

SONGS OF FAITH AND LOVE: A STUDY OF OLIVIER MESSIAEN'S *POÈMES POUR MI*
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ABSTRACT

It is my determination that Oliver Messiaen's first song cycle, *Poèmes pour Mi* (1936), exhibits nearly all of the representative musical and literary devices of the composer's arsenal: musical and poetic symbols and symmetry, asymmetric and exotic rhythms, color and harmony, and is inspired by his Catholic faith, and must therefore be regarded as among the composer's most significant early vocal works. After outlining a brief biography and an overview of the work and its premiere, the subsequent analysis covers the compositional techniques and thematic devices are presented, including specific discussion of spirituality, numerical symbols, modal vocabulary, musical colors, and the "Boris motif." A description of the cycle follows, highlighting important aspects of each piece as they relate to Messiaen's style. Musical examples appear where relevant

BIOGRAPHY

Olivier Eugène Prosper Charles Messiaen, born 10 December 1908 in Avignon, France, was pre-destined to be a creative force in the world. His father, Pierre, was an English teacher and scholar best known for translating William Shakespeare's complete works. His mother, poetess Cécile Sauvage, penned a book during her pregnancy, entitled *L'âme en bourgeon* ("The Flowering Soul"), which she dedicated to her son. These poems incorporated three important thematic ideas that would later influence the composer's works: nature (birdsong), music, and the exoticism of the Orient. It was clear to Sauvage that she was to give birth to a special boy, writing, "...I carry within me the love of mysterious and marvelous things."¹

Messiaen grew up in the city of Grenoble, a town resting at the foot of the French Alps in the southeastern part of France. It was there that the self-described loner entertained himself with nature's beauty, his mother's stories, Shakespeare reenactments, fairytales and the mystery of the supernatural, and a growing love of music.² Messiaen taught himself how to play the piano as a child, composing the piano work, *La Dame de Shalotte*, based on the Tennyson poem.³ As predicted by his mother, Messiaen realized his artistic fate at the age of ten when his first harmony instructor, Jehan de Gibson Nantes, gave him a copy of Claude Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Messiaen would later

¹ Carla Huston Bell, *Olivier Messiaen* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1984), 1-2.

² Olivier Messiaen, "Olivier Messiaen: The Music of Faith" (Films On Demand, 1984), accessed 13 January 2016, fod.infobase.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=104680&xtid=10323.

³ Claude Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen* (London: Stainer & Bell, 1976), 1.

confess it was “love at first sight”⁴ and “...probably the most decisive influence in [my] life.”⁵

The following year, he was sent to study at the Paris Conservatoire, where he studied music history with Maurice Emmanuel, organ with Marcel Dupré, and composition and orchestration under Paul Dukas. Between 1926-1930 Messiaen won five Premier Prix awards in categories ranging from counterpoint and fugue to organ and improvisation, and in 1931 he became the organist for the Église de la Sainte-Trinité in Paris, a position he would hold for more than sixty years.

The year 1936 provided Messiaen with both professional and personal successes. He joined the faculty at the Schola Cantorum and the École Normale de Musique, where he taught harmony. In addition he helped found the group *La Jeune France* (1936-1945) along with composers André Jolivet (1905-1974), Jean-Yves Daniel-Lesur (1908-2002), and Yves Baudrier (1906-1988).⁶ Bound by their spiritual aspirations, the men aimed to rebuild and encourage an interest in the passions and sensuality that could result from music—specifically, what they called *living* music. It was in part, a reaction to the anti-Romantic movement started by the composer-musician group *Les Six*, who believed their music should seek higher levels of refinement.⁷ In his personal life, it marked the year his son,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Roger Nichols, *Messiaen* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 7.

⁶ *The New Grove* lists *La Jeune France* as beginning in 1936 with record of at least one performance as late as 1945. The Vichy regime was recognized as the official government of France until August of 1945, which could explain the dissolution of the musical group. The name *La Jeune France* is also associated with a political organization that was established in 1940 in Vichy, France.

⁷ Paul Griffiths, "Les Six," Oxford Music Online, accessed 6 January 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.www2.lib.ku.edu/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e6228>

Pascal, was born with his wife of four years, violinist and composer, Claire Delbos (1906-1959).

The 1940s and 1950s proved to be full of challenges and successes. Messiaen was obliged to leave his positions and join the army during the Second World War, where he served as a hospital attendant and was taken as a prisoner of war by the Germans and held at Görlitz, in the former Province of Silesia.⁸ He was released two years later in 1942 and returned to his work at the Église de la Sainte-Trinité and accepted a new position at the Paris Conservatoire, where he taught harmony for thirty-six years. It was at the Conservatoire that Messiaen taught his most famous students, including Yvonne Loriod (1924-2010), Pierre Boulez (1925-2016), Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928-2007), and William Bolcom (b. 1938).⁹ At this time he also began work on his *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie* (1949-1992), which would be a work in progress over his more than forty years of teaching. The seven-volume work includes music analysis of some of his own works and those of other composers (Mozart, Debussy), in addition to his thoughts on composition, ancient and modern rhythms, birdsong, color, modes, and theology. Additionally, Messiaen's *Technique de mon langage musical* (1944) was published. In this treatise, Messiaen explored and cited examples of rhythmic varieties, including Hindu rhythms, added notes rhythms, augmented and diminished rhythms, retrograde and non-retrogradable rhythms, and polyrhythms.

⁸ During his imprisonment, Messiaen composed one of his best-known works: *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (1940-41).

