

philharmonia orchestra

OLIVIER MESSIAEN

(1908 – 1992)

Réveil des oiseaux (1953)

The commission for *Réveil des oiseaux* came from Heinrich Strobel, director of the Donaueschingen Festival, where the work had its first performance on 11 October 1953. Messiaen's diaries show that he had been planning a work for piano and orchestra based on the complex numerical structures that had obsessed him in his music of the early 1950s. Suddenly that idea was scrapped – no doubt to Strobel's astonishment – and replaced by a composition based entirely on birdsongs.

This change of direction was not as sudden as it seemed. Nature had always been important to Messiaen, and birdsong had been present in his music for more than a decade. The first significant examples occur in the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (1941), although their effect is stylized rather than realistic, as in all Messiaen's music of the 1940s. Messiaen was intent, however, on a profound study of birdsong. It has to be remembered that for him birdsong was not only a source of inspiration but was itself a form of music: 'Nature, birdsong! These are my passions. They are also my refuge. In melancholy moments, when my uselessness is brutally revealed to me... what else is there to do except search for the true face of Nature, forgotten somewhere in the forest, in the fields, in the mountains, on the seashore, among the birds? For me, it is here that music lives: music that is free, anonymous, improvised...'

Already by the end of the 1940s Messiaen was making expeditions into the countryside in order to transcribe birdsong into musical notation. At first his efforts were hampered by lack of ornithological knowledge. The breakthrough came in April 1952 when he was given an introduction to Jacques Delamain, a noted expert on birds and birdsong (as well as the producer of the cognac that still bears his name). Following Delamain's advice, Messiaen started to collect birdsongs in specially dedicated notebooks in which he kept a record not only of the melodic outlines of the song but also details of timbre, time and place, plumage and habitat. *Réveil* was the first fruit of this research, and the first in a sequence of works dedicated almost entirely to birdsong: *Oiseaux exotiques* (1956), *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (1956–8), and *Chronochromie* (1960). The birdsongs for *Réveil* were collected on Delamain's estate between Cognac and Jarnac in south-west France and in the forests around St-Germain-en-Laye and Orgeval on the western edge of Paris.

Réveil follows the songs of birds from midnight to midday, the form determined strictly by the sequence of events in nature, punctuated by two lengthy silences, at dawn and noon. The first section introduces nocturnal birds: a long piano solo (nightingale) is followed by a sequence of shorter calls, among them the little owl (solo violin), woodlark (piccolo) and Cetti's warbler (E flat clarinet). The piano then introduces the songs of the whitethroat and robin. Suddenly, the music takes on a new energy, with a decisive motif (melodious warbler) passed between piano, solo viola and oboe. This is the start of the dawn chorus. An extended piano solo (robin) swells into a *tutti* with more than a dozen species singing in tumult, from which stand out the song thrush (oboes, clarinet and trumpets) and golden oriole (horns doubled by strings). Abruptly, the music ceases and a long silence ensues. The songs of the morning that follow are framed by three substantial piano cadenzas, beginning with the jaunty

melodies of a blackcap and later a voluble blackbird. The intervening exchanges evoke the colours of birdsong with exquisite instrumental effects: fluttering flutes and trilling strings (turtle dove), rippling figures on the celesta (whitethroat), or piccolo doubled by cor anglais (hoopoe). The final piano cadenza begins as a mosaic of brief calls, mostly high and rapid (blue tit, wren, goldfinch) before the cawing of a crow introduces a dialogue between two golden orioles. The piano ends with a duet between a robin and blackbird. Finally, the music arrives at the silence of midday, broken by fragmentary calls, with the last word given to the drumming of a woodpecker and the distant notes of a cuckoo.

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