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120 deçi-tâlas and a list of the complete Messiaen birds in Latin, French and English with references to the works in which they appear.

The opening chapter disposes of the biographical details as quickly as etiquette allows so that on the fifth page we are already into the building blocks of Messiaen's style (sections on harmony, melody and form) in preparation for the early works in Chapter Three. Before a discussion of the organ works of the late 1930s, a chapter on rhythm and one on Christianity and symbolism broaden further the stylistic base. Thereafter all is chronological: the early song cycles, the war years, Messiaen and the Tristan myth (*Harawi Turangalîla, Cinq Rechants*) and the 'experimental' period (1949-51). A chapter on birdsong and the first birdsong works takes us to the longest chapter, on the *Catalogue d'Oiseaux*, then on to the present with four pages of historical perspective to round off.

Analysis of style and individual works is at the heart of Johnson's book. He wants to show how Messiaen's music ticks, to explain the stylistic influences and their absorption and to elucidate in some detail the ingredients and forms of major works. This works very well up to the music of the 50s. Messiaen's own *Technique de Mon Langage Musical* provides the basic reference and, furthermore, discussion of works can proceed along traditional syntactic lines, allowing for the various original shifts and emphases in Messiaen's personal use of his own Western cultural heritage, his absorbing of more exotic cultural influences (Greek metre and Indian talas) and the musico-visual aspects of nature.

It is after the works of the 'experimental' period that Messiaen's language responds less successfully to Johnson's incisions. The analysis of *Réveil des Oiseaux*, for instance, produces a rather malformed chicken out of an uncomfortably hybrid egg. The sections of the work unveil an agglomerate of terms: cadenza, strophe, refrain, episode, codetta and coda, which Johnson maps out in a superimposition of three forms: Binary I (a fairly straight binary), Binary II (a sort of sonata form) and an arch form. But, we are told, in considering each form separately we must disregard certain sections (shaded out in the form scheme) which do not apply to all three forms. To get an arch you must forget about the final refrain. To find Binary I leave out Refrain 2 of Tutti II, the episode of Tutti IV and Cadenza VI. And if you want Binary II omit the introduction, Cadenzas II, IV, V and VI and the episode of Tutti IV. The obvious conclusion is that the form is not a superimposition of Binaries I, II and an arch. So much for the dangers of looking at scores from traditional angles. If the cap doesn't fit, don't try to squeeze the head inside. And if you need three mutilated caps to take care of one head, then you need another cap.

Even the setting out of the material is not correct. Messiaen, in his introduction to the score of *Réveil des Oiseaux*, identifies four piano cadenzas. Johnson finds six. We can concede him one extra to make five: the piano passage which introduces the dawn chorus, although it is significant that Messiaen looks upon this as the first entry of the dawn chorus rather than a piano section per se. We cannot, however, concede the second cadenza at Fig. 6. If we did, we should also have to throw in a passage of similar short length at Fig. 9 to make a seventh cadenza. These two shorter passages are not divisive like the cadenzas proper, but are merely part of instrumental ensemble sections. By way of side effect, this inaccurate identification of cadenzas crumbles the symmetry of Johnson's arch. Finally, Johnson does not note the 'Réveil' itself at Fig. 13, an event of some importance considering the title. It is a new section. Both the new material, the instrumentation, the composer and, most important of all, our ears tell us it is.

The *Catalogue d'Oiseaux* receives more space than any other work in the book, and therefore demands detailed discussion. In addition, Sherlaw Johnson's treatment of it will focus attention on analytical problems and attitudes in general. This chapter contains a general introduction to each piece, a classification of birdsong and non-birdsong material, a section on structure and a table for each of the 13 pieces setting out the musical material ("group structure") and form.

The elaboration of the musical material used in the work is comprehensive and useful (one can, indeed, say this of all the discussions of individual works in this book). The analytical procedure, however, is of doubtful value in getting to grips with the mechanism of the *Catalogue*. Johnson chooses parameters and arranges them in a series of continua: tempo (fast — slow), dynamic (loudest — softest), texture (most dense — least dense), register (high — low), rhythm (very seldom mentioned) and degree of dissonance. Each group of musical material (types of birdsong, colour chords etc.) therefore appears in Johnson's tables as a "continuum of varying characteristics which will vary according to the parameter chosen". The continua/parameters which provide the points of contact among musical materials are summarised in each table under the term 'mode'. We can agree with Johnson that

MESSIAEN, by Robert Sherlaw Johnson
Dent, 1975 (£6.95)

MESSIAEN, by Roger Nichols
(OXFORD STUDIES OF COMPOSERS series)
Oxford University Press, 1975 (£2.50)

DENIS SMALLEY

A musician writing the first substantial book on a contemporary composer has a dual responsibility. Merely because it is the first, many look to its analyses and judgements as a basis for their own opinions, listening and further study. Secondly, the study of an important composer will inevitably touch on contemporary music in general, a sweaty arena where perceptive, published thought is rare. Robert Sherlaw Johnson's book on Messiaen is the first attempt at an in-depth examination of this composer's music. A first thumbthrough uncovers three indexes: Messiaen's works, works by other composers and a general index; and three invaluable appendices: a chronological list of works, a table of the

usually weak parameters like register and intensity can be strong unifying factors, *perhaps* holding a piece together, if indeed it needs to be held together by them for want of any other means. But what is more doubtful to my ears and eyes is whether this explanation is correctly elucidated or, more fundamentally, correctly conceived in the first place.

