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The role of the Conservatoire de Paris in Messiaen's development as a composer

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Abstract : In 1919, when he was 11 years old, Olivier Messiaen entered the Paris Conservatory. Later, he was appointed professor of harmony on March 25, 1941, in the same Conservatoire de Paris. This position was vacant since the ousting of André Bloch. The latter was removed from his post in December 1940 because he was Jewish. Later, Messiaen might have tried to hide what he did during the year 1941, which was for him a troubled page of history. He was later professor of analysis and composition until his retirement in 1978. He spent half a century (more than two thirds of his life) at the Conservatoire, both as a student and a teacher. As a matter of fact, this institution, by its *esprit de corps*, probably galvanized the career of the composer, considered since, according to many sources, one of the most important musicians of the second twentieth century. It was also through the mediation work of Yvonne Loriod, met at the Conservatoire, who will premiere almost all future works for piano; of Boulez, the powerful mediator, his pupil in class of harmony at the Conservatoire; of Antoine Goléa, musicologist and supporter of his modernist aesthetics. There is undoubtedly a secret within the French music community: "The Conservatoire" (of Paris) is a powerful world that builds the careers of its inductees, students and/or teachers. Even before 1945 it could be presumed from reading certain letters that the Conservatoire had begun its mediation work to launch Messiaen's development as a composer.

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Messiaen spent 48 years – nearly half a century – at the Conservatoire de Paris. First he stayed there for 11 years, as a student, between 1919 and 1930, then as a professor, for no less than 37 years, between 1941 and 1978 when he retired. His class has become legendary. Jean Boivin, one of

his pupils, has devoted an entire book on this subject.¹ Another student, who entered the Conservatoire in 1966, wrote:

I entered the Conservatoire when I was 20. I went there with an incredible discipline, I worked more than anyone; I learned my harmony right away, and then I started my counterpoint studies. Then came May 1968, and for me this became the moment of my personal crisis, a new awareness of society, musicians, pedagogy. I had to attend the fugue class and learn to write a fugue in seventeen hours, from 6 AM to 11PM, we were swooping to finish it in time. But what is the use of it now? The only thing that remains important to me is Messiaen's analysis class.²

Nearly half a century in the Paris Conservatory

In 1919, Olivier Messiaen was still a child. He was 11 years old. But as young as he was, he entered the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris. He began by studying piano and, remarkably, percussion. Then he studied other subjects for no less than 11 years. He did not leave until 1930, after obtaining awards for harmony (in 1924), counterpoint, fugue (1926), accompaniment (1927), organ, improvisation, music history (1929), and finally composition (1930). With these eight prizes, he entered the pantheon of the legendary students, the early and brilliant “prize collectors.” This insured him later, as a teacher, the admiration of his students.

For Messiaen, the 1930's were the decade outside the Conservatory. In this time he remained chiefly an organ composer, who would admittedly become “*the most influential organ composer in the twentieth century.*”³

Then came the “*strange war.*” This “*drôle de guerre*” put France on its knees in less than a year. Messiaen was taken prisoner at Stalag Görnitz VIII A, in Silesia. He spent the winter of 1940–1941 there. Another entire book is devoted on this very precise subject.⁴ Notably because there, he composed and premiered his very famous *Quartet for the*

¹Jean Boivin, *La Classe de Messiaen* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1995).

² Quoted by Pierre-Michel Menger, *Le paradoxe du musicien: Le compositeur, le mélomane et l'État dans la société contemporaine* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), 56.

³See Jon Gillock, *Performing Messiaen's Organ Music: 66 Masterclasses* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), in the introduction.

⁴Rebecca Rishin, *Messiaen quartet* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

End of Time, which Jerzy Stankiewicz called “the masterpiece of chamber music of the twentieth century.”⁵

The problem of the year 1941

What happened next? It is hard to know precisely. According to Christopher Murray and Yves Balmer, Messiaen would have continually “revisited the story of his life.”⁶ That is to say: he sometimes had to lie about his past, especially about this troubled period of history.

For example, after the war, the composer always claimed to have returned to France, from his captivity in Germany, in 1942. However, his real return took place in February 1941, one year before. The proof is precisely given by the Conservatoire de Paris: he was appointed professor there on March 25, 1941.

