Messiaen as Orchestrator

Christopher Dingle

Messiaen was primarily an orchestral composer. An odd assertion, perhaps, for someone who wrote so much distinctive music for piano, organ and the voice. Nonetheless, it is not merely that the orchestra was a clear focus through much of his career, but also that an orchestral mindset pervades much of Messiaen's solo and chamber music as well. His music implies the capabilities and range of timbre associated with a large ensemble, so that even with the blank canvass of a piano, the instrument should, for instance, sound like a French horns in one phrase, bells in another and a xylophone in yet another.[1] Messiaen's consideration of timbre hand-in-hand with pitch and rhythm essentially meant that he was implicitly orchestrating his music even when no orchestra was involved. This chapter explores some of the key traits of Messiaen's approach to orchestrating, a task that inevitably also considers his treatment of individual instruments.

Like many of his compatriots, Messiaen 'composed' a two or three stave score which he then 'orchestrated', often at a later stage, to produce a full score. Even as late as *Saint François d'Assise,* the programme note delineates the 'composition' and 'orchestration' into the periods 1975–9 and 1979–83 respectively.[2] However, composing and orchestrating were far more integrated for Messiaen than those distinct phases suggest, as is clear from an exchange with Claude Samuel:

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[1] See, for instance, *Vingt regards sur l'enfant-Jésus*, 'Regard de l'Esprit de joie', p. 63, and 'Noël', pp. 90 and 91.

[2] Olivier Messiaen, 'Saint François d'Assise', liner note for Cybélia recording of *Saint François d'Assise*, CY833/6, p. 3.

> **CS:** When composing a work, you immediately think of the timbres you'll choose; I meant to say, you're not content to write a work at the piano and to orchestrate it the second time around.
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> **OM:** That way of writing music, in two separate stages, was possible in Rossini's era, but it's absolutely unthinkable today when orchestration is closely tied to composition.[3]

Throughout his career, Messiaen usually composed harmonies and melodies at the piano,[4] something that is readily apparent from the way that the majority of his music falls comfortably under two hands in reduction. Messiaen identified his own pianism as being orchestral, 'turning the piano into a mock orchestra with a large palette of timbres and accents', attributing this to the numerous transcriptions he played as a child.[5] The piano's 'lack of personality' made it 'conducive to the pursuit of timbres',[6] while his use of 'artificial

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[3] Claude Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color – Conversations with Claude Samuel*, trans. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus 1994), p. 53. Originally published as *Olivier Messiaen: Musique et couleur - nouveaux entretiens avec Claude Samuel* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1986).

[4] Peter Hill, 'Interview with Yvonne Loriod' in Peter Hill (ed.), *The Messiaen Companion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 285.

[5] Samuel, *Music and Color*, pp. 113–14.

[6] Samuel, *Music and Color*, p. 55.

resonances' stemmed from experimenting at the organ, notably using mixture stops in isolation.[7]

The centrality of orchestral music to Messiaen's thinking is clear from the sequence of works he wrote at the start of his career. In successive years he wrote the 'symphonic meditation' *Les Offrandes oubliées* (1930), *Le Tombeau resplendissant* (1931) and *Hymne au Saint-Sacrement* (1932), crowning these achievements with the four-movement *L'Ascension* (1932–3). To these might also be added various student works such as *Jésus* (c. 1928) and *Le Banquet Eucharistique* (c.1928). Given the amount of work involved in writing a full orchestral score, it is striking that none of these pieces was written in response to a commission. Much easier gains could have been made from solo and chamber works, with a greater prospect of performance. Much later, even when using chorus in *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur, Jésus-Christ* (1965–9), the sense is of the voices being an extension of the orchestra. Similarly, despite vocal soloists and chorus, the vast orchestra drives the music *Saint François*, conveying what is only implicit in the relatively succinct libretto.

