

A vibrant bird, possibly a Tanager, is perched on a tree branch. The bird has a bright yellow head, a black throat, and a large, flowing orange-red tail. It is facing right, looking towards the top of the frame. The background is a soft-focus view of a forest with green foliage and tree trunks.

PIANO
CLASSICS

Messiaen

Piano Music

CIRO LONGOBARDI

OLIVIER MESSIAEN 1908-1992

PIANO MUSIC

Huit Préludes (1928-29)		10. Pièce pour le tombeau	
1. La colombe	1'54	de Paul Dukas (1935)	2'58
2. Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste	7'30	11. Rondeau (1943)	2'38
3. Le nombre léger	1'41	12. Cantéyodjayâ (1948)	12'52
4. Instants défunts	3'55	Quatre Études de rythme (1949-50)	
5. Les sons impalpables du rêve...	3'49	13. Île de Feu I	2'07
6. Cloches d'angoisse et larmes d'adieu	8'37	14. Mode de valeurs et d'intensités	4'30
7. Plainte calme	2'54	15. Neumes rythmiques	5'59
8. Un reflet dans le vent...	5'48	16. Île de Feu II	4'55
9. Fantaisie burlesque (1932)	7'38	17. La Fauvette des Jardins (1970)	28'12

Ciro Longobardi
Piano: Fazioli F278 mk III

INWARD COLORS, RHYTHMS OF NATURE, BIRDSONGS

This box set presents a selection of piano works composed by Messiaen over the span of more than 40 years. In comparison with the great cycles of *Vingt regards sur l'enfant-Jésus* and *Catalogue d'Oiseaux* it might seem like a simple collection of scattered pieces and smaller suites. Nothing could be further from reality: apart from few occasional pieces, we find works that, due to their complexity of conception and depth of inspiration, can fully stand alongside those monuments, as well as works widely acknowledged as turning points in the history of Western compositional thinking.

Early works

It is easy to recognize Debussyian origins in the *Huit Préludes* (1928-29), with regard to the choice of form, the titles, the use of ambiguous and suspended harmonies. However, these pieces already sound as Messiaen's music unmistakably does, thanks to the composer's particular sensitivity to color and harmony. On "color" it is worth mentioning his words about the painter, and friend, Charles Blanc-Gatti, suffering from psychological synaesthesia: "*I am all the same affected by a sort of synesthesia, more in my mind than in my body, that allows me, when I hear music and also when I read it, to see inwardly, in my mind's eye, colors that move with the music; and I vividly sense these colors, and sometimes I've precisely indicated their correspondence in my scores. Obviously one should be able to prove this relationship scientifically, but I cannot.*"

Thus the inward colors of the first prelude, *La colombe* (The dove), are orange and violet, being the colors associated with mode 2, one of the modes used by Messiaen for melodic and timbre/harmonic constructions. Modes are sequences of notes similar to the traditional major and minor scales, with fewer chances of transposition. The first prelude is a slow, expressive piece with a sweet sonority. Immediately, above the accompanied melody we perceive a faster counter voice, which is actually a melody of

complex sounds, each sound being composed of three-note chords. The creation of complex sounds/timbre is a feature of all Messiaen's music, while the use of forms based on repetition is typical of his early works. In fact, this prelude is a simple A-A' form, the second part being a repetition of the first with a different ending.

In the second one, *Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste* (Song of ecstasy in a sad landscape) we have a bridge form A-A'-B-C-B-A''- A''' where A is the sad landscape presented in four different versions (whose inward colors are gray, mauve, Prussian blue), B is the song of ecstasy (whose color is silvery, diamond-like), C is a contrasting episode in the form of a canon, a counterpoint procedure in which the right hand repeats after a while what the left hand is already playing.

The inward colors of the third prelude, *Le nombre léger* (The light number) are orange and violet, as for the first one, of which it shares the mode. It is made up of fast and brilliant figures, often split between the two hands, which at times recall piano figures from Debussy's *Images II* and *Préludes II*.

The fourth prelude, *Instants défunts* (Dead moments) is again a slow, static piece, especially in the ending. The inward colors are a combination of gray, mauve and green.

In the fifth prelude, *Les sons impalpables du rêve...* (The impalpable sounds of the dream...) we have the mode 3 on the right hand, with a quick chord melody that overlaps the mode 2 of the chordal theme on the left hand. Also in this case we have a repetition-based form, which we can summarize in the A-B-A-C-A-B-A scheme. Of course, the combination of modes corresponds to a combination of inward colors, mainly blue-orange and purple.