As a matter of fact, according to Murray and Balmer, Messiaen totally occulted this year 1941. Because he probably wanted to hide that his release from the prison camp, and consequently his return to France, were due to the interpersonal skills of General Charles Huntziger.⁷ Huntziger was commander-in-chief of the Vichy⁸ Infantry. Messiaen was elected to his first position at the Conservatoire, as a harmony teacher, on March 25, 1941, and not in 1942. And this appointment was possible thanks to the ousting of André Bloch. Bloch had been in post since 1927. However, he was Jewish. Because of this, he was dismissed on December 18, 1940, as a consequence of the first law on the status of Jews. Murray and Balmer specified:

Messiaen did not wait passively for his appointment: upon his arrival in Vichy in March 1941, he activated his networks and campaigned with important figures of the French musical life to obtain a position he was already coveting before the war. And circumstances made it accessible earlier than expected. To achieve his ends, like all pretenders to an administrative position, he wrote a standard letter: ‘I am not Jewish, my four grandparents are not Jewish, and there is absolutely no Jewish blood in my family.’⁹

⁵See Jerzy Stankiewicz, “Ile wykonań *Kwartet na koniec Czasu* Oliviera Messiaena odbyło się w Stalagu VIII A w Gorlitz? Nowe fakty i hipotezy 70 lat później,” in *Res facta nova: Teksty o muzyce współczesnej* 12, no. 21 (2011).

⁶Yves Balmer and Christopher Murray, “Olivier Messiaen et la reconstruction de son parcours sous l’Occupation: le vide de l’année 1941,” in *La musique à Paris sous l’Occupation*, ed. Myriam Chimènes & Yannick Simon (Paris: Fayard/Cité de la Musique, 2013), 152.

⁷*Ibid.*, 157.

⁸The capital of South France collaborating with Nazi Germany.

⁹Yves Balmer and Christopher Murray, *op. cit.*, 158-9.

Let us take another example of the “re-writing” of his biography. Filmmaker Denise Tual commissioned the future *Visions de l’Amen*. The work was completed in October 1942. But Messiaen made Denise Tual believe in very fast work on composing the piece, much faster than it actually took place. Indeed, the work was already prefaced as early as 1941.¹⁰ Let us focus on *Visions of Amen*. For Messiaen, the future premiere of this work for two pianos was also an opportunity to become better acquainted with a particular pupil of the Conservatoire, the one who would become his second wife, the young pianist Yvonne Loriod.

In 1943, Messiaen was a brilliant 35 years old teacher. Yvonne Loriod was a 19 years old piano pupil in the same place, the Paris Conservatory. It was probably for her and himself, i.e. for their love, that Messiaen particularly wrote *Visions de l’Amen*, for two pianos as “for two lovers,” in a way. *Visions de l’Amen* was also an opportunity for a trip together, a premiere in London, during the war. How could two French citizens cross the Channel and travel to London in 1943? That seems very surprising. Messiaen wrote a letter to his friend Felix Aprahamian in 1943. Since 1942, Aprahamian had been helping Tony Mayer organize the *Concerts de Musique Française* series at the Wigmore Hall in London. In his letter, Messiaen asked Aprahamian for permission to leave French territory (for himself and his young friend Yvonne Loriod). He also asked for two “good grand pianos.” He described his *Visions of Amen* as his “best work.”¹¹

A wartime composer?

His best work, indeed? Indeed, this wartime period was fruitful. As a matter of fact, Messiaen had written his most famous works during this short period. After the extremely famous *Quartet for the End of Time* (1940–1941) came the *Trois petites liturgies de présence divine* (1943), the *Vingt regards sur l’Enfant Jésus*, for piano (also premiered by the Conservatory pupil Yvonne Loriod in 1944), and soon, after the war, the most famous piece for orchestra, *Turangalîla-Symphonie* (1948–1949). Was Messiaen a wartime composer? Was the severe “*mise en loge*” of the world conflict some kind of Mallarmé’s “*salutary constraint*”?

¹⁰Ibid., 153.

¹¹See Nigel Simeone, «*Bien cher Félix...*»: *Letters from Olivier Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod to Felix Aprahamian* (Cambridge: Mirage Press, 1998).