⁹ Yvonne Loriod was known for her strong technical skills at the piano and impressive memory. Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen were important contributors to serial and other avant-garde music. In addition, Boulez is known for conducting the works of many twentieth-century composers, including Messiaen. William Bolcom is an American composer and pianist whose compositional style spans the influence of cabaret, ragtime, popular dance music, and old popular songs.

As things began to return to normal in his professional life after World War II, his personal life was suffering. Claire had become ill and was sent to a sanatorium, where her health continued to decline until her death in 1959. Two years later, Messiaen married his former pupil, pianist Yvonne Loriod. Many of his later works were dedicated to Yvonne, who was his advocate well into the later half of the twentieth-century. In addition, she is responsible for revising his *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie*.¹⁰

OVERVIEW AND PREMIERE

The song cycle, *Poèmes pour Mi* (1936) was a gift for Messiaen's first wife Claire Delbos, whom he married in 1932. "Mi" was his nickname for her. The cycle is made up of two books with poetry written by Messiaen. This song cycle, along with *Chants de terre et de ciel* (1938) and *Harawi* (1945) were written specifically for French dramatic soprano, Marcelle Bunlet (1900-1991).¹¹ Messiaen wrote for Bunlet because of her "very flexible voice and [a] very extended tessitura."¹² The original version, which called for dramatic soprano and piano, was first performed on 28 April 1937 for the *Concerts de la Spirale* in Paris with Bunlet and Messiaen performing.¹³ In 1937, Messiaen composed an orchestral version, which premiered that same year in Brussels with Bunlet and the Belgian National

¹⁰ Peter Hill, "Interview with Yvonne Loriod." *The Messiaen Companion* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1995), 284-285.

¹¹ Messiaen and Bunlet performed *Poèmes pour Mi* at a concert in Vichy in 1954. This is the only known recording with the two of them.

¹² Claude Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen* (London: Stainer & Bell, 1976), 82.

¹³ Olivier Messiaen. *Poèmes pour Mi*, with Olivier Messiaen (piano) and Lise Arsequest (soprano), recorded by Everest Records. SDBR 3269, S-39050, 1968, LP.

Radio Orchestra under the direction of Franz André.¹⁴ The orchestral version did not receive a premiere in France until ten years later at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées, again with Bunlet singing, and Roger Désormière conducting the Orchestre National.

The first book, which includes four songs, focuses on the preparation for marriage, as experienced from the male point of view. The second book celebrates the fulfillment of marriage and the life thereafter. Within the poetry, one finds a balance of romantic love and God's love and references to God's creations. While Messiaen divided the cycle into two books, one could argue that the fifth song, "L'épouse," is the centerpiece that divides the first and last sections of equal length.

COMPOSITIONAL TECHNIQUES AND THEMATIC DEVICES

Spirituality

Throughout Messiaen's life and career, one thing remained constant: his devotion to God. He was raised in a home with a Catholic father and his mother was non-religious. Nevertheless, he felt God's presence as early as he could remember. In the documentary *Olivier Messiaen: The Music of Faith*, Messiaen professes to have been "born with faith" and trusted that even non-believers experience some level of spirituality. He considered his music to be a spiritual sacrifice; it was his testimony to the loyalty he had for the secular world and echoed his feelings about his faith. Through his music, Messiaen desired to find the "inner union" between himself and God, which tied directly into the goals of the

¹⁴ Durand published the original version in 1937, followed by the orchestral in 1939.

Catholic Church.¹⁵ According to Messiaen, his music consists of three theological categories: God's love (as shown through the gift of Jesus), human love, and God's creation.¹⁶ Messiaen's "hierarchy of love" divides love in order of importance: divine, maternal, human, and trivial.¹⁷ Many of his works, including *Poèmes pour Mi* also deal with the following themes: the Trinity, Ascension, the Apocalypse, Transfiguration, and the Resurrection (both Christ and Man).¹⁸

Numerical Symbols

In addition to the aforementioned themes, Messiaen utilized biblically symbolic numbers throughout the work. These numbers can be found in the poetry that he sets, formal structures, rhythmic syntax, and choice of modes. The most prevalent number is three: the symbol of divinity and the Holy Trinity. Messiaen also incorporates the Hindu symbol of divinity with the number five—it specifically relates to the Indian god Shiva, who represents the death of death and is therefore a type of Christ.¹⁹ The number seven, according to Messiaen, is the "perfect number, the Creation of six days sanctified by the divine Sabbath."²⁰ The number seven is also the foundation of God's word and with the number seven come the seven Catholic rites instituted by Christ (Baptism, Confirmation,

¹⁵Andrew Shenton, *Olivier Messiaen's System of Signs* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2008), 17-18.

¹⁶ Shenton, 26.

¹⁷ Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), 74-75.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen* (London: J M Dent & Sons Ltd., 1989), 41-42.

²⁰ *ibid.*

Eucharist, Confession, Anointing of the Sick, Ordination, Matrimony).²¹ Messiaen also utilized the number nine, perhaps as a personal symbol of the motherhood of the Holy Virgin, divine completeness, and the meaning of finality.²²

Favorite Pitch Sets

Messiaen frequently incorporated into his compositions the *modes of limited transposition*, scales that can be transposed by a semitone fewer than eleven times before the original set of notes reappears.²³ These *modes* are considered limited due to some transpositions containing the same notes, even if they happen to appear in a different order in the scale (see Table 1.1). The transpositions are determined based upon the chromatic scale, which totals twelve semitones. For example, Mode I in its original transposition includes C, D, E F#, G#, and B-flat. Knowing that this mode includes half of the semitones in a twelve-note scale, one can deduce there is only one possible transposition of this mode, which includes C#, E-flat, F, G, A, and B. These are the notes that make up the whole-tone scale, which can be found often in the works of Claude Debussy and Messiaen's teacher, Dukas.

