographer Claude Samuels, gives Messiaen the posthumous title, Bird Prophet.

wild angels

Wild geese, not angels, are images of humanity's own highest self, naturalist David Quammen writes.

Wild geese. Angels. Messiaen would say there is no difference.