The sixth prelude, *Cloches d'angoisses et larmes d'adieu* is again a slow movement, the first part of which (Bells of anguish) is based on obsessively repeated notes, like bells, around which a series of complex cluster-chords unfolds, according to a procedure reminiscent of Ravel's *Le gibet*. Yet when the climax is reached, the image of anguish turns into a lyrical and dreamy feeling, in a new section with a contrasting character (Tears of farewell). The three final notes, albeit arranged by contrary motion, are curiously

reminiscent of the beginning of Beethoven's Sonata Les Adieux, where the upper part of the first three chords is marked in the score with the word 'Le-be-whol' (Farewell).

The seventh prelude, *Plainte calme*, is a very simple piece, with an intimate mood, a kind of preparation for the last virtuosic prelude, *Un reflet dans le vent...* (A reflection in the wind...). Here figures inspired by Debussy's and Ravel's pianism are immediately recognizable, soon followed by a persuasive melody wrapped in arpeggios. The section B, even more lively, gives rise to a very bright climax, after which we have a varied repetition of the first part (repetitions and symmetries that return...) with an extremely excited ending.

The composition of *Fantaisie burlesque* (1932) was the answer to a kind of challenge. Since his old classmates attributed to him a too serious and meditative character, Messiaen wanted to demonstrate he was able to express the comicality in music. In the composer's opinion, the challenge was not won: he considered really successful just the central part - actually endowed with truly fascinating sounds - while the extreme parts were, according to him, musically lacking. The structure of the piece is a symmetrical rondeau form, with an A-B-A-C-D-C-A-B-A' scheme that enhances the repetitiveness of the chord-sequence at the beginning, a kind of strange, mechanical laugh.

The *Pièce pour le tombeau de Paul Dukas* was written in 1935 as part of a memorial tribute to the composer by some students and friends. It is a very simple and austere piece, with a slow and impressive sequence of chords that continuously resolves towards a dominant seventh on the B note.

The *Rondeau*, written in 1943 as part of the teaching duties at the Paris Conservatory, is an enjoyable test piece for the Conservatory piano competition. It is structured in two parts, with the second repeating the first with variations-expansions. Considering that Messiaen was working on *Visions de l'Amen* at the same time, and that was shortly going to compose

the *Vingt Regards* (1944), both complex and advanced works, the *Rondeau* is a very clear example of the composer's adaptability to smaller commitments.

Rhythmic-serial works (1948-50)

"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...Schematically, rhythmic music is music that scorns repetition, squareness, and equal divisions, and that is inspired by the movements of nature, movements of free and unequal durations."

Towards the end of the 1940s, after the completion of *Turangalila*, Messiaen faces a period of crisis and rethinking. He is looking for a renewal of his language, which he will achieve through the study of rhythm and birdsong. In this sense *Cantéyodjayâ* – a pseudo-Sanskrit word like the others scattered in the score – composed in 1948, *"is strikingly transitional"* (Gareth Healey). This complex and articulated piece marks the composer's involvement in the study of Hindu rhythms, the entry of serial writing into his music, and an extensive use of his own pre-existing materials taken from *Turangalila*, *Vingt Regards*, *Cinq Rechants*, *Harawi*. The change in piano writing couldn't be more unsettling. Debussy's and Ravel's pianism, developed in a completely original way by the composer's personality, turns into a decidedly percussive new writing. In this case too, the repetitions play a fundamental role. The initial rhythmic figure, a quasi-rondeau theme, reappears periodically, yet the entire development of the piece is made by more or less short sections that return juxtaposing, often abruptly, to each other. After the central part of the piece, the harmonic density and rhythmic intensity gradually grow up to the climax, followed by a quick recapitulation of the opening figures and an extremely incisive final gesture.

The radical change in piano writing is also clear in the *Quatre Études de rythme* (1949-50). The two *Île de Feu* (Isle of Fire) are dedicated to Papua New Guinea, so the themes *"have all the violence of the magical rites of that country"*.

Île de Feu I has an initial theme-refrain played by the right hand in the low register, with the percussive accompaniment of the left hand. In the subsequent variations of the refrain, Messiaen first inserts a pseudo-birdsong, then chords in the treble (as higher resonances), then percussive elements both in the treble and the bass. A second theme, derived from the first, is played by the left hand in the excited and wild episode that leads to the finale.

Mode de valeurs et d'intensités, composed and first performed in Darmstadt, had a significant influence on the post WWII avant-garde and on such composers as Boulez and Stockhausen. With its modes of 36 notes, 24 durations, 12 attacks, 7 dynamics, it is the first piece in history to present the total and highly engineered predetermination of the composition elements (total serialism). When listening, it seems to be in front of a completely open sound space, apparently without reference points, yet with the tendency to place the same notes in the same registers of the instrument, almost creating polarities for perception.