²¹ Andrew Shenton, *Olivier Messiaen's System of Signs* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2008), 17-18.

²² Carla Huston Bell, *Olivier Messiaen* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1984), 60.

²³ *Mode of limited transposition*, Oxford Music Online, accessed 6 January 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.www2.lib.ku.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/50589>.

Table 1.1: Messiaen's Modes of Limited Transposition

Mode 1 (whole tone):

1 ¹	C	D	E	F#	G#	B \flat
1 ²	C#	E \flat	F	G	A	B

Mode 2 (octatonic):

2 ¹	C	C#	E \flat	E	F#	G	A	B \flat
2 ²	C#	D	E	F	G	G#	B \flat	B
2 ³	C	D	E \flat	F	F#	G#	A	B

Mode 3:

3 ¹	C	D	E \flat	E	F#	G	G#	B \flat	B
3 ²	C	C#	E \flat	E	F	G	G#	A	B
3 ³	C	C#	D	E	F	F#	G#	A	B \flat
3 ⁴	C#	D	E \flat	F	F#	G	A	B \flat	B

Mode 4:

4 ¹	C	C#	D	F	F#	G	G#	B
4 ²	C	C#	D	E \flat	F#	G	G#	A
4 ³	C#	D	E \flat	E	G	G#	A	B \flat
4 ⁴	D	E \flat	E	F	G#	A	B \flat	B
4 ⁵	C	E \flat	E	F	F#	A	B \flat	B
4 ⁶	C	C#	E	F	F#	G	B \flat	B

Mode 5:

5 ¹	C	C#	F	F#	G	B
5 ²	C	C#	D	F#	G	G#
5 ³	C#	D	E \flat	G	G#	A
5 ⁴	D	E \flat	E	G#	A	B \flat
5 ⁵	E \flat	E	F	A	B \flat	B
5 ⁶	C	E	F	F#	B \flat	B

Mode 6

6 ¹	C	D	E	F	F#	G#	B \flat	B
6 ²	C	C#	E \flat	F	F#	G	A	B
6 ³	C	C#	D	E	F#	G	G#	B \flat
6 ⁴	C#	D	E \flat	F	G	G#	A	B
6 ⁵	C	D	E \flat	E	F#	G#	A	B \flat
6 ⁶	C#	E \flat	E	F	G	A	B \flat	B

Mode 7:

7 ¹	C	C#	D	E \flat	F	F#	G	G#	A	B
7 ²	C	C#	D	E \flat	E	F#	G	G#	A	B \flat
7 ³	C#	D	E \flat	E	F	G	G#	A	B \flat	B
7 ⁴	C	D	E \flat	E	F	F#	G#	A	B \flat	B
7 ⁵	C	C#	E \flat	E	F	F#	G	A	B \flat	B
7 ⁶	C	C#	D	E	F	F#	G	G#	B \flat	B

Source: Adapted from Siglind Bruhn, "Languages of Devotion, Magic, and Awe" in *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death: Musico-Poetic Signification in the "Tristan Trilogy" and Three Related Song Cycles* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2008), 43.

Musical Colors

The earliest modes were often associated with a certain emotion, or could be used to convey a specific mood. By using transpositions of these original modes, Messiaen provided himself with a palette of musical colors that could give variety to the mood of a song, create vivid imagery, and avoid the constraints of a strict key signature. Messiaen primarily incorporated transpositions of Modes II and III throughout *Poèmes*.

These modes on their own, and in relationship to a specific key created musical colors, which Messiaen found to be crucial to his works. The combination of F# and mode 2 are used in slow, ecstatic movements, while the pairing of e minor and mode 2 represent Christ's suffering upon the cross.²⁴ The key of E major is slow, but implies praise, and G major represents the desire for the fulfillment of human love.²⁵ It is worth noting that Messiaen does not always clearly indicate the key of a piece; however, it can be determined upon closer study of the score.

In addition to conveying specific moods, Messiaen often wanted to create colors through sound, much like what one may see when looking through a stained-glass window. He claimed to have seen color when hearing certain sounds, experiencing synesthesia.²⁶ He frequently used modes 2 and 3 and their transpositions. In a discussion with Claude Samuel, Messiaen described Mode 2¹ as "blue-violet rocks, speckled with little gray cubes, cobalt blue, deep Prussian blue, highlighted by a bit of violet-purple gold, red, ruby, and stars mauve, black and white. Blue-violet is dominant" while his description of Mode 2²

²⁴ Johnson, 43-44.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Christine Elizabeth Bronson, "Making Meaning with Synesthesia: Perception, Aspiration, and Olivier Messiaen's Reality." (MM thesis, Florida State University, 2013), 45, accessed 31 January 2016, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1411374735?accountid=14556>.

contains “gold and silver spirals against a background of brown and ruby-red vertical stripes. Gold and brown are dominant.”²⁷ Mode 2³ is described as “light green and prairie-green foliage, with specks of blue, silver, and reddish orange. Dominant is green.”²⁸ It quickly becomes clear that Messiaen was consumed with the vivid imagery created through the transpositions of modes.

