An Analysis of Schoenberg's and Messiaen's Selected Solo Piano Pieces

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Painting Nature with Sound

and the reality of sounds around us. Equipped with high technology devices, composers are able to obtain or synthesise sound samples and apply them into their compositions, and from the beginning of 20th century, electronic music has presented a new path for composers to venture into. This eliminates many of the difficulties of obtaining and incorporating nature's sounds into a piece of work, but certainly, the use of nature sound in composition are not as transparent as they were in previous years, since composer's sensitivity of the sound quality are challenged, taking account of different composers' organisations and styles of writing.

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992), the French composer, was considered one of the most important 20th century composers who have been through the era when electronic music and the musique concrète were in progress. Despite the use of musique concrète in some of his major works such as the well-acknowledged Turangaliïa (1948), electronic music is considered far less important to Messiaen in comparison with his contemporaries such as Edgar Varèse, Karlheinz Stockhausen (Messiaen's student), Steve Reich and others. Messiaen's宗旨 in portraying natural elements become apparent in his later works, in which his method resounds of a completely organic and natural method without any aid of electronic equipment. However, the idea of birdsong can be seen to have developed throughout his earlier works, which are bound to his Catholic faith and the great mystic subject of Tristan and Isolde.

In this article, the Catalogue d'oiseaux will be used as a primary example of Messiaen's birdsong works due to its distinctiveness in length (the whole cycle of thirteen movements taking approximately 2½ hours) and written for a solo piano work. Each movement features a solo birdsong together with other subsidiary birdsong and depictions of landscapes as observed by the composer at different chosen places in France. What is interesting about Messiaen's birdsong writing is how the composer contains birdsong elements together with other nature depictions through his music, not only by employing a completely organic process to transcribe birdsong with his hearing and musical ability, but to the source of using a single instrument, the piano. The organic process in this context refers to the transcriptions made by the composer at a chosen date, place and time, and this is aided by the fact that he was equipped with knowledge in ornithology which was culminated from his meeting with Jacques Delattre in 1952. The emphasis of Messiaen's transcription is that these birdsons were transferred from an individual auditory system into a written musical notation. Other than using a tape recorder to assist the composer in transcribing
Chapter 5

Considering Nature Factors in Messiaen’s
Selected Solo Piano Pieces

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Time and Day

Some important nature factors, such as the structure of time and the cycle of the day had not been sidestepped by Messiaen in his birdsong works. What Messiaen intends is to transfer his view at a particular time and place to his work. But how effective are these subjects presented to listeners? The verbal indications give considerable information with regard to the composer’s intention, and these indications become part of the notation whereby performers are required to know throughout the score. For Messiaen, the structure of time has become one of the ways to construct a work together with the birdsong phrases or passages. In other words, it serves not only as a material but also as a connection to accommodate all subjects.
Chapter 6

Movement and Spatial Elements in Birdsong

One of the most striking features of some of Messiaen’s music is that it makes one conscious that everything in it is within a context of something bigger. There is the sound behind the sound, the longer duration behind the shorter one, the slower rhythm behind the quicker one. And behind all movements there is an awareness of stillness, behind all sound an awareness of silence, and behind all measured time an awareness of eternity (Armfield, 1955 p.857).

One interesting example of symmetry is found in the mode de valeurs from ‘La claire est la nuit’ that presents the major, creating the slightest emotion with unstable accents dynamic, together with unpredictable rhythms that appear in the three voices. The whole device of mode de valeurs that originated from the mode de valeurs et d’intervalle (1949) could form the primary topic for discussion as it has tremendous influence on composers such as Stockhausen.

The focus here, however, is to concentrate on the dynamic arrangement which marks one of the modes that forms the mode passage. In this mode passage, one dynamic level is stated by two different tones, except for the two pivot notes – D#, which is ppp and the loudest note – A, which is ff (Figure 1). All these dynamics are fixed regardless of different registers.

Accordingly, the most contrasting dynamic can be achieved with the tritone interval A – D#. Notes which are closer, for example, in semitones, give less dynamic contrast on both sides of the mode. The contrast of the dynamic increases according to the distance of the interval. However, it is interesting to note that after a certain degree of interval, for instance, A to D# onwards, the dynamic contrast will again gradually become less pronounced due to the effect of the symmetrical arrangement. For example: A to Bb – interval 3, is inverted, it will become interval 7 which matches the above statement that closer intervals have less dynamic contrast.

Figure 1

| A | G# | E | F# | F | E | D# | D | C# | C | B | Bb | A |
|---|----|---|----|---|---|-----|---|----|---|---|----|   |
| ff | f  | mf | p  | pp | pp | ppp | pp | mf | f  | ff | ff |   |

Symmetry and Palindrome

Elements of symmetry and palindrome in nature are strongly focused on in Messiaen’s birdsong works. Bartók’s view regarding Bartók’s nature music theme thus reveals that Messiaen is not less different, as he explains that ‘One of the ways to introduce the terms into the musical domain is to discover the laws of organic growth, the patterns and symmetries found in leaves, sunflowers and sea shells, in the temporal proportions of a composition’ (Bartok, 1965, p. 319). Superimposition and juxtaposition of materials has long been identified as one of Messiaen’s discursive grids regardless of the use of subjects or harmonies. Zooming from the outer surface, the palindromic pattern has formed the order of the thirteen movements in Catalogue d’oiseaux (they are categorized in seven books: 3 1 2 1 2 1 3); zooming in we will notice some movements in which subjects are arranged symmetrically, and further to the assertion that material used to form a particular subject is constructed based on these patterns. As Armfield wrote: