

philharmonia orchestra

BIRDSONG IN MESSIAEN

Peter Hill, Messiaen biographer:

I first came to visit Messiaen in the Rue Marcadet in December 1986. That first session I remember I was playing pieces from his *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, the Catalogue of Birds, a big piano cycle all about the birds of France, and he talked to me about the birds that he loved so much. He talked to me about the places where he collected the birdsong, and he would go off into his inner sanctum and fetch out these little books of birds for me to look at. But I couldn't help noticing these bird books were very simple – they were the sort of book you might give to your five year old. That gave me an idea, so the next time I came to see Messiaen I brought a rather special book, *The Birds of Great Britain* by the Victorian bird illustrator John Gould. I wasn't prepared for Messiaen's reaction. I mean, he looked at the book and he was completely silent for about ten minutes just turning the pages in wonder, making little sounds as he recognised the birds.

Well I'm sitting here in a little park in front of the Theatre Marigny just off the Champs Elysees, and this was the place where Messiaen's work for piano and small orchestra, *Oiseaux exotiques*, was first performed on 10 March 1956.

Nigel Simeone, Messiaen biographer:

The piece was received with incredible enthusiasm. This was unusual, and it was certainly not always Messiaen's experience either.

Peter Hill:

Oiseaux exotiques is an extraordinarily interesting work, because it was the first birdsong work where Messiaen worked not from the birds that he heard in the countryside and notated, but actually from gramophone records. There's a set called *American Birdsongs* and it was published by the Laborator of Ornithology at Cornell University in 1942, and it seems originally he started to write a work that was about American birds. And then about six weeks or so into the composition he went to one of the bird markets in Paris, and there he heard a special collection that they'd got of Oriental birds, and he spent three days scribbling furiously, writing down all these amazing birdsongs from India and East Asia and so on, and he just couldn't resist using all this new material in his piece about American birds.

I think it's true that Messiaen was probably very proud of the fact that he had studied nature in the detail that nobody else had bothered to do. I mean, it's an incredible fact that we're surrounded by potential for music in nature, but that Messiaen was virtually the first person to go out there like an artist with his kind of easel, you know, and actually take down birdsong and listen to birdsong really really carefully.

Pete Fry, Philharmonia Orchestra Percussionist:

I absolutely adore birdsong, it can change your entire feeling about life and changes your frame of mind completely; I mean it does mine anyway. As soon as I hear a bird singing I just feel better, it just makes you feel good. A bird is always identifiable by its song, because it doesn't really vary: I mean it might change depending on the season or whether they're trying to stake a territory or attract a mate or whatever it might be, but you can always identify it as being that bird's song because it's very precise. And it's the same with Messiaen's music, it is very precise, it's very

rhythmically notated: there's no misunderstanding as to what that rhythm can be, and actually most of his music isn't very elastic, it is pretty rigid.

Nigel Simeone:

I think this whole engagement with nature has a lot to do with also Messiaen's view of what nature was. I mean it was a creative thing, the birds were the great songsters of creation, nature was something that for him was one of the great glories of what God had made.

Peter Hill:

Messiaen, because of his religious phase, didn't see birdsong as just a kind of interesting noise which might be useful for a composer, but actually as something much more than that, actually as music. So it was terribly important to Messiaen to be faithful as he saw it to the birdsong. I have to say that this has to be taken with several grains of salt, shall we say, because you can compare now the notations that Messiaen made from recordings where you can actually hear the birds, you can hear the recordings yourselves: you can usually see what Messiaen meant by his notation but it is very much a translation, and it's a translation, as many people have observed, into Messiaen's musical language.

And here's one of the earliest examples of that, it's from *Oiseaux exotiques*, the piece that was première in 1956, and it's an American bird called the Wood Thrush. Now Messiaen's first notation that comes from the recording is very primitive, it goes like this:

piano example

It's just that, very very simple, and it goes through various stages and becomes something absolutely incredible. So in the piece itself it's a sort of little cadenza for piano that goes like this:

piano example

So it's something really resplendent and magnificent and very much developed. I mean there's a huge amount of poetic licence that's gone into that.