“Boris Motif”

In addition to his frequent use of modes, Messiaen borrows a theme from the Coronation Scene of Modest Mussorgsky’s opera *Boris Godunov* (1869, rev. 1872) for some of the songs included in *Poèmes* (see Musical Example 1). In the opera, the “Boris motif” is used to musically depict church bells and includes the pitches C#-E-D#-F#-C#. Messiaen adapts the original, changing the opening interval from a minor third to a tritone, with usually one other interval in the sequence shortened. Messiaen uses this “motif” in four of the nine songs in the cycle under consideration here (see Table 1.2). Notice it is used to enhance important words or outcries, and is occasionally found in the piano part as well. The “Boris motif” is found in a number of forms: rhythmically augmented, diminished, repeated several times in a row, and even in vocal and piano doubling. Additionally, the variations do not always begin with an opening tritone, but may instead move by a third. In using his adaptations of the “Boris motif,” Messiaen is able to bring attention to important poetic material while creating unity within the cycle.

²⁷ Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Language of Mystical Love* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), 90.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Musical Example 1: Mussorgsky’s “Boris motif”



Table 1.2: Messiaen’s Use of the “Boris motif” in *Poèmes pour Mi*

“Action de grâces” m. 4 “transforme” (“transformed”)	“Paysage” m. 5-8	“Épouvante” m. 40 “ha”	“Les deux guerriers” m. 16 “ah”
The “motif” is used as a vocalise that depicts the light transforming.	Messiaen returns the “motif” to the right hand of the piano, where it is sounded six times. The sixth repetition is interrupted by the return of the opening material. The final pitch of the “motif” is extended rhythmically to describe the “chagrins” (“grief”) and “hesitant” (“hesitation”) the protagonist is experiencing.	An augmented variation of the “motif” is present in the vocal line over a rhythmic canon in the piano part. By adding a variation of the “motif,” Messiaen has created another layer and extended the suffering experienced by the protagonist.	Messiaen’s treatment of the “motif” in this song is similar to “Épouvante.” The “gémissons” (“groans”) appear in straight sixteenth-note gestures. Messiaen elevated the agony with two repetitions that are doubled in the right hand of the piano.
m. 14 “unie” (“united”) The “motif” leads to an extension of the original vocalise, describing two waves becoming one.	m. 13 The right hand of the piano repeats the “motif” twice, serving as connective material.		
m. 28 “lumière” (“light”) The “motif” is repeated twice in the vocalise, drawing attention to the “light” that refers to the Holy Spirit.	m. 16-20 A rhythmically diminished variation of the “motif” is sounded, imitating the first image of the beloved, smiling, hidden “entre le blé et le soleil” (“between the corn and sun”).		
m. 29-30 Messiaen transfers the “motif” to the right hand of the piano, where it is repeated three times. This serves as transitional material to the new section.	m. 20-21 The right hand of the piano begins the “motif” an eighth-note ahead of the voice, creating a slight overlap before quickly returning to unison for “la main sur les yeux” (“her hand over her eyes”).		
m. 42-43 “étoile” (“star”) The “motif” serves as a final celebration of God’s gifts before leading into the joyous “Alleluia” finale.			

Rhythm

Rhythmic fluidity is found throughout Messiaen's compositions. When asked about rhythm in the documentary *The Music of Faith*, Messiaen explained, "I have always avoided using a regular beat because an even rhythm is artificial. Equal durations belong to a military march, which is an artificial thing."²⁹ He defended his comments by explaining that things in nature, like the branches of trees and the rolling waves are irregular, therefore making regularity unnatural, un-human. Messiaen's rhythms stem from an interest in Hindu rhythms that are related to the *deçî-tâlas* (rhythmic formulae) found in ancient Sanskrit treatises.³⁰ Messiaen's earliest incorporation of these rhythms into his music occurred in 1935 with *La Nativité du Seigneur*.³¹ From the study of Hindu rhythms, Messiaen developed four rhythmic concepts for his musical style: augmentation, diminution, non-retrogradable rhythms, and added values. While these are not unique to Messiaen, they are characteristic of his personal style, and can be found in *Poèmes*. When a rhythm is doubled, it is called an exact augmentation (see Musical Example 2), which can be found in the opening of "Épouvant" (see Musical Example 3). Non-retrograde rhythms, according to Messiaen, are "an absolutely closed rhythm [that] works the same forwards and backwards."³² These are present throughout *Poèmes*, but have their greatest impact

²⁹ Olivier Messiaen, "Olivier Messiaen: The Music of Faith" (Films On Demand, 1984), accessed 13 January 2016, fod.infobase.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=104680&xtid=10323.

³⁰ Paul Griffiths, "Olivier Messiaen." Oxford Music Online, accessed 5 January 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.www2.lib.ku.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/18497>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Stephanie Lynn Aston, "Journeys of Expression: An Examination of Four Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Vocal Works." (DMA dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 2011), 18, accessed 31 January 2016, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/875564302?accountid=14556>.

Musical Example 4: Added Notes in “La maison” as found in Messiaen’s *The Technique of My Musical Language* (1944).

The image shows a page of a musical score for the piece "La maison" by Olivier Messiaen. The page is numbered 192. The title "La maison" is written in a small font. The tempo is marked "Presque vif" and the dynamic is "mf". The score is for Soprano and Piano. The lyrics are: "Cet te mai son nous al lons la quit ter: Je la vois dans ton œil." The piano part features complex, non-retrogradable rhythms with many beamed sixteenth notes. The vocal line is simple and follows the lyrics.

THE CYCLE

“Action de grâces”

The first song of the cycle appropriately serves as a prayer of thanksgiving, musically as well as poetically. When studying the score, it quickly becomes clear that Messiaen does not include time signatures. Instead, measures are often varied in the number of beats in order to suit the poetry and the musical imagery he wanted to create. Aurally, these rhythmic varieties can be subtle, especially Messiaen’s use of rhythmic palindrome, or non-retrogradable rhythm. The opening measure, which is repeated twice more, begins with a palindrome in the piano. When each note is divided into sixteenth notes, they total **8/4-2-1/2/2/2/2-2-3/8**. Upon first glance, these do not appear to be a mirror image, however when combining the bolded numbers, they become **8/7/2/2/2/7/8** (see Musical Example 5).