Unsurprisingly, Messiaen's orchestra in the works from the 1930s is essentially the same as that of his teacher, Paul Dukas, with triple woodwind, four horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba,[8] timpani, percussion and strings. Having gathered this sizeable orchestra, Messiaen's willingness to leave the winds and percussion idle for extended periods in these early works, including the entire last movement of *L'Ascension*, shows a remarkable confidence. That he is prepared to omit the strings during *L'Ascension*'s opening movement is even more startling. This is an early example of orchestration being used symbolically, the outer movements reflecting different aspects of Christ, the alpha and omega. Messiaen would

[7] Samuel, *Music and Color*, p. 56.

[8] *Hymne au Saint-Sacrement* omits tuba.

return to this specific approach nearly sixty years later in *Éclairs sur l'Au-Delà…* (1987–91), his final completed orchestral work. In this case the subtle addition of a trinity of quietly trilling triangles to the final movement, 'Le Christ, lumière du Paradis' ensures every section of the orchestra contributes to representing Christ's totality.

Messiaen's willingness to concentrate on a single orchestral family or even a single sonority is a recurrent trope of his orchestration. It is most obvious when percussion is the focus, whether in the machinations of 'Turangalîla II' from *Turangalîla-Symphonie* (1946–8), the opening to each 'Récit Évangélique' movement in *La Transfiguration* or the tam tam and gong rolls in *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* (1964), but the combination of percussion and unison brass in 'Les sept Anges aux sept trompettes' from *Éclairs* is no less striking. At the heart of the following movement, 'Et Dieu essuiera toutes larme de leurs yeux…', 127 players fall silent for half-a-minute while a blackbird is heard on a lone flute. This tendency is most pronounced with the three solo movements in *Des canyons aux étoiles…* (1971–4). The two for piano might be regarded as mere extensions of the prominent solo writing for Yvonne Loriod, but placing the extensive horn piece 'Appel interstellaire' at the heart of *Des canyons* is audacious. If such moments grab the attention, Messiaen's omission of his ten double basses in *Éclairs* until the eighth movement is equally notable.

Despite the bold approach to the outer movements of *L'Ascension*, Messiaen's early orchestral writing shows a clear lineage stretching back to the 19th century, not just Dukas, but also Ravel, Debussy and Berlioz, along with Stravinsky's early ballets. In essence, Messiaen's orchestration in the 1930s is typically late-Romantic. Like his teacher, Messiaen never used saxophone, presumably as it was associated too closely with the jazz he detested. Nonetheless, there are two significant differences between Dukas and his young apprentice. First, at this stage, Messiaen's percussion section is more modest; bass drum, cymbals, triangle and, in *Le Tombeau resplendissant*, tambourine, with no tuned percussion beyond the

timpani. A more surprising omission, given its celestial connotations, is the harp. Aside from a token handful of notes within one of his Prix de Rome submissions, where its inclusion was presumably a requirement, Messiaen shunned the instrument throughout his career. Boulez's extensive use of harp confirms that it is compatible with post-tonal writing, so Messiaen's avoidance of an instrument intrinsic to French orchestration is a puzzle. Did he have a bad experience as a student? Alternatively, he may have felt the instrument was too closely associated with the Romantic orchestra. That appears to have been the conclusion he reached about the timpani. Their emphatic grounding of the harmony disappears from his scores after *L'Ascension*. While the addition of numerous new sounds catches the ear, the orchestral sound of mature Messiaen and its distinctiveness from the pre-war era is defined at least as much by the absence of timpani.

Nonetheless, Messiaen's orchestral works are notable for the accretion of various non-traditional instruments notably in the form of metallic and tuned percussion. He was not the first to use gongs, tam tams or cymbals, but his inclusion of several of each was distinctive, incorporating the sounds reminiscent of gamelan and other non-western musics in his orchestra. As can be seen from **Table ?.1**, tam-tam first appears in the orchestral version of *Poèmes pour Mi* (1937), but there is a substantial expansion in the post-War works, reaching a zenith in *La Transfiguration* with seven assorted cymbals, seven gongs and three tam-tams. Their use also progresses from simply modifying the texture to becoming a distinct musical feature. The incorporation of metallic tuned instruments from *Trois petites Liturgies de la présence Divine* (1943–4) onwards is also a significant factor in the qualitative difference in percussion writing from the pre-War works. Boulez acknowledged Messiaen as 'the first composer to give the vibraphone an independent place in the orchestra' and recalled the

amazement among the *maître*'s students prompted by its inclusion in *Trois petites Liturgies*.[9] First introduced in *Turangalîla*, tubular bells became even more fundamental to Messiaen's mature soundworld, appearing in every work from *Chronochromie* (1959–60) onwards, culminating in his using three sets for *Éclairs*. Tubular bell themes are a recurrent feature of the sketches for *Éclairs*, revealing that Messiaen originally intended them to provide a gentle carillon throughout the central slow movement for strings, 'Demeurer dans l'Amour'.[10]