Another idea would be that it was the *Conservatoire* which advanced Messiaen's development as a composer, since his appointment as a young professor in 1941. In another text,¹² we tried to show that the Conservatoire engendered a strong *esprit de corps*. And Messiaen probably had a special and particularly shining role in the Conservatoire de Paris, a role in the very center of this *esprit de corps* (a powerful professional "club spirit"). He may have been like a young "d'Artagnan" in this old institution resembling a cadet school. Having won numerous awards certainly made him a student legend. It seems natural that this *esprit de corps* worked to promote the young career of this "prince of the Conservatoire". Thus, Yvonne Loriod, as a young "musketeer of this cadet school", might have put all her talent (and more), in 1944, for premiering what would become – as a consequence of her special engagement? – Messiaen's most famous piano piece (The *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant Jésus*).

Messiaen may have also been inspired, no doubt, by this return to the Conservatoire as a musical Garden of Eden temporarily lost (during the 1930's), and a crucible of a new love (with Yvonne Loriod), a new hope, and, 18 years later, a new marriage. For Messiaen, particularly during this war time, the Conservatoire might have been like a marvelous shelter and perhaps much more: a sublimated homeland, whose he would have been a "young king."

After the war, the students of the Conservatoire, such as Loriod, and others, supported this local model, Messiaen, as they would have defended their flag, their champion. Perhaps because Messiaen honored them as a rising composer. But also, most likely, because he was this student legend, this "mister eight prices," this "Conservatory champion" perhaps even more for them than simply a great composer. Pierre Boulez supported Messiaen during the period after the war, despite some aesthetic differences between them at times.¹³ However, Boulez was severe with his opponents, at the slightest divergence.¹⁴ But Boulez had been a pupil in Messiaen's class of harmony, between 1944 and 1945. So, obviously, he supported his own roots, his

¹²See *Vingt regards sur Messiaen* (Aix-en-Provence: PUP, 2017), 159–66.

¹³Jean-Claude Risset reported that Boulez "had been cruel with some musics by Messiaen ("musique de Lupanar", he even wrote about a very sensual work of the 1940's)." Jean-Claude Risset, *Du songe au son: entretiens avec Matthieu Guillot* (Paris, L'harmattan, 2007), 68.

¹⁴"All the musicians who never felt the necessity of dodecaphonism are USELESS." Pierre Boulez, *Relevés d'apprenti* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 149.

teacher, his coterie, that is to say, his very precise social class. He supported the Conservatoire.

After the war

Now we must withdraw from the subject of this book. As a conclusion, we shall mention the after-war period. Until his retirement, despite his singular financial independence, Messiaen continued to teach at the Conservatoire. Why? According to Pierre-Michel Menger it was, "*less because of strict economic necessity than by taste or balance between creation and social life, permanent contacts with the professional circles of the music.*"¹⁵ But mostly, let us notice Messiaen fertilized these circles at the *root*: the pupils, all future instrumentalists, future conductors, future musicologists, all of them marked since their youth – their studenthood at the Conservatoire – with the idea that Messiaen would logically become a musical myth, anyway, *also because* he was a *student myth* (simply as an exceptional student himself) inside the Conservatoire.¹⁶

The student myth of musical perfection was also reinforced by another myth, that of "*perfect kindness.*" Messiaen may have been a perfect gentleman, sometimes even called *saint Olivier*.¹⁷ A former pupil of his in composition, Jacques Petit, confirmed that he never heard Messiaen "*criticize a work by old, new composers or student-composers. Everything seemed always possible, even works which were obviously atrocious.*"¹⁸ Pierrette Mari, another pupil (in 1965), believed in Messiaen's "*candor, extreme kindness.*"¹⁹

Candor? For composer Jean-Claude Risset, Messiaen was a great composer, but also someone a little "wily,"²⁰ much

¹⁵ Pierre-Michel Menger, *Le paradoxe du musicien. Le compositeur, le mélomane et l'État dans la société contemporaine* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), 71.