Musical Example 5: Polymodality, Rhythmic Canon, and Rhythmic Palindrome in Measure 1 of Olivier Messiaen's "Action de grâces"



The rhythmic palindrome is set as a canon in the piano, the left hand following one full beat behind the right. This is also an introduction of two of Messiaen's favorite modes. Mode 3² sounds in the right hand while 2¹ sounds in the left hand, creating a polymodal texture. This mixture of modes can be interpreted as a musical symbol for the union of Man and God. In choosing to begin with the canon and these modes, Messiaen has created a musical vision of God, somewhat distant at first, leading Man. With each new chord the two grow nearer, leading into a cluster chord set to mode 6¹. This mode is less frequently used; however, its color blend creates a brightness and earthiness that seems appropriate for the following opening vocal line, "Le ciel et l'eau qui suit les variations des nuages..." ("The sky and the water that follow the variations of the clouds..."). Messiaen wrote the vocal line using a chant with the tonal center of F#. Incorporating chant strengthens the religious undertones throughout the cycle.

The completion of the first statement includes a vocal melisma on the "Boris motif." The piano follows with a repeat of opening music and an extension on the opening cluster chord—like the "Boris motif" these too become more elaborate with each restatement.

With the first repeat of the opening material, the tonal center of the chant rises to A-flat, now introducing the beloved, “Et un oeil près de mon oeil...et deux pieds derrière mes pieds” (“And an eye near to my eye...and two feet behind my feet”), who follows the protagonist’s lead. When the poetry describes the two as waves united, the “Boris motif” returns to highlight the text. As the piano repeats its punctuation, it becomes more complex. The tonal center of the plainchant is again transposed, this time up to C. The line continues as expected with a “Boris motif” at the end of the phrase to emphasize “lumière” (“light”). Following close behind, the right hand of the piano includes the “Boris motif” for the first time, which acts as a transition into the B section.

By this time, the protagonist has listed a number of “Thanksgivings,” including the beauty of nature and its transformative qualities, the beloved who is a loving companion and follows the path to God, and the grace and love of God through the resurrection. The B section is the realization of the greatest gift God has given: himself. Musically, Messiaen creates this moment of awe and gratitude with a *Presque lent* (almost slow) and descending tritones that sound almost static in their descent. The vocal line also includes a tritone on the words “tout cela” (“all that [God has given to me]”) to emphasize God’s gifts. The tonal center of this section is D with each line of text gaining more energy from the rising chromatic, scalar passages. The interweaving of the vocal and piano lines to this point have been important to the understanding of Messiaen’s message. This is why his choice to use silence in the piano with the mention of the Eucharist on the words “Pain plus doux” (“bread more sweet”) is so special. Describing this gift as being sweeter than the freshness of the stars, Messiaen wrote an ascending scale, which leads into an extension of the “Boris motif” as a final celebration of God’s sacrifices. The B section, with the exception of the

opening tritones, sounds C# dominant throughout. This makes sense, as the musical introduction of the “Alleluia” celebration is clearly written as F#—this is one of two occasions where Messiaen has included a key signature. The poem ends with seven repetitions of this word. Johnson compares this to a *jubilus*, which is a melismatic extension of the final “a” of an Alleluia sung between the Epistle and Gospel of the Roman Mass.³³ The number seven is important, as it represents physical and spiritual completeness and perfection, and is referenced throughout the Bible.³⁴

“Paysage”

“Paysage” (“Landscape”) is a short song that still manages to convey many things. The opening line compares a lake as a “gros bijou bleu” (“big blue jewel”) and is repeated three times at the beginning, middle, and end of the song. The voice echoes the tritone heard in the right hand of the piano. The left hand supports with a second-inversion V⁷ chord in mode 2². The combination of color and the descending gesture imitate the gentle splash of jewel-toned, blue water. This vivid imagery is disrupted by the falling chromatic line in the right hand of the piano, followed by an abrupt and brief moment of silence. These falling lines are made more substantial in that they are written in first inversion, creating more weight to the musical “tumble” of chords. They anticipate the acknowledgement of struggle that results from living in a secular world. In this song particularly, Messiaen relies heavily on the “Boris motif.” In measure 4 the vocal line

³³ Johnson, 56

³⁴ “Meaning of Numbers in the Bible,” The Bible Study Site accessed 31 January 2016. <http://www.biblestudy.org/bibleref/meaning-of-numbers-in-bible/introduction.html>.