By contrast, Messiaen's predilection for cencerros (chromatically-tuned cowbells) was relatively short-lived. They have increasingly prominent roles in *Sept Haïkaï* (1962) and *Couleur de la cité céleste* (1963), culminating in *Et exspecto* (1964) where they are a pervasive feature, even intoning the Easter antiphon. After this, they disappear from Messiaen's scores. Emerging around the same time as cencerros, the combination of two or three members of the xylophone family provided an equally distinctive, yet more enduring sonority. *Réveil des oiseaux* (1953) and *Oiseaux exotiques* (1955–6) both feature a single xylophone, but in almost every work from *Chronochromie* onwards, it is paired with one or both of xylorimba and marimba.[11] This is not merely a matter of having lower notes available, but the advent of a key musical fingerprint from Messiaen's later scores: xylos in simultaneous rapid passages, usually of birdsong. They play in rhythmic unison, but use inexact doublings of pitch, the notes being a seventh or ninth (sometimes a tritone) from each other rather than a pure octave (or perfect fifth). Although the material is different on every

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[9] Pierre Boulez, *Orientations - Collected Writings*, trans. Martin Cooper (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 160.

[10] Messiaen Archive, Bibliothèque nationale de France, RES VMA 1488(8), p. 21.

[11] Xylorimbas usually encompass most of a xylophone's register with additional lower notes. In practice, Messiaen's xylorimba parts generally fall within a xylophone's register.

occasion, the trinity of xylos is essentially an *idée fixe* of *Saint François*, opening the opera and returning on numerous occasions thereafter. The opera is also notable for featuring three ondes Martenots. Although not the first composer to use it, the solo parts in *Trois petites Liturgies* and, especially, *Turangalîla* made Maurice Martenot's idiosyncratic electronic instrument almost synonymous with Messiaen.[12] That being the case, it is striking that the ondes Martenot was absent from his scores for three decades, and did not return after *Saint François*.

Of the vast amount of indeterminately-pitched and unpitched percussion instruments in Messiaen's scores, two exemplars must suffice. His ability to write musically for temple blocks is exceptional, subtly punctuating and occasionally leading the texture, avoiding any hint of horses' clip-clopping readily brought to mind by other composers' use of them. Among the array of ear-catching instruments, including multiple sets of claves, wood blocks and maracas, a remarkable subtlety can easily be overlooked. In *Des canyons* and *Saint François* Messiaen calls for 'chimes' made from three different materials; glass, shells and wood. The precision with which he deploys the slightly different rustling made by each reflects the care with which he approached every aspect of his sound world, even in a work as vast as the opera.

This raises the question of when in Messiaen's creative process such timbral nuances appeared. His sketches reveal frequent indications of instrumentation, even at the earliest stages. Sometimes this is broad brush, a sequence of chords simply labelled 'bois' [woodwind] or 'cordes' [strings]. Elsewhere he is more specific, with annotations such as 'htb, clar, bassons' [oboe, clarinet, bassoons]. These are *aides mémoires* for the type of

[12] More recently, Jonny Greenwood's use of ondes Martenot on various albums by Radiohead and other projects has brought the instrument to a new audience.

timbre he had in mind. Nonetheless, even in rough sketches, they can be remarkably punctilious, noting specifics such as 'glock (avec 3 baguettes)' [glockenspiel with 3 sticks] or providing the sticking for xylophone passages. Despite such precision, it is important to recognize that Messiaen could change his mind in the finished work. For instance, the draft orchestration for 'L'Oiseau Lyre et la Ville fiancée' from *Éclairs* indicates that the two demisemquavers at the end of bar two, as well as the entirety of bar 3, should be played by flutes, clarinets, oboes, bassoons, trumpet and horns.[13] However, in the final orchestration, xylophone, xylorimba and marimba play the last notes of bar 2, and double the first chord of bar 3.