Neumes rythmiques is based on the composer's purpose of setting rhythmic correspondences with the melodic neumes of the plainchant. Here too the composer proceeds by juxtaposition of more or less short sections, each of which is expanded with the addition of durations. Thus the structure seems to grow by metric increase and not by rhythmic intensification.

Île de Feu II is a kind of fusion between *Île de Feu I* and *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*. The theme-refrain, played at the beginning by the left hand with the addition of chords/upper resonance of the right hand, is then proposed in five variations, alternating with serial sections - which consist of interversion series based on 12 notes, 12 durations, 4 attacks, 5 dynamics that recall some sections of the *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*. An episode of *"wild, barbarian dance"*, a long section in which right and left hands play, in regular pulse, respectively a sequence on a Hindu rhythm system and a 12-note mode, leads to a final climax with an extremely percussive character.

A late ornithological work (1970)

The other area of research and renewal of his own language was for Messiaen the study and transcription of birdsong, which he began to practice systematically from the beginning of the 1950s. "*And so each spring, armed with pencils, erasers, manuscript paper, drawing paper and an enormous pair of binoculars, I visit a different province of France in search of my teachers. This is how I wrote the Catalogue d'Oiseaux for solo piano...it is an open-ended work. If death does not put an end to my activity, this first catalogue will be followed by a second and perhaps by a third.*" Indeed, the composer went on for years collecting and transcribing materials, producing a certain number of sketches for future pieces and at least one piece, unpublished despite almost completely written.

Nonetheless, and due to important commissions, Messiaen had to put aside the project of ornithological compositions for solo piano, only to return in 1970 with *La Fauvette des Jardins* (The garden warbler) an extensive homage to the lake and mountain landscape, which surrounded the summer retreat of the composer, in the French Alps. Messiaen was particularly fascinated by the protagonist, whose spectacular singing, contrasting with the almost insignificant appearance and reserved character, dominates this large piece with long, virtuosic solos. As in *La Rousserolle Effarvatte* (No.7 from the *Catalogue*), the work describes the time span of a day, starting from the night until the following evening. As in the *Catalogue*, a preface guides us through the composer's inner images.

As regards the landscape, we soon have musical representations of the night, the waves of Lake Petichet, the mountain of the Grande Serre, the ash trees, the alders. And one can soon hear the quail and the nightingale.

With the dawn the lake turns pink, and we immediately listen to the first essay of the protagonist's song. It unfolds through longer and longer virtuosic solos (*the garden warbler sings and sings tirelessly*) alternating with the singing of seventeen birds, including the goldfinch, the blackcap, the swallow, the golden oriole, the blackbird, the green woodpecker, the wren,

and the flight of the black kite, the protagonist of the first great excited climax, which resolves on the peaceful image of the lake in the afternoon (*the most beautiful hours of the day*). Another climax immediately precedes the last solo of the garden warbler, at sunset (*the sky turns red, orange, purple*). At 9 pm the terrifying call of the owl is heard, the large lake is dimly lit by the moonlight, the silhouettes of the alders are black ... *everything sinks into the grandiose shadow of memory.*

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CIRO LONGOBARDI

Ciro Longobardi. Finalist and best pianist at the International Gaudeamus Interpreters Competition 1994 Rotterdam, Kranichsteiner Musikpreis at the 37° Ferienkurse für Neue Musik Darmstadt the same year, he performed as a soloist and chamber musician for Traiettorie Festival Parma, Milano Musica Festival, Ravenna Festival, Rai Nuova Musica Turin, Venice Biennale, Teatro S. Carlo and Scarlatti Society Naples, Angelica International Festival Bologna, Festival Aperto Reggio Emilia, Saarländischer Rundfunk Saarbrücken, ZKM Karlsruhe, Unerhörte Musik Berlin, Fondation Maeght Saint Paul de Vence, INA GRM Paris, Gaudeamus Foundation Amsterdam, Guggenheim Museum New York, Salzburg Festival and many other institutions. He recorded for Stradivarius, Kairos, Limen, Mode Records, Rai Trade, Neos, Die Schachtel. Among the prizes awarded, a Coup de Cœur de Radio France (September 2011), a Special Prize of the critics for the best Italian album (Musica e Dischi magazine, 2011), a album of the month (Amadeus magazine, October 2012) and a National Prize of the disc (Amadeus Magazine, August 2013).

In 2019 the important collaboration with Piano Classics led to the release of Messiaen's complete Catalogue d'Oiseaux, which won the Abbiati Prize, the most important Italian critics award, and got a 5-star review from the leading French magazine Diapason. In the midst of the pandemic, he gave the first Italian performance of Messiaen's complete ornithological piano works for the Festival Aperto Reggio Emilia.

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