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Robin Freeman

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## Courtesy towards the things of Nature: Interpretations of Messiaen's 'Catalogue d'oiseaux'

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(The present article began life as a review of Anatole Ugorski's recent CD recording of Messiaen's *Catalogue des Oiseaux* and its 'pendant' *La Fauvette des Jardins* (Deutsche Grammophon 439 214-2, 3-CD set), but spilled over into other areas and came to demand comparison with Peter Hill's recordings of these works on three separate discs (Unicorn Kanchana DKPCD 9062, 9075, 9090) which unaccountably escaped review in these pages at the time of their first appearance – Ed.)

Messiaen's *Catalogue d'oiseaux* is most often programmed as individual pieces: which is as it should be, since it is not a cycle like the *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus* but a collection from which to select what, and how much, one wants to play or hear at a particular time. All the more important to have complete recordings of it, so what we listen to has a consistent interpretative grain. In addition to the *style oiseau* there is of course the *style Lorient*, an essential point of reference, above all for the rendering of certain percussive effects; but, once these have become technical second nature, the margins of fantasy seem as comfortable as with any other composer. In fact what Bertrand Poirot-Delpêche calls *le paradoxe flaubertien* would seem especially applicable to music so full of precise detail: *plus les détails s'accroissent, plus il faut rêver leur sens*.

The aesthetic of the *Catalogue* is a fairly complex affair. Rudolf Zeller, writing in *Musik-Konzepte* 28, argues for a parallel with *musique concrète*, the composer recording 'material' in the field for subsequent manipulation in the 'studio'. It is an attractive argument and one that has the advantage of shielding Messiaen from the attacks of those critics who felt he was backsliding after his avant-garde phase extending from the *Cinq rechants* to the *Livre d'orgue*. It also takes into account Messiaen's benevolent curiosity about what Pierre Schaeffer and his collaborators were attempting, something that could well have led to a playful 'let's compare notes' between them. Nevertheless there is a basic difference of outlook here. The proponents of *musique concrète* from Henry to Bayle have been interested in combining the materials they collect in a disturbing way, disturbing because anti-natural,

or, to use the technical term, surreal. The idea behind this is to deconstruct everyday reality so as to open the way to something new and adventurous, often though not exclusively conceived in a social context. What prompted Messiaen was much more like what prompted Janáček, wandering about Moravia notebook at the ready, to jot down speech-rhythms and natural sounds, doubtless including birdsong. And this to fashion an 'all-purpose' style, one to be used for abstract as well as figurative works, however redolent of times and places, and able to reach what Messiaen himself called 'hidden corners of the memory'. A notion manifestly closer to Marcel Proust than to André Breton.

Another important element is the use of the changing hours of the day and night to give an overall scansion to each piece. Messiaen told Claude Samuel that it had taken him a long time to discover this principle. In fact two examples of it lay frequently under his professor's eyes, both of them from Debussy: 'De l'aube à midi . . .' from *La mer* and the gradual emergence of 'Matin d'un jour de fête' from 'Les parfums de la nuit' in *Ibéria*. With this distinction – that Debussy aims for a seamless transition with an atmosphere in constant evolution, whereas Messiaen busies himself with the articulation of his image of time, filling it with changing incident, most of it to do with weather and the kind of birds that are singing. There is a further model, literary this time: the descriptions in *Les jours et les nuits des oiseaux* by Jacques Delmain, Messiaen's ornithologist friend, master of the *Branderiaie de Gardépée* where *Le loriot* is set.

Once the *style oiseau* had abandoned the Renaissance stylization of a Jannequin (still delightfully present in *Le réveil des oiseaux* and the image, if you like, of the celestial aviary in *Oiseaux exotiques*) Messiaen set about constructing something much more like an ornithologist's *tableau vivant*: an assemblage of many birds from a single habitat to serve as an aide-memoire for the expert, as an initiation for the profane. The contrast of minute naturalistic detail with the ample sweep of wind, sea and sun Messiaen

learned in part from a musical and poetic source of crucial relevance to the *Catalogue*, the *Histoires naturelles*, Maurice Ravel's setting of prose-poems by Jules Renard.<sup>1</sup> He who has grasped the mechanism of the conclusion to *Le grillon* when the cricket, who has at last finished tidying his little house, slips out of sight just as the moon comes into view over the poplars that seem to be pointing it out like so many fingers, will be able to sort out whole passages of Messiaen's great tapestry as it unfolds.