On reaching the book's final chapter we find a parallel drawn between the Johnsonian continua analysis and the use of continua by Stockhausen in *Gesang der Jünglinge*. Stockhausen, of course, is using a conscious, step-by-step scale of relationships to create points of contact between electronic sound and a boy's voice as a basis for organising the detail of his musical material. The *Catalogue d'Oiseaux* continua are Johnson's, not Messiaen's; they are not consciously syntactic and they are too vague and eclectic to explain why and how Messiaen's music works.

In travelling on from Messiaen's concept of mode in the *Mode de Valeurs et d'Intensités*, Johnson stretches the term to take in all the continua of all parameters, so that we now have a mode of parameters and continua. But what 'mode' really turns out to be is a general description to the left of each group structure table summarising what he considers to be important unifying factors in each piece. For *La Chouette Hulotte* for example: "suggestions of A minor, harsh sustained dissonance — all birds are of Group I(a)." Could we not dispense with this 'mode', an unnecessary, forced concept? We could probably use it to embark on a generalised gallop through the music of other composers — indeed, the whole of music history — creating such 'modes' on all sides.

Johnson's purpose in creating such modes and continua is to explain how Messiaen's music hangs together. But because of their general character they cannot do this on their own. Neither does a form scheme tell us the answer unaided: a symphony does not cohere because a first subject is joined to a second by a transitional passage. It is the more detailed syntax of the language which gives the answers. In discussing a contemporary composer whose syntax is not universal property, we must obviously delve into details which we might take for granted in a more traditional composer. In Messiaen's earlier works we can rely on traditional notions of melody, harmony and rhythm, but in his later works we

cannot. When the basic *values* of a syntactic system have changed, we must of necessity examine them. The most important value shift in Messiaen's sound is that of timbre: the stretching of concepts of pitch and harmony towards sound masses of greater or lesser complexity, and one step further to *musical objects*. This means an orientation away from the score towards the ear: a musical object does not always sound as it looks on the page, and many of Johnson's faulty diagnoses spring from this problem. This more progressive development in Messiaen's style is not satisfactorily explained by a continuum of degrees of dissonance, at once too general and too narrow a view. In fact, if one uses the concept of the musical object as an analytical tool, it means that discussions about degrees of dissonance are no longer adequate.

On a more detailed level, we can find the beginnings of answers to Messiaen's syntactic coherence back in his earlier works, in the technical device of the appoggiatura ("anacrusis - stress - désinence"), in rhythmic elements (various classes of repeated figures, tremolando, uses of silence of articulation), in the formal principle of varied repetition and in the growth of melodies away from intervals towards contours and noise shapes. If we were to enlarge this tentative syntactic list throughout Messiaen's works, we would find characteristics which cut across the seemingly disparate musical material, which explain the confluence of disparities and in fact eliminate many of them. Sherlaw Johnson does not ignore these elements. He mentions and rementions them all in various corners of his book, but never uses them in analysis; nor is he able to tie them together in a coherent picture of Messiaen's later music.

The final general problem in Johnson's analyses is the question of time and proportion. We sometimes have the largest proportions of a work laid out, but never the proportions of sections one to another, never in other words the *interior* proportions. So in the string of letters which make up a form scheme of refrains, strophes, couplets, interpolations or interludes, the same letter can often represent both a bar and a page of music: the timing of musical events is of such great importance to the workings of music that it cannot be pushed aside. But the measured proportions of time are not the only temporal concept at work in music: the passing of real

Messiaen ROBERT SHERLAW JOHNSON

A full-length assessment of one of the most significant and individual composers of the twentieth century. Robert Sherlaw Johnson gives an account of the composer's life and early influences, and discusses his music in detail. '... factual exposition and a neat summing up of Messiaen's position in the history of music.' Martin Cooper *The Daily Telegraph* £6.95

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time can be suspended by the nature of the musical language. Messiaen's language is well known for this and Johnson, of course, does not ignore it, though it never enters analytical discussion as it should.

Were we able to accept the analysis of the *Catalogue d'Oiseaux*, the number of errors in the form tables exceeds the bounds of permissible human fallibility. I list the more obvious faults in three of the pieces:

'Le Lorient': Strophes H-H-H-E-A-E should be H-H-H-A-E-A. There is no footnote for the asterisk.

'Le Merle Bleu': Introduction i/H/g/A should be i/H/g/A/E. It is fairly impossible to tell where the introduction ends and Couplet I begins.

Second couplet A+g should be A+g-F.

c missing between fourth couplet and the coda.

The "résonance des parois rocheuses" needs separate classification.

'Le Traquet Rieur': Strophe I:D-C-E/D-A-E/D-A-D-B should be D-C-E/D-A-E-A-D-B or more simply D-C-E/D/A-B.

