

Book Reviews

Claude Samuel. *Olivier Messiaen: Musique et couleurs: Nouveaux entretiens avec Claude Samuel*. Paris: Editions Belfond, 1986. Translated by E. Thomas Glasow as *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*. Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1994.

Reviewed by Vincent Benitez

I feel that rhythm is the primordial and perhaps essential part of music; I think it most likely existed before melody and harmony, and in fact I have a secret preference for this element. I cherish this preference all the more because I feel it distinguished my entry into contemporary music. (67)

Olivier Messiaen's compositional achievements in rhythmic processes and organization rank him as one of the twentieth century's leading innovators in this area, influencing composers such as Boulez and Stockhausen. Drawing from diverse sources such as Greek meters, Indian *deçî-tâlas*, Japanese temporal concepts, Beethoven (development by elimination¹), and Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, Messiaen forged a temporal language that infused a distinctive sound and style to his music. One must note, however, that Messiaen's innovations were not limited to the rhythmic field alone. The symmetrical framework of his modes of limited transpositions and the uses of birdsong, plainchant, added-note chords, and sound/color relationships in his music are just some examples of his creativity in the areas of pitch, texture, and timbre. Messiaen drew analogies between his procedures in both rhythmic and pitch domains. For example, in his *Chronochromie* for orchestra (1959–60), Messiaen used symmetrical permutations, a

¹This procedure consists of gradually withdrawing notes from a musical idea until its basic essence is exposed.

technical innovation that he likened to the modes of limited transpositions and nonretrogradeable rhythms.² All three represent “the charm of impossibilities,” the charm resulting from self-imposed limitations effecting permutations of note values in a particular ordering (symmetrical permutations), transpositions of synthetic scales (modes of limited transpositions), and rhythmic possibilities in retrograde motion (nonretrogradeable rhythms).³

Paul Griffiths hails Messiaen as the first great composer who departed from Western tradition.⁴ Messiaen’s music exhibits a certain melodic-harmonic stasis due to its pitch origins in the symmetrical modes of limited transpositions. Traditional linear development by way of harmonic means is absent. Messiaen uses rhythmic elaboration, such as rhythmic irregularity and an emphasis on the pulse, to impart a sense of forward impetus to his music. His melodic-harmonic stasis, combined with his particular rhythmic elaboration of it, presents a musical time free from any sort of measurement. What results—in keeping with Messiaen’s Catholic faith, which serves as the central agent that unifies all of his musical thought and expression—is a state of religious euphoria and contemplation, self-contained blocks of sound that represent a Christian eternity.

To seek to understand Messiaen’s music is to confront a host of manifold and sundry influences that spring from many times and places. Thus, E. Thomas Glasow’s translation of Claude Samuel’s *Olivier Messiaen: Musique et couleurs: Nouveaux entretiens avec Claude Samuel* (Paris: Editions Belfond, 1986) is a welcome addition to the Messiaen literature, for it allows English readers not fluent in French to view a personal portrait of the composer through several sets of

²“Symmetrical permutations are note-values that follow each other in a certain order and that are always reread from the starting point” (80).

³The “charm of impossibilities” possesses an occultic power, according to Messiaen, because it confronts the insurmountable obstacle of limitation. Messiaen states that the charm of impossibilities has dominated his entire life as a composer (47–48).

⁴Paul Griffiths, “Olivier Messiaen,” in *The New Grove Twentieth-Century French Masters* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991), 229.

conversations between Samuel and Messiaen recorded in the composer's later years. These interviews reveal many of Messiaen's opinions and reflections concerning his life, influences, works, other composers, performers, students, and compositional styles. Messiaen, at the invitation of Pierre Belfond, first agreed to collaborate with Samuel on a set of dialogues in 1967, resulting in eventual publication (9).⁵ In the mid-1980s, Messiaen agreed to collaborate with Samuel again by adding some more chapters and material to the original 1967 book. The passage of almost two decades allowed Messiaen to review, clarify, and update his earlier thoughts. Samuel maintains that the later version preserves the essence of the earlier and marvels at Messiaen's consistency of thought: the new chapters do not substantially contradict anything stated in other sources (10).