Which brings me to a final model for the *Catalogue* which on its own would take an essay to expound, the tapestries of Jean Lurçat. 'Chez Jean Lurçat ce sont ses chouettes et ses fleurs. Chez moi ce sont mes oiseaux,' Messiaen told Brigitte Massin without however going into his composer's secrets. There was a major exhibition of Jean Lurçat's tapestries at the Trocadéro in 1958, when Messiaen was still at work on his cycle. The two artists share an inexhaustible vigour in the manipulation of highly characterized detail, a massive sense of scale, and a surehanded deployment of intensively contrasting colours. For the successful tapestry-maker this is a matter

<sup>1</sup> The *Histoires naturelles* of Jules Renard, the whole book of them and not just those set by Ravel, would also have served as inspiration for Messiaen. Renard, who carried on spending much of the year in his village of Chitry in the Nièvre even after the *tout Paris* of literary salons was open to him, had like Messiaen a countryman's shrewdness and sense of observation. The fact that his swan is on the lookout for worms (*mais qu'est-ce que je dis? Il s'engraisse comme une oie*) doesn't keep him from seeming as graceful and dreamlike as any romantic's. Delamain too understood that birds sing to attract a mate, threaten rivals and define their territory. He also knew that they sometimes sing from content, or to be in company with other birds and in response to the weather and to the time of day. There is nothing naive about Messiaen's approach to this or any other subject. In fact it would be no exaggeration to say that Messiaen in the *Catalogue* does for birds what Mussorgsky did for children in the *The Nursery*: he gives them a life of their own. Roger Nichols's otherwise valuable essay in the DGG booklet 'The true lost face of music: Messiaen's catalogue' is wrong to encourage such a view – which moreover in France, where *naïf* implies the lack of a serious professional training, would be virtually a contradiction in terms. Unfortunately, Anthony Pople's assertion, in the Unicorn-Kanchana booklet, that Messiaen's preliminary descriptions 'could have come from the pen of Berlioz' is a likeminded error. Anyone who has Berlioz's accounts of his *scappate* to Subiaco during his stay at the Villa Médicis will know that his main interest in birds was how many he could stuff into his game pouch. The truth is that more than half a century of sophisticated ornithological literature lies behind Messiaen's texts – both French and British, for Delamain is generous in his praise of Grey of Fallosen and W.H. Hudson. It is well to remember that the presiding musical genius in the Messiaen household while Olivier grew up was Charles-Marie Widor, who once wrote: 'I cannot imagine an ignorant musician. The world of the intellect is closely knit. Music has an obvious connection with painting, sculpture, architecture, drawing and with science as well.'

of necessity. He cannot reach for a finer pencil, a thinner brush, nor has he a palette on which to mix his colours. With Messiaen the limitations are freely assumed and betray an extraordinary ability to reason synaesthetically, rather than trust solely to intuition.

There are other connexions between the two artists. Lurçat, in reviving the tapestry as a modern art form, took as his point of reference the great medieval tapestry of the Apocalypse in Angers – a choice to which the author of the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* could hardly have been indifferent. And in 1942, writing from his wartime retreat of Villeneuve-lès-Avignon, Lurçat says that the smiling countryside round about fills his Frenchman's heart with a 'courtoisie pour les choses de la nature, c'est-à-dire esprit de réalité'. A willingness, therefore, to let things (and animals) have their say. For the rest readers may consult Jean Cassou's 1958 exhibition catalogue and Messiaen's own essay on Lurçat, which Yvonne Messiaen assures me is finally about to be published.

With all this as prelude, we may consider the most recent complete recording, by Anatole Ugorski, and that of Peter Hill – the latter merely part of his monumental complete Messiaen cycle. I should say straight away that both versions are monuments of research, commitment and inventive playing. The differences between them are complementary; they do not have the same strengths and weaknesses. Ugorski's pianism is typically Slavic; he does not seek chamber effects; his pedalling is more generous than Hill's though no less tasteful and precise. He can be mysterious where appropriate and explosive as well. He strives to fuse detail in broad gestures so as to give an overall sense of structural urgency. The listener is thrust into the midst of sights, sounds and impressions that he will need to sort out later. So it is not surprising to learn that Ugorski had already given the first Russian performances of *Le réveil des oiseaux* and of *Oiseaux exotiques* before he came across the score of the *Catalogue* in a friend's library.

Peter Hill's pianism is perfectly capable of any Lisztian bravura required, but he retains a sobriety, an intimacy and a tendency to understatement characteristic not just of London but of Paris as well.<sup>2</sup> One thinks of Haas and

<sup>2</sup> Not the Paris of Tournemire, however. There seems little doubt that pieces like *Les cloches de Châteauneuf du Faou*, written late in Tournemire's life after the completion of *L'orgue mystique*, were an essential prompting for Messiaen's mature piano style. Only the *Préludes-Poèmes* were given a public performance in the composer's lifetime and they, like his other piano music, have remained unpublished so it is likely that Messiaen knew this music through visits to Tournemire's home.