returns with a recitation centering on A-natural. The “Boris motif” sounds in the right hand of the piano in measures 5-8 a total of six times, with the final repetition left incomplete, and instead interrupted by the tritone heard in the opening measure of the song. Attention is drawn to the word “hésitent” (“hesitate”) in measure 8 with the number of sixteenth-note beats increasing to 23—this is the longest measure of the song. It creates a musical interpretation of the protagonist’s “Mes pieds qui hésitent dans la poussière” (“feet that hesitate in the dust”) on “La route pleine de chagrins et de fondrières” (“road full of grief and hollows.”) Following the first repetition of the “big blue jewel,” the beloved is formally introduced, “verte et bleue comme le paysage!” (“green and blue like a landscape”). This is another example of why the “Boris motif” has such an impact in the song. Until this point, the piano has been a crucial part of the story. Here, however, the piano lines are sustained, subtly moving from mode 2^3 to 3^2 in measures 14-15 to simply support the chant above. Messiaen highlighted the text, “Entre le blé et le soleil je vois son visage: Elle sourit” (“between the sun and corn I see her face: she smiles”) by composing the line to be sung only on A-natural. In addition, the “Boris motif” or a variation of it sounds in the piano part 20 times out of the 24 measures of the song. Messiaen wrote the “Boris motif” into the vocal line at the *Plus lent* with the line “la main sur les yeux” (“her hand over her eyes”). Even though there is a final repetition of the “big blue lake,” it sounds incomplete, ending with an unresolved descending scalar passage in the piano line. Perhaps this was Messiaen’s way of maintaining the mystery of the beloved. It is also worth noting that “Paysage” is one of a few examples from this cycle that employs surrealism in the poetry. As an artistic movement that had some impact on music as early as the 1920’s, Bruhn describes it as “radical imagery or examples of alienated objects.”

“La maison”

Messiaen’s closest example of a typical French *mélodie* comes in the form of “La maison,” which was inspired by the time he spent at his summer home in Petichet.³⁵ “La maison” or “The House” serves as a metaphor in this poem. Just as “Cette maison nous allons la quitter” (“This house we will leave...”) the couple must eventually leave the house, they will soon also leave “nos corps” (“their bodies”). Messiaen creates musical parallelism to complement the poetry, placing emphasis on the lines “I see it in your eyes” and “I see them in your eyes,” referring to the house and their bodies respectively. While the protagonist shows no hints of sadness, he witnesses the sadness in the eyes of his beloved. Messiaen incorporates chant into the interlude above sustained chords from mode 3³ in the piano. This contrast from the lyrical opening brings further attention to the message, when the protagonist comforts the beloved with promises of their resurrection as a result of their devotion to God: “Toutes ces images de douleur qui s’impriment dans ton oeil...Ton oeil ne les retrouvera plus: Quand nous contemplerons la Vérité” (“All of these images of pain that imprint in your eye: Your eye will no more find them when we contemplate the Truth”). They will leave their secular bodies for transfigured bodies in their eternal resting place. These images of pain and the gift of eternal resting reference the scripture readings 2 Corinthians 5:2 and 5:4.³⁶ The final six measures of “La maison” offer a number of interesting elements. First, Messiaen has created rhythmic symmetry that spans from measures 10-15: 8/12/11/23(11+12)/8. This rhythmic symmetry serves as a visual reminder of the hopefulness for eternal life. Griffith’s draws attention to measure 11,

³⁵ “Gallery,” Olivier Messiaen. Accessed 12 January 2016, <http://www.oliviermessiaen.org/messiaengall.htm>

³⁶ “We groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling” and “For while we are in the tent, we groan and are burdened.”

which includes all of the notes necessary to create mode 2¹, stressing that this is unusual for Messiaen.³⁷ That being said, the 12-note aggregate emphasizes the word “Vérité” (“Truth”), which is clearly one of the most important words of the poem. In addition to these musical symbols, Messiaen ends the piece with a pentatonic chord that follows a symmetrical line, perhaps representing eternity (see Musical Example 6).

Musical Example 6: Rhythmic symmetry, Mode 2¹, and “Eternity” Palindrome in Measures 10-15 of Olivier Messiaen’s “La maison”

The image shows a musical score for Olivier Messiaen's "La maison". It consists of three systems of music, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked "Modéré". The lyrics are: "Ton oeil ne les re-trou-ve-ra plus: Quand nous con-tem-ple-rans ta Vé-ri-té, Dans des corps purs, jea-nes, é-ter-nel-le-ment lu-mi-neux." The score includes dynamic markings such as "f", "p", "mf", and "pp", and tempo changes like "Rall.". The piano accompaniment features complex chords and rhythmic patterns, including a pentatonic chord at the end.

³⁷Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (London: Faber, 1985), 79.

“Épouvante”

The cycle takes a dramatic turn with “Épouvante,” which translates to “terror.” The poem is written using the conditional tense, which clarifies that this is a warning of what could come rather than what is inevitable. The song begins with agonizing moans that descend into the fiery depths of hell via octave chromatic scales a perfect fourth and an augmented fourth apart, supported by a C major chord and a cluster of notes. The moans are accompanied by a thicker texture than previous songs and sounds mostly in the bass clef, symbolizing hell. The singer is placed in a vulnerable part of the range, with a tonal center on middle C, reciting the warnings of what may come when one focuses their attention too much in earthly pleasures. The piano includes plummeting, percussive lines that increase in volume and intensity with each repetition (see Musical Example 7). This warning is strengthened through the surrealism inserted throughout the poem, including, “Des lambeaux sanglants te suivraient dans les ténèbres comme une vomissure triangulaire” (“Bloody shreds that would follow you in the darkness as a triangular vomit”). While these images may seem unusual, the intent behind them is clear. Messiaen includes a whole-tone scale in the vocal line, which is doubled—though difficult to hear—in the piano part. This is a musical culmination of the fear and anguish the protagonist envisions may result if he does not follow God, and leads to the high B-flat. The tormenting visions of fire are musically represented by mode 2², which is supposed to represent God’s love. This insertion cannot be by accident, and is likely Messiaen’s way of reminding the listener that God is present even in times of struggle. Images of darkness and despair make way for more troubled moans, which Messiaen transforms into a polymodal “Boris motif” with mode 2² returning to the vocal line and 3⁴ in the piano. In addition to the

polymodality in measures 40-41, Messiaen increased the rhythmic complexity of the moans, with measures of 16 and 42 sixteenth-note beats respectively. Not only do his musical choices create an extension of suffering, they add to the challenges for the performer. The climax is reached two measures later with the protagonist's descending outcries at *fortississimo*, which seem to be in vain. Messiaen wrote two descending tritone moans for the protagonist, before he is defeated in a final chromatic groan, followed by a percussive fall in the piano. Although Messiaen never comes out and mentions "hell," one could conclude that this poem describes his own personal vision of hell through the potential loss of his beloved and his relationship with God.