The first two conversations ("Musical Expectations" and "Landmarks") correspond to the earlier collaboration's Conversation One.⁶ Messiaen discusses the role of his parents, particularly his mother, Cécile Sauvage, in his formative years. He goes into more detail than he does in the earlier work by citing his mother's poetic intuitions as pivotal in directing him toward nature and art. These intuitions, according to Messiaen, predicted that he would become a composer and ornithologist and that Japan would captivate him (15). Samuel questions Messiaen in "Landmarks" about his motivations for composing and asks him to elaborate upon the three precepts that dominate his entire output: Catholicism, human love as exemplified by the Celtic legend of Tristan, and nature. There is nothing new in this discussion, for Messiaen remains consistent with his earlier

⁵Claude Samuel, *Entretiens avec Olivier Messiaen* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1967), translated as *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen* by Felix Aprahamian (London: Stainer & Bell, 1976). All references to the 1967 conversations will come from the 1976 Aprahamian translation.

⁶Samuel (1976), 1-14. Aprahamian, in his translation, numbers all of the conversations sequentially, something that Glasow does not do. I will refer to Aprahamian's conversation numbers so that the reader may get a general sense of how the book under review compares with its earlier version. I am making no claims for an exhaustive comparison in this review.

pronouncements. He does touch upon some aspects of his opera, *Saint François d'Assise* (1975–83), but they are in line with his goal of expressing the “marvelous aspects of the Faith” (26). Samuel and Messiaen close this conversation by briefly discussing sound-color relationships in music, something that they will concentrate on in the fourth conversation (“Of Sounds and Colors”).

Samuel pursues a variety of topics in the third conversation (“From Technique to Emotion”): sound-color relationships in Messiaen’s music; the modes of limited transpositions; Messiaen’s views on tonality, modality, and serialism; orchestration; and the Ondes Martenot. Messiaen provides more information on his favorite painters—besides Charles Blanc-Gatti and Robert Delaunay—and correspondences between painters and composers, things that he did not do in the earlier version of these conversations.⁷ Mathias Grünewald, Claude Monet, and Fra Angelico are the painters specifically cited by Messiaen in this later set of conversations because of their interesting approaches to color. Samuel asks Messiaen for his views on composer/painter couplings such as Debussy/Cézanne, Stravinsky/Picasso, Webern/Klee, and Schoenberg/Kandinsky. Messiaen acknowledges that these correspondences do exist and states that their era is responsible for them (45). He disagrees with the Debussy/Cézanne and Schoenberg/Kandinsky associations while agreeing with the other pairings. According to the composer, there is a geometric aspect to Cézanne’s works that is missing in Debussy, and Kandinsky’s colors can be very brutal and violent compared to the gray of Schoenberg’s music (46).

The next conversation, “Of Sounds and Colors,” has no earlier version. Messiaen lists the colors evoked by the modes of limited transpositions, yet he states that the modes are not the sole foundation of his harmonic vocabulary. Chords of contracted resonance, revolving chords, chords of total chromaticism, chords of transposed inversions on the same bass note, and the myriad number of chords that are designed to evoke the timbres of birdsongs are nonmodal harmonic-

⁷Samuel informs Messiaen that his earlier responses to the question about relationships between composers and painters were unsatisfactory (45).

color components that started to appear in the works of the late 1950s and 60s. Furthermore, Messiaen states that these chords all have twelve unique colors which correspond to the twelve possible transpositions (64), a quality that chords derived from the modes of limited transpositions do not share. This leads one to speculate on the nonmodal nature of the works from this period. What is also interesting for this reviewer are Messiaen's statements regarding how these chords become lighter or darker when moved up or down an octave from an initial midrange position. This perhaps demonstrates the importance of absolute pitch class, along with the importance of absolute pitch implied in the twelve unique colors evoked by the twelve transpositions of each of Messiaen's special chords.

"In Quest of Rhythm" and "My Birds" (the fifth and sixth conversations, respectively) offer little change from the earlier set of conversations in 1967.⁸ In "In Quest of Rhythm," Messiaen elaborates on many of the components that comprise his rhythmic language, from Mozart to Debussy, Beethoven to Stravinsky (*The Rite of Spring*), and Greek meters to Hindu rhythms. What this conversation reveals is an eclectic yet unified approach to rhythm, the unity stemming from Messiaen's love of magical/occultic forces: prime numbers, rhythmic asymmetry, rhythmic palindromes, and the dynamic/passive interplay of different rhythmic characters.⁹ The influence of Greek meters and Hindu rhythms cannot be overestimated; his first rhythmically important works, *La nativité du Seigneur* (1935) and *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (1941), would not have materialized without them. Yet

⁸Samuel (1976), Conversations Three and Four, 33–65.