Perlemuter, of the spirit, if not the letter, of their interpretations of Ravel. Hill is concerned with narrative, with contemplative space, a poetic, unhurried rendering of detail that makes of the listener a detached if rapt observer able to order his vision as he is borne along. He generally favours slower tempos, which is all to the good. Anyone dealing with Messiaen's music, especially a pianist or conductor, should write on his cuffs this exchange between Xavier Darasse and the composer:

X.D.: Vous voulez donc qu'on vous joue très lentement?  
O.M.: Oui, très, très lentement.

In the one case where Ugorski's performance is substantially longer than Hill's *Le merle bleu* (13'45" as opposed to 11'35") the results are very impressive indeed. In particular the sudden fury of the waves against the sundrenched cliffs and the frenzy of birdsong that seems to cut through sea spray and the glare of reflected sunlight. Hill's version seems crabbed in comparison.

Ex.1.

Poule d'eau  
Un peu vif (♩ = 120)

*f* (piqué, pointu, très sec)      *p*      *ff* (explosif) *f*      *mf*

(sans péd.)

Vif (♩ = 180)

1 2 3

If there is space left on the above-mentioned cuffs here is another phrase to write on them, this time from Antoine Goléa's *Recontres avec Olivier Messiaen*:

O.M.: J'aime tout ce qui fait peur.

Here too the exuberance of Ugorski bears fruit. *La chouette hulotte*, *Le merle de roche* can terrify under his hands. However, in the *Catalogue* at least, slowness is not all. Some of Ugorski's quicker running times are due to more rapid bird figuration only. Which means that for the remaining eleven pieces there is much less to choose from. On the other hand there are more insidious ways to terrify. Hill's *Le courlis cendré* seems to me his strongest performance of all, with its grey colours and eerie feel of desolation. But this musical image of the other Finisterre is privileged territory for an English pianist, for which quantities of kelp-scented English music and poetry prepare him. Ugorski's rendering is too warm and too bright. But aside from these limit examples comparison is essentially a connoisseur's pastime, leading to a double appreciation because, and not in spite of, the distinctions to be made.

May a single example suffice to give readers a

glimpse of what is in store for them. *La bouscarle* seems a good choice, the more so because its birds can all be sighted in Surrey and because the Charenton is a wind in the willows sort of river. Never mind that the Martin pêcheur (*nous n'avons pas d'oiseau plus éclatant*) is the real protagonist. The merchant of Venice, after all, is Antonio and not Shylock. *La bouscarle* is as close to an idyll, a pastoral, as anything in the *Catalogue*. The river is obliging: *calme et chantante* Messiaen describes it. But birds will be birds even in a setting like this, and a glance through the composer's mise-en-scène reveals: *une voix éclate avec violence*, petite Fauvette *rageuse* (bouscarle); la poule d'eau *caquette*; quelques *cris aigus* (martin pêcheur); incantations *rythmées* (*grive musicienne*); *attaques auréolées* (huppe); *traits incisifs* (rossignol); *râchement, râle* (gênets = scraping, rattling of broom pods); *bruissements suraigus* (hirondelle de rivage); ponctuation *brutale* (bouscarle), and finally la bouscarle *explose*.

The poule d'eau does its cackling directly after the bouscarle's opening explosion (Ex.1):

Hill's reading is straightforward in terms of the notation but Ugorski, who is always on the lookout for larger groupings, makes the second bar of the example curiously unstable – a sort of pivot between bouscarle and martin-pêcheur. Anecdotally it is as if the moorhen were clucking to itself for a moment before getting on with its public outburst. When this passage returns at the end of the piece the dynamics remain the same: *f ff*. But this time Messiaen adds a figure at the beginning and fuses bars 2 and 3 by suppressing the rest. There follows not (as after Ex.1) the cry of the martin-pêcheur but a further 'explosion' from the bouscarle which gives the whole passage a stretto-like intensity. Thus in the Ugorski version the greater regularity of the *p* figure in its final context is structurally revealing.

#### References

- Zeller, H.R., 'Messiaen und kritische Universalität' in *Musik-Konzepte* 28.
- Renard, Jules, *Histoires naturelles*. Garnier-Flammarion, 1967.
- Delamain, Jacques, *Les Jours et les nuits des oiseaux*. Paris, 1932; English translation by Marie Schlumberger, London 1933. Delamain's books are currently being reprinted in France.



Ex.6

Once again neither pianist takes Ex.6 (très lent) slow enough. I have singled it out to call attention to a curious detail: Ugorski gives far more weight to the anticipatory B $\flat$  than the text implies, for reasons that escape me. Hill plays it in perfect conformity with what follows.

Ex.7

The nightingale (Ex.7) has a page entirely to itself. Hill treats it as a longish episode, Ugorski as a sort of cadenza . . . Neither reading is sufficiently *lointain(e) et lunaire* – the one bird description that calls for radically different treatment. (Though be it said in passing that Hill's hirondelle des rivages achieves a kind of poetry that Ugorski seldom strives for.)