The process of turning reminders of timbre into a full orchestration was still a laborious technical challenge. Although three musical lines moving together and labelled '3 xylos' translate readily to xylophone, xylorimba and marimba, the path from a passage marked 'bois' or 'cuivres' to Messiaen's carefully nuanced voicings is less straightforward. Many traces of standard orchestration can be found, such as the delineation between high and low horn parts or carefully interleaving woodwind parts to produce a blended sound. However, Messiaen frequently confounds such traditions by, for instance, placing the flutes and oboes in blocks in a deliberate layering of their distinct timbres. Regardless, even in the verticalized block harmony of the numerous chorale passages in his music, a cursory examination of the score reveals his concern for musical line. In more complex textures, such as birdsong choruses, instrumental voicing is supplemented by painstaking dynamic subtleties so that discrete lines emerge in and out of the hubbub.

It is tempting to assume that it was the use of strings for such tangled lines, notably in the 'Épôde' from *Chronochromie*, that prompted Messiaen to provide each string player with

[13] Messiaen Archive, BnF, Res Vma MS-1488(5), p.7.

an individual part in various works from the 1960s onwards. That may have been a significant factor, but writing such as in the 'Strophe' movements should not be overlooked. Three layers of harmonic sequences, one comprising eight-pitch chords, the others seven, are assigned to solo string players resulting in 22 individual parts. It is thanks to this, and even greater divisions, as much as weight of sound that Messiaen settled on a sizeable standard string section of 68 players (16.16.14.12.10). Similar reasons lie behind the ten-section choruses employed for *La Transfiguration* and *Saint François*, with 10 and 15 voices per section respectively. Like the strings, each singer has their own part due to moments such as the infliction of the stigmata in the opera, where the voices divide into 29. Bespoke parts may be the norm for wind players, but the desire to have a full palette of orchestral colour both for chordal writing and heterophonies also pushed an expansion from triple woodwind in *Turangalîla* to an extraordinary 24 players (10.4.10.4) for *Éclairs*. Messiaen's brass sections likewise grew from around 10 players to 17. In both cases there are some notable additions of extreme bass instruments with contrabass clarinet, contrabass tuba and Saxhorn.

Counterbalancing this growth in the size of his full orchestra, Messiaen wrote pieces from *Trois petites Liturgies* onwards where the ensemble is tailored for the work in question. A notable strand is formed by the pieces written in some way or other with Pierre Boulez in mind, starting in the 1950s with *Oiseaux exotiques*, encompassing *Sept Haïkaï* and *Couleurs de la Cité céleste* (1963) and culminating with *Un vitrail et des oiseaux* (1987) and *La Ville d'En-Haut* (1987). Ranging from 19 to 40 players in size, with the 8 violins of *Sept Haïkaï* being the only strings, these wind and percussion ensembles are eminently suited both to Boulez's aesthetic preferences and the practical constraints of the Domaine Musical or Ensemble Intercontemporain. With numerous other works written since for these and other new music organizations, it is easy to overlook the impact of Messiaen's bold ensemble choices.