⁹Prime numbers, according to Messiaen, represent an occultic force because they cannot be divided into equal fractions (79). Greek meters and Hindu rhythms both feature prime numbers, hence Messiaen's attraction to them. A natural consequence of Messiaen's emphasis on prime numbers in the rhythmic domain is asymmetric division. I have already mentioned the occultic power of nonretrogradeable rhythms: the charm of impossibilities lies behind them. Finally, Messiaen's technique of rhythmic characters is derived from the variable rhythmic cells of *The Rite of Spring*. There are three characters, which represent three different rhythmic groups: one group is ever increasing in note values, another group is ever decreasing in note values, while the third group's note values never change.

Messiaen was a composer who was always searching for new avenues of expression. The above-mentioned symmetrical permutations of *Chronochromie* and the superimposing of different tempos in “The Sermon to the Birds” from *Saint François d’Assise* are just two examples of his continual creative renewal. “My Birds” finds Messiaen talking about his fascination with birds and their songs. For the Messiaen scholar, perhaps the most important things to remember in this conversation are the composer’s approaches in adapting birdsongs to his compositions. Messiaen either attempts to reproduce as precisely as possible a musical portrait of a bird and its habitat or uses the bird’s song as the basic material for his pieces (94–95).

“The Orient Experience” and “An American Paradise” can be coupled. Both conversations focus on Messiaen’s travels and experiences in two foreign countries and their aesthetic effect upon him. Japan captivated Messiaen after he first honeymooned there with his second wife, Yvonne Loriod, in 1962. Messiaen immediately fell in love with the Japanese musical traditions of the No drama and Gagaku. For Messiaen, the static character of Gagaku with its harmony placed above its melody was incredibly modern (99–100). There are obvious echoes of Gagaku in *Sept haikai* (1962) and of the No drama in the character of the Angel in *Saint François d’Assise*. The United States represents a mixture of both good and bad for Messiaen. He has no taste for the large urban side of American life; however, as he readily admits, his first experience at Tanglewood, exposing him to a slower and greener America, was different. This conversation’s importance lies in the background and analytical information that it provides for Messiaen’s *Des canyons aux étoiles* (1971–74), which was based on the composer’s visit to Bryce Canyon, Utah. *Des canyons aux étoiles* is not only an ornithological work but also has elements of astronomy and geology; all contribute to the work’s goal of praise and contemplation (163).

“Trajectory,” “Passing the Torch,” and “Contradictions of the Century” (the eighth, tenth, and eleventh conversations, respectively)

cover much territory.¹⁰ “Trajectory” is by far the longest of the three (46 pages). Messiaen reveals his opinions on various composers and any of their resulting influences on his work. Besides the well-known influences of Debussy, Dukas (the jewel scene from *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*), Mozart, and Berlioz, Messiaen cites Albeniz’s *Iberia*, which played a formidable role in his knowledge of pianistic possibilities (114). Messiaen goes on to discuss his organ *oeuvre*, *Cinq rechants* (1948), *Chronochromie*, *Sept haïkai*, *Couleurs de la cité céleste* (1963), and *La Transfiguration de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (1965–69) in some detail. “Passing the Torch” is a conversation dealing with Messiaen’s reflections as a teacher and the many students that have come in contact with him. Here we learn that Boulez is the “greatest musician of his generation . . . and the greatest composer of serial music” (182). Messiaen also informs us that Stockhausen, although unequivocally his most important foreign student, was unhappy in his class because it dealt with accentuation in Mozart (186). Finally, “Contradictions of the Century” is a veritable potpourri of thoughts concerning modern music. Schoenberg is not one of Messiaen’s favorite composers. Messiaen regards Webern as the true serial composer, Berg and Schoenberg as precursors, and Boulez as surpassing them all (192). Jazz and neoclassicism are not viewed in a positive light, while Xenakis and Ligeti are. The conversation concludes with Messiaen’s ruminations regarding the many musicians who are devoted to performing his works.