Musical Example 7: Plummeting Lines Paired with Surrealist Poetry in Measures 13-18 of Olivier Messiaen's "Épouvante"

The image shows a musical score for measures 13-18 of Olivier Messiaen's "Épouvante". It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is written in a single staff with lyrics underneath. The piano accompaniment is written in two staves (treble and bass clef). The score includes dynamic markings such as *p*, *cresc.*, and *cresc. sempre*. The lyrics are: "Des lambeaux san-glants te suivraient dans les té-né-bres Comme u-ne vo-mis-su... re tri-an-gu-lai..". The music is characterized by complex rhythms and a descending melodic line in the vocal part.

“L’épouse”

As the heart of the cycle and arguably the most beautiful of the songs, “L’épouse” (The Wife) offers a hopeful message through poetry and symbolic references to the Holy Trinity. The focus of the poem lies in the covenant of marriage and the sacrament of husband and wife to God. “L’épouse” describes both the secular “wife” and the bride of Christ, specifically the Church. In this text, Messiaen draws from Matthew and Ephesians to strengthen this message.³⁸ While the other songs have been from the point of view of the protagonist, one could argue that this poem is told from the view of the Holy Spirit. Bruhn argues that it is unclear whether or not the protagonist is speaking directly to his beloved, or if he is directing the words toward himself for assurance.³⁹

³⁸ These scripture readings underline love and obedience shared between Man and Wife. Through Christ’s sacrifice, these things are made possible. Messiaen and Matthew draw parallels between the Wife as an extension of the Husband and the Church as an extension of Christ.

“Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.” (Matthew 19:6, New Century Version)

“Wives, yield to your husbands, as you do to the Lord, because the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church. And he is the Savior of the body, which is the church. As the church yields to Christ, so you wives should yield to your husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it to make it belong to God. Christ used the word to make the church clean by washing it with water. He died so that he could give the church to himself like a bride in all her beauty. He died so that the church could be pure and without fault, with no evil or sin or any other wrong thing in it. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they love their own bodies. The man who loves his wife loves himself. No one ever hates his own body, but feeds and takes care of it. And that is what Christ does for the church, because we are parts of his body. The Scripture says, “So a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two will become one body.” That secret is very important—I am talking about Christ and the church. But each one of you must love his wife as he loves himself, and a wife must respect her husband.” (Ephesians 5:22-33, New Century Version)

³⁹ Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Exploration of Love and Death*, 85

The evidence of symbolism related to the Holy Trinity is substantial. Messiaen composed the song in thirteen measures. This number is symbolic throughout the Bible, with negative and positive connotations. Considering the context of Messiaen's poetry, his use of the number thirteen likely makes reference to great blessing and promise, as well as to new life. The poem includes three people: the husband, the wife, and Christ. The composer divides the song into three sections with three refrains of "Va où l'Esprit te mène" ("Go where the spirit leads you"), each growing in dynamic level. Messiaen used all three transpositions of mode 2 throughout the song, the mode known by this point for its association with God and his love. The number of sixteenth notes in each measure is divisible by three, with the exception of the penultimate measure. This measure is a repetition of the previous measure, however it has two additional beats, totaling 29. Messiaen elongates the line, "Comme l'Eglise est le prolongement..." ("As the church is the extension...") to emphasize from *whom* the church extends —Christ.

"Ta voix"

"Ta voix" ("Your voice") depicts an image of heaven and the promise of eternal happiness. Other than the "Alleluia" vocalise of "Action," it is the only song that includes a key signature, which is in F# major (just like the "Alleluia"). The protagonist imagines his beloved singing praises to the Father, and through these praises, she is made more beautiful and angelic: an incorporeal angel, a bird of spring. The pianist presents a polyrhythmic ostinato, though the irregularity in some measures muddies the pattern. This song follows a clear ABA' form with the B section reverting to polymodality. Although the first five measures of each A section can be subdivided into thirteen beats of sixteenth

notes, the remainder of the song is rhythmically complex, in that the rhythms do not follow a clear pattern, making the counting of this song especially challenging. Following the final statement of the A' section, the pianist has a one-measure cadenza, totaling ninety-nine sixteenth-note beats. The rhythms are reminiscent of the "Boris motif" and their asymmetry imitates the song of a bird. Though Messiaen did not begin his "Bird Song" period until the 1950's, his fascination with birds and their tunes was evident beginning in his mid-teens. Therefore, while this may not be representative of a specific bird, the asymmetrical writing and the sextuplets doubled at the octave beyond the A above the staff provide the impression of bird song. The vocal line following this reads, "You would sing," which directly corresponds to the "Bird of Spring" mentioned directly before the "bird song" occurs, making this a likely interpretation.