¹⁶ Finally, the *promotion of the Conservatoire itself* strongly worked for Messiaen's development. Several generations of teenagers, all former pupils, obviously worked for Messiaen, since the war and still today for some of them. It certainly seems difficult to precisely evaluate the part of this "school mediation" in Messiaen's career and later (until nowadays), in the still vivid reception of Messiaen. It might be considerable though.

¹⁷ Wolfgang Rathert titled "Olivier Messiaen: a saint (Franciscus)". See Wolfgang Rathert, "Olivier Messiaen: Ein Heiliger (Franziskus) der Musikgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts?," in *Religion und Glaube als künstlerische Kernkräfte im Werk von Olivier Messiaen*, ed. Albrecht Götze (Hofheim: Wolke, 2010), 9–24.

¹⁸ Quoted by Pascal Arnault and Nicolas Darbon, *Messiaen ou les sons impalpables du rêve* (Lillebonne: Millénaire III, 1999), 5.

¹⁹ See Boivin, *La Classe de Messiaen*, 169.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 65.

too calculating. But we can also doubt that Messiaen calculated his attitudes in his class as in a “pre-press conference” for his career.

YouTube shows a short video of Messiaen’s class. The date is not specified. But it was probably in the end of the 1960s (or the beginning of the 1970s). On this video one can see Messiaen teaching in the Conservatoire. We may notice his famous “friendliness,” and perhaps also the charm – and sometimes jokes – of a pedagogue.

Messiaen : “Ladies and gentlemen, dears friends, fellow citizens, please be seated.

This morning I’ve brought you Pelleas and Melisande.

What strikes you in this passage? Two things strike me instantly. There are two important words.

Pupil girl: “Far?”

Messiaen: Thank you. The word “far.” Melisande says “I’m not from here. I was born far from here. Far.” She repeats it over and over, drifting further away, as if she wouldn’t even belong to our planet, as if she would be from another world, another dimension.

Immediately Gollot makes the link, asking: “What glistens so from the depths of the water?”

What’s so extraordinary in this phrase?

Reflections in the water is one of Debussy’s works.

A pupil: Golden fish.

Messiaen: Golden fish. Yes, but all of Debussy is about watery things or shimmering things.

[Laughter.]

I am going to play it for you now. Then I shall ask you some questions.

Gollot says: “Where are you born?” (Excuse-me, I sing very badly. I have a composer’s voice.)

Melisande replies “far from here. Far. Far?”

Gollot: “What glistens so from the depths of the water?”

[Later during the lesson] Messiaen: I play both. Here is the tone by tone scale. Here is the second interpretation. This one has a much warmer color. The first is cooler. The second is warmer. Do you agree?

Do you agree on grey-violet for the first?

They always worry about the colors...

[Laughter.]

A pupil jokes: I’m colorblind.

Messiaen: This seems to me a sort of orange, but an orange with touches of blue.

A pupil: Touches of green!

Messiaen: Blue and green are cool, yes. But the orange dominates.”

Thus, at the end, Messiaen incidentally spoke about colors associated to sounds. It was his famous synesthesia. Was Messiaen looking for an impossible “synesthetic” complicity²¹ with his pupils? Or was he trying to captivate

²¹Messiaen also seemed to “promote” his faith, or his taste for astronomy, through this “distant” Melisande, distant indeed – according to the composer

these romantic teenagers with a mysterious supernatural capacity, this synesthesia?

The last pupil's remark was "touches of green." However, one may doubt this pupil was really a connoisseur of synesthesia, as Messiaen was. He might be a "sponger pupil," trying to please his teacher.

Let us take this very peculiar example to conclude, as in some kind of anecdote. This pupil seemed "charmed," perhaps even fascinated by Messiaen, or notably by Messiaen's "academic value" inside the Conservatoire. He obviously tried to *work* for his model, thus for the Conservatoire itself. And this work was a work of mediation through a confirmation (yes "touches of green"), notably as the teacher seemed to touch a difficult subject. In a way this "*soldier helped the captain*" when the latter seemed to be in a difficult position. When Messiaen (or The Conservatoire itself) spoke about colors, the pupil emphasized this topic, as if to defend a Conservatoire-related topic, even a marginal one, even not reasonable. It was finally a mediation work for the Conservatoire de Paris itself through its privileged vector – Messiaen.

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