

# philharmonia orchestra

## **OLIVIER MESSIAEN**

(1908 – 1992)

### ***Oiseaux exotiques (1955/56)***

After completing the immense *Turangalila-Symphonie*, first performed at the end of 1949, Olivier Messiaen began a series of experimental works which included the four *Etudes de rythme* for piano solo, the *Livre d'orgue*, and *Réveil des oiseaux* for piano and orchestra. Messiaen's serious immersion in birdsong began in April 1952 when he visited the country estate of Jacques Delamain, author of *Why Birds Sing* and a brandy maker by profession. Delamain encouraged the composer to take a more methodical interest in ornithology, and Messiaen soon saw the musical potential for this. After depicting a dawn chorus of French birds in *Réveil des oiseaux* (1953), he next turned his attention to a new work which would include birds from much further afield.

Pierre Boulez had requested a new piece to be played at his recently founded *Domaine musical*, and the result was *Oiseaux exotiques*, for solo piano and an ensemble of woodwind, brass and percussion. Messiaen's sources for the new work included recordings of American birds on disc, including the Wood Thrush, which plays such an important (and expressive) part in the work, from its initial appearance in the first piano cadenza, to its last just before the end of the work. But not all the birds in *Oiseaux exotiques* came from records, as Messiaen also visited bird exhibitions and private aviaries in and around Paris, to see and hear Shammas, Red Cardinals and other spectacular non-native birds. According to Messiaen himself, he began the work on 5 November 1955 and completed it on 23 January 1956, though some of the birds included in the work were first heard by Messiaen after he had begun composition.

What emerged at the end of the preliminary research, the transcription of songs, and the relatively short time spent on composition itself, is a fifteen-minute work of astonishingly brilliant colours, matched by memorable musical ideas which are ultimately derived from birdsong. But it is vital to stress that the birdsongs here are no mere imitations – Messiaen has transformed them into highly individual musical ideas. The most crucial ingredient of all is something only a composer can create: a strong thread of musical drama which makes hearing *Oiseaux exotiques* a compelling experience – from the arresting shriek of the Minah Bird at the very start, to the final return of the pounding chords – first heard near the opening – derived from the song of the Himalayan Laughing Thrush, via the warm sun-drenched song of the American Wood Thrush, and the breathtaking moment when the Indian Shama enters, in a blaze of E major. Gilles Tremblay, a Messiaen pupil at the time *Oiseaux exotiques* was composed, has speculated that by combining birds from America and India, Messiaen was aiming for “a kind of global universality.” This is a very persuasive idea, since in this work East meets West through birdsong in the most startlingly effective way.

The first performance of *Oiseaux exotiques* took place in the Théâtre Petit Marigny in Paris, at the Concert du Domaine Musical on 10 March 1956. Yvonne Loriod played the solo part, and the orchestra – including many of the leading exponents of contemporary music in Paris – was conducted by Rudolf Albert. This première was given in a very small theatre (able to hold around 300 people), adding even more immediacy. Gilles Tremblay remembers the occasion as “marvellous, above all because of the joy and energy which emanated from the work.” Critics were generally enthusiastic, and the piece soon travelled abroad to great acclaim (in Cologne it was described as a “sensation”). The 1956 première was

also recorded, and the extremely enthusiastic audience response can be heard at the end. This work was a first for Messiaen: the first time his careful transcription of birdsongs was transformed into a dazzling, non-literal representation of birds – with joyous results.

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