Like "Épouvante," the poetry of "Ta voix" makes use of the conditional tense, though not as a warning. Described by Bruhn as "spiritually complementary," "Épouvante," pairs nicely with "Ta voix," as they provide drastically different poetic and emotional responses. The two poems create vivid parallels: images of light and dark, heaven and hell. A new awakening calms shrieks of fear and suffering. Despair is replaced with hope.⁴⁰

"Les deux guerriers"

"Les deux guerriers" describes husband and wife as "two warriors" united and marching their way toward the gates of heaven. The message here is unlike "La maison" and functions as a warning, suggesting that without action, nothing is granted or given. As husband and wife, the warriors must fight their way together into the Holy City. Though

⁴⁰ Bruhn, *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death*, 83-84.

these are Messiaen's words, again he borrows from a Bible passage, Ephesians 6:10-17.⁴¹ Like "Épouvante," the vocal line of "Les deux guerriers" explores the lower range of the soprano voice. These sections are unaccompanied, perhaps because Messiaen was aware that the notes would be difficult to project.

The song is broken into three clear sections, ABA' and makes use of transpositions in modes 2, 3, and 4. Similar to the poetic symmetry found in "La maison," this song has poetic symmetry worth noting. It begins, "De deux nous voici un..." ("Behold us two in one...") referring to Husband and Wife, now united and in search for the Holy Land. In the measure prior to the return of A' the poem reads, "Je suis tes deux enfants, mon Dieu! ("I am your two children, my God..."), making reference again to this unity of the two people and their connection to him. Musically, the melodic contour of this measure is reminiscent of the "Va" section of "L'épouse," which could imply that a transition in the relationship has occurred—possibly the Husband and Wife have strengthened their bond with one another and God (see Musical Examples 8a and 8b). Messiaen includes word painting in the piano part of measure 24 with grace note gestures that imitate the "Lancez vers le ciel les flèches du dévouement d'aurore" ("arrows launching into the sky...") before shifting to mode 2¹

⁴¹ "Finally be strong in the Lord and in his great power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can fight against the devil's evil tricks. Our fight is not against people on earth but against the rulers and authorities and the powers of this world's darkness, against the spiritual powers of evil in the heavenly world. That is why you need to put on God's armor. Then on the day of evil you will be able to stand strong. And when you have finished the whole fight, you will still be standing. So stand strong, with the belt of truth tied around your waist and the protection of right living on your chest. On your feet wear the Good News of peace to help you stand strong. And also use the shield of faith with which you can stop all the burning arrows of the Evil One. Accept God's salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." (Ephesians 6:10-17, New Century Version)

(God's love) to anticipate the final line, "Vous parviendrez aux portes de la Ville" ("You will arrive at the gates of the city").

Musical Example 8a: Measures 17-18 of Olivier Messiaen's "Les deux guerriers"



Musical Example 8b: Measure 1 of Olivier Messiaen's "L'épouse"



"Le collier"

In the entire cycle, "Le collier" ("The Necklace") is the only song that insinuates romantic intimacy, and like "Paysage," makes no direct reference to God. Musically, this is represented with the omission of mode 2¹. Messiaen composed a pattern of four chords using mode 3¹ in the right hand of the piano to imitate the circular pattern of the necklace (see Musical Example 9). This pattern begins and ends on a C minor triad, giving it a clear beginning and ending. In addition, the left hand of the piano is in mode 2², resulting in a polymodal color that seems to represent the colors of the rainbow and the exoticism of the

“necklace” itself. The poetry shifts between nature, “Printemps enchaîné...” and “Paysage courbe...” (“Captive spring” and “Curved landscape”) and the “necklace.” Through surrealist poetry, he describes this treasured necklace as a “Petit soutien vivant...Collier de renouveau” (“Tiny living cushion...necklace of renewal”). It becomes clear that the beloved supports the protagonist, particularly in times of strife. This is one of the only examples in this poem of Messiaen’s reference to human love. He brings attention to this “necklace” through the music, specifically in measures 19-23. Here, Messiaen’s setting of “Collier d’Orient, collier choisi...” (“necklace of the Orient, necklace chosen...”) borrows from the following modes: Mixolydian, Aeolian, Ionian, and Lydian.⁴² These modes are sounded consecutively by means of stacked chords in the left and right hand of the piano. The pattern is repeated five times. This is the only place Messiaen incorporated these modes, strengthening the argument that he wanted to bring attention to how special and exotic the necklace was (see Musical Example 10). In the final statement of A’ there are a few things worth mentioning. First, Messiaen’s use of silence; after the final “Ah mon collier” (“Ah, my necklace...”) the music stops, before revealing that the “necklace” is a symbol for “Tes deux bras autour de mon cou, ce matin” (“Your two arms around my neck this morning”). This silence heightens the importance of this moment. To imitate the shape of the beloved’s arms, Messiaen ended the song with a return of the opening circular pattern of “Le collier” (“the necklace”). Like “Paysage,” this song ends sounding unresolved, which makes the anticipation of the final song that much stronger.

⁴² Yun Lee, "Symmetry and Symbolic Language in Olivier Messiaen's "Poèmes pour Mi": A Musical Reflection on Divine and Conjugal Love" (doctoral dissertation, Boston University, 2009), 135, accessed 13 January 2016, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/304850662?accountid=14556>.

Musical Example 9: Circular pattern of “the Necklace” in Measures 1-3 of Olivier Messiaen’s “Le collier”

CHANT *Modéré, un peu vif p*

PIANO *p*

Prin - temps en - chai - né,

Musical Example 10: “Exotic” use of Medieval Modes in Measures 20-23 of Olivier Messiaen’s “Le collier”

CHANT *cresc.*

PIANO *cresc.*

ent, col - lier choi - si mul - ti - co - lore aux per - les du - res et co -

“Prière exaucée”

The final poem, “Prière exaucée” (‘Prayer Answered’) is an appropriate conclusion to Messiaen