The twelfth conversation, “Saint Francis of Assisi,” is a discussion of Messiaen’s only opera. *Saint François d’Assise* can be thought of as a grand summation of Messiaen’s music because it encompasses musical techniques and materials from all periods of his output. On the other hand, considering *Saint François d’Assise* in these terms might be a bit simplistic. Whatever the case, Messiaen’s opera and longest work

¹⁰These three conversations correspond to Conversations Five through Seven of the 1967 version; see Samuel (1976), 67–124.

holds a formidable position in his compositional *oeuvre*.¹¹ Thus, this conversation may be considered the most important contribution of the book, for it provides a great deal of information regarding many aspects of the opera, particularly its genesis, structure (especially the use of leitmotifs) and orchestration, staging problems and solutions, and reception by the public. The means of communication in *Saint François d'Assise* are illustrated by way of a vast array of stylistic devices and musical forces: birdsong, chant, use of electronic instruments in a huge orchestra, Greek rhythms, varieties of percussion instruments and their creative employment, triadic harmonies, and symmetrical permutations of twelve notes. All of this, perhaps, points to a composer who has maintained a certain amount of youthfulness in his old age.

Just as we are presented with much information about the opera in this conversation, we are also confronted with four eternal conflicts in Messiaen's life as a composer which are exemplified by *Saint François d'Assise* (and worth stating here). First, as a "composer-believer," he often articulates the tenets of Roman Catholicism to non-believers, yet he becomes frustrated with their ignorance of its marvelous and mysterious facets. Second, he, as an ornithologist, speaks of birds to city dwellers who know nothing of the beauty and wonder of hearing a birdsong in the countryside. Third, Messiaen is frustrated by the skepticism on the part of the public regarding his synaesthesia. Finally, he laments the lack of sensitivity displayed on the part of most people regarding the subtle nature of rhythm (249). Perhaps if we can come to grips with these conflicts, we can better understand and appreciate Messiaen's music.

The last conversation, "Circling the Globe," is nothing but a short travelogue listing trips and triumphs around the world, starting from 29 April 1985 (251–60). This is followed by a short epilogue by Samuel ("In Memoriam: Olivier Messiaen"). Messiaen, according to Samuel, "is now a musical monument, a glorious name whose works have entered the ranks of twentieth-century classics" (261).

¹¹At one point, Messiaen told everyone that he was finished with composing after the completion of *Saint François d'Assise*. See Peter Hill, "Interview with Yvonne Loriod," in *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1995), 301.

Glasow's translation is rich with information. It takes us on a grand tour through the many facets that comprise Olivier Messiaen. I have one major criticism, however: it would have been helpful if Glasow had put forth an *annotated* translation. Much of the book is a repetition of the 1967 collaboration, and it would have been beneficial for readers to know in what ways this book differed from the earlier conversations and where it struck new ground. Furthermore, Glasow could have supplied more information on the many personalities, works, and events cited by Messiaen. I would have liked more information on some of the books devoted to Saint Francis that Messiaen read, additional information on the composition and performances of works beyond that found in the Selected List of Works (263–68) located at the end of the book, and dates for the periods when Messiaen was associated with other composers, performers, and students. Glasow could have also included his own preface, perhaps revealing his perspective on the 1986 Messiaen-Samuel collaboration. Moreover, he could also have annotated his bibliography (283–88), briefly commenting upon the significance each book or article has for Messiaen research.

Despite my criticism, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel* is an important contribution to Messiaen scholarship. The book is relatively free of misprints and has a handsome appearance with some excellent photographs. Besides the above-mentioned bibliography and selected works list, it also contains a discography (269–81). Now that Messiaen has left us for his beloved Paradise, perhaps now is the time for a more substantive evaluation of his work.¹² I would like to see more sophisticated attempts to comprehend and tie his spiritual world together with his vast assemblage of musical techniques. What exactly constitutes Messiaen's melodic/harmonic world? Are there any underlying relationships behind the sound/color phenomena that permeate his work? Does Messiaen's

¹²In my opinion, many Messiaen scholars merely reiterate the composer's statements concerning his music and do not venture beyond that safe haven. For exceptions, see Jonathan W. Bernard, "Messiaen's Synaesthesia: The Correspondence between Color and Sound Structure in His Music," *Music Perception* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1986): 41–68; and idem, "Colour," in *The Messiaen Companion*, 203–19.

use of rhythm and meter involve larger structural forces, or is there truly only an emphasis on the beat? These are just a few of the questions that Glasow's translation can help to answer in the future.