A reconciliation between one such bespoke ensemble and the giganticist turn Messiaen's music made in the mid-1960s resulted in the finest exemplar of his skills as an orchestrator. *Des canyons aux étoiles* is part of the same sequence of big statements as *La Transfiguration* and *Saint François*, but was commissioned for performance in the modestly-proportioned Alice Tully Hall at New York's Lincoln Center. Messiaen calculated he could fit an ensemble of 44 on the stage. He clearly wanted to retain a string section functioning at times in a way similar to a full Romantic orchestra, providing the textural bedrock in key passages including a slow movement of sustained lyricism, without compromising the range of timbre and power available from the wind and percussion. The resulting ensemble simply should not balance. Just 13 strings compete with 23 winds, 7 percussionists and piano soloist, yet Messiaen manages to have his cake and eat it. Replete with extended techniques, it would be easy for budding composers or orchestrators to be distracted by features such as alternate woodwind fingerings, careful calibration of trumpet mutes or double bass played with a triangle beater. More pertinent for study, though, is the way that, even in the most forceful passages, the strings are still very much present in the texture, the wind emerging through them. Ranging from diaphanous delicacy, via a kaleidoscopic vibrancy of timbres to climaxes of immense power, Messiaen somehow manages in *Des canyons* to convey a similar breadth of vision to *La Transfiguration* and *Saint François* with an ensemble barely one third the size. It provides ample confirmation, were it needed, that he stands alongside the likes of Berlioz, Rimsky-Korsakov and Ravel as a supreme orchestrator.

Table ?.1 Metallic percussion in Messiaen's Orchestral Music

Work	Cymbals	Gongs	Tam-tams	Tuned percussion	Other
Les Offrandes oubliées	clash cymbals				triangle
Le Tombeau resplendissant	1 cymbal				triangle
Hymne au Saint Sacrement	1 suspended cymbal				triangle
L'Ascension	clash cymbals				triangle
Poèmes pour Mi	1 suspended cymbal clash cymbals		1 tam-tam		triangle
Trois petites Liturgies	1 Chinese cymbal (m)		1 tam-tam (g)	celesta vibraphone	
Turangalîa-symphonie	1 Chinese cymbal 1 Turkish cymbal (p) 1 suspended cymbal clash cymbals		1 tam-tam	celesta keyed glockenspiel vibraphone tubular bells	triangle
Réveil des oiseaux	1 suspended cymbal			celesta keyed glockenspiel	
Oiseaux exotiques		3 gongs (a, m, g)	1 tam-tam (tg)	glockenspiel	
Chronochromie	1 suspended cymbal (mg) 1 Chinese cymbal (g)	3 gongs (a, ma, m)	1 tam-tam (tg)	glockenspiel tubular bells	
Sept Haïkaï	2 Turkish cymbals (p) 1 Chinese cymbal	2 gongs	2 tam-tams	cencerros crotales tubular bells	
Couleurs de la cité céleste		4 gongs	2 tam-tams	cencerros tubular bells	
Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum		6 gongs	3 tam-tams	3 sets of cencerros tubular bells	

La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur, Jésus-Christ	3 Turkish cymbals (p) 2 suspended cymbals 2 pairs of clash cymbals	7 gongs	3 tam-tams (g, pg, tg)	solo vibraphone crotales tubular bells	triangle jingles luminophone
Des canyons aux étoiles…	1 suspended cymbal (p) 2 suspended cymbals	4 gongs	2 tam-tams (mg, tg)	solo glockenspiel crotales tubular bells	triangle metal sheet (tôle)*
Saint François d'Assise	1 [suspended] cymbal (tp) 1 [suspended] cymbal (p) 2 suspended cymbals 1 suspended cymbal (gr)	3 gongs	3 tam-tams	crotales glockenspiel 2 sets of tubular bells vibraphone	3 triangles metal sheet (tôle)*
Un Vitrail et des oiseaux	1 suspended cymbal (p) 1 suspended cymbal		2 tam-tams (p, gr)	tubular bells	triangle
La Ville d'en-haut	1 suspended cymbal		4 tam-tams	glockenspiel tubular bells	triangle
Un sourire	1 suspended cymbal			tubular bells	
Éclairs sur l'Au-Delà…	1 suspended cymbal (p) 1 suspended cymbal 1 suspended cymbal (gr)	3 gongs (a) 3 gongs (g)	3 tam-tams (1 p, 1 t-gr)	glockenspiel crotales 3 sets of tubular bells	3 triangles

* essentially a thunder sheet
a = aigu (high)
g = grave (low)
gr = grande (large)
l = large (cymbal) or low (gong, tam-tam)
m = médium (medium)
ma = médium aigu (medium high)
mg = médium grave (medium low)
p = petite (small)
pg = plus grave (lower)
tg = very low
tgr = très grand

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