Ex.8

Music examples 1-3, 4-8 © copyright by Alphonse Leduc Editions Musicales

Finally (Ex.8) it is Hill who takes pains to assume the dive of the martin-pêcheur into the structure of the concluding phrase group. He is doubly right to do so, since it is a new descriptive element tucked in at the last moment to give a sense of freshness.

*La fauvette des jardins* would take a separate review to do it justice. It is much further from the pieces in the *Catalogue* than at first appears. The

key to this music is 'l'ombre grandiose du souvenir' which includes the composer's memories of the *Catalogue* itself and the days in which he wrote it. As with the characters that hover about Goethe in the prologue to the second *Faust*, it is as if this time the birds have come to sing to Maître Olivier in his retreat in the Dauphiné. Musically the great innovation is a sort of neoromanesque counterpoint in the long duets, not unrelated to French baroque organ music – ultimate triumph of the visions of Charles-Marie Widor. In Peter Hill's version the changing sky, the slow decline into twilight and darkness are more calmly tangible. Ugorski projects the sublimity of the mountain landscape – his touch is almost mineral here – and the engulfing shadows that reach out towards the last strands of daylight.

Beyond these details of comparison lies a fundamental question. Is the marriage of music and narrative in the *Catalogue* such as to demand something no comparable collection of pieces written at a single stretch requires? A rethinking of the basic approach in terms of touch, dynamic range and the rest for each single piece? One certainty remains, however. Peter Hill's will be the last 'authorized version' by those still able to make the pilgrimage to rue Marcadet when both Messiaens were there to give advice. Ugorski and his private scores written in three colours without accidentals marks the entry of the *Catalogue d'oiseaux* into the common patrimony of pianists wherever they be who have the energy and imagination to interpret it.

#### A CONCLUDING DEFENSE OF THE NIGHTINGALE

Eleonore Büning, doing quixotic battle with Audubon calendars and Harz Mountain canaries in the DG programme booklet,\*

tries her best to demythologize the nightingale, taking as her point of departure a misinterpreted passage from an essay by Messiaen. 'Their song is limited, monotonous and always the same and the

\* Büning, Eleonore, 'Ein Vogel ist mehr als ein Vogel. einige Anmerkungen zum Surrealismus im *Catalogue d'oiseaux*' in DGG booklet; replaced in the English notes by Roger Nichols's essay 'The True Last Face of Music'.

composer didn't think much of it'. The truth is that Messiaen gave a privileged place to the nightingale all his life long – from the amorous colloquies of *Le reveil des oiseaux*, through *L'alouette lulu* of the *Catalogue* (that dialogue between heaven and earth as represented by the lark and the nightingale), to the portrayal of the Last Supper in the *Livre du Saint Sacrement* where the nightingale, bird of the Passion, begins to sing outside the window as it will sing through the night on the Mount of Olives. Even without special knowledge or training anyone who has listened to nightingales will know that they vary their song according to other birds they are singing with, and that they will even on occasion imitate other species. In addition to Machado's nightingales in the thickets by the river below Soria, Almeida Carrett's on the moist slopes above Santarem, Tasso's which sang to him in his madness on the Janiculum, [Euripides' (and Seferis') telling soldiers in Egypt and Platres that Troy fell for nothing, Ed.] and Coleridge's in the back gardens on the Highgate end of Hampstead Heath: none of them sing in the same way. In fact as *L'Alouette lulu* suggests, the nightingale is more of an actor than a singer. The eloquent meanderings of its recitation sprinkled with *parlando* and *sotto voce* effects have had an influ-

ence on the development of informal prosody, first in the Middle Ages and again in the Pre-romantic and Romantic periods. It has become part and parcel of high culture in the West.

Beyond Büning's judgement however lies another attempt to free Messiaen from accusations of kitsch and naiveté associated with the representation of birdsong in music, here through a frank appeal to surrealism. The historical side to her argument is on shaky ground. Thus she claims Jannequin does not transcend baroque convention, Rameau is the victim of a philosophy (shades of Gilbert Ryle) that pits the world of man against the world of nature. This is to deny the daimonic element in *Le rappel des oiseaux*, and its influence both on Messiaen's *Le reveil des oiseaux* and on his *Cinq Rechants*, and to overlook the symbolic character of Renaissance thought. As for the author of the admirably Cartesian *Traité de l'harmonie*, one must not forget that he wrote some of the most sublime storm and hunt music of the 18th century, which stands in direct connexion with Berlioz, Debussy and Messiaen himself. Lurçat's notion of courtesy is the governing idea of the *Catalogue d'oiseaux* – a refusal to allow the transforming power of art to do ultimate violence to those things of nature which it transforms.

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