A full key to preface the tables would have helped. The reader needs to know without having to undertake research that a dash indicates succession, an oblique stroke indicates interchange and a plus sign indicates simultaneity. To be consistent, the order of entries in a section containing simultaneity should be maintained. The use of the word 'group' is confusing. It refers in this chapter to classification of bird material, non-bird material and also to a "musical unit" characterised by parameter combinations.

Musical analysis is double-pronged: it can elucidate the composer's compositional process and it can examine the ways music works by studying the notation *and* the sound, always with the aim of increasing the depth of understanding in the listener. Robert Sherlaw Johnson does a first class job in elucidating the composer's thought processes: the breakdowns of permutations, the use of birdsong, the complexities of the *deçi-tâlas*, the impact of Christianity or the Tristan myth, for example. But the consistently inadequate investigation into detailed syntax, interior proportion, real and psychological time and his tendency to analyse later works in too traditional a manner, sometimes misjudging basic analytical criteria often without listening to the evidence of the ear, are the serious drawbacks of the book.

In the light of my comments on analysis, I inevitably find the final chapter on historical placing a disappointment. We have a summary of Messiaen's descendancy, an attack on critics of his sectional forms, relationships drawn with the serialists, tenuous ties with Boulez and Stockhausen, a beautiful non sequitur about ring modulation and unnecessary mentions of Goehr (who was a Messiaen pupil) and Birtwistle and Maxwell Davies (who weren't).

Although I have spent most of my space in attacking Johnson's analyses and in looking at two works (only because these days analysis can so often be useless and misguided), I should not like readers to think I judge the good and bad in the book by the proportions of space I have devoted to each. Sherlaw Johnson's book is a mixture of good scholarship, perceptive comment, useful information and their antitheses. It is invaluable for anyone interested in Messiaen, but must be read with caution. In considering the dual responsibilities towards Messiaen and towards contemporary music in general, it is disappointing to report only partial success.

Roger Nichols' book on Messiaen is the latest in the Oxford Studies of Composers series, which aims at presenting a concise study for the less specialised reader. This kind of book makes unique demands on a writer: he must have a first class, full knowledge of the composer's music, be able to extract the quintessential and express it succinctly.

Nichols trots chronologically from work to work, introducing Messiaen's ideas according to each work's emphases, a labyrinthine experience which relies too much on the reader's deftness at selecting relevant stylistic information expertly enough to reconstitute a coherent, reliable view at the end. The presentation is, therefore, too muddled both for a study of Messiaen and for the needs of the reader of the Oxford Series. The relentless adherence to a prose-style presentation, though the most traditional procedure, is not always the clearest way of expressing ideas: a look at Johnson's book proves the advantages of deviation from paragraphed prose.

There is a liberal sprinkling of musical illustrations, rather unnecessarily generous for the earlier works; for some works no important point seems to be made by the quotation. Except for an excerpt from *Turangalila*, all orchestral works are quoted in reduction, which may save space but can so easily give a misguided impression of the actual sound, where very often that sound in itself is of prime importance.

The major drawback to the book lies in the personal inadequacies of the author, revealed in his extramusical analogies and in his attitude towards the creative process and music history. First, a childlike naivety permeates the language of extramusical description:

"Messiaen certainly takes beautiful advantage of the construction of the piano in the timing and placing of the low octave A. 'Sons impalpables' indeed." (Equally naive as a musical idea.)

"In this piece we can almost feel the effort with which Christ drags himself out of the mire of the world to join his Father in heaven." 'Prière du Christ montant vers son Père' from *L'Ascension*.)

Secondly, Nichols lives with hangups about the interaction and use of numbers and proportions in music (one could write a long history on the subject) and the perpetuation of the distorted myth concerning the separation of 'inspiration' and intellect in the compositional process. Many passages in the book read like pure biblical Hollywood:

"Of Messiaen's heart there has never been any doubt, and from its wholeness and oneness springs the unity of style. But in that unity there are many mansions, each one furnished differently according to the interactions of his heart with his no less active head."

"This desire of the heart is now brought under control by the head and allied to the 'charm of impossibilities'." (Non-retrogradable rhythm in the *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps*.)

"... *Regard du Temps*, where the heart and the head take turns."

"The layout of the seven pieces is a clear embodiment of the composer's head/heart dichotomy." (*Livre d'Orgue*.)

Thirdly, the spectre of traditional tonality seems to pursue Nichols in an unhealthy manner:

"... some respect at least for traditional tonality ..."

"... good old-fashioned tonality."

"... the sort of passage that has caused pain to those devotees of the modern music for whom the perfect cadence is an obscenity."

"... now the unashamed glory of pure major triads ..."

It should be emphasised that these quoted extracts are by no means isolated selections from Nichols' book, and it would be possible to elaborate on such recurring attitudes and see how they must adversely affect any discussion of Messiaen's music, must injure analysis (if not prevent it) and encourage reactionary approaches inappropriate to Messiaen's music and contemporary music as a whole. But to do this would draw unsolicited attention to a book which is best ignored. At the very least it should not be administered to the kind of reader for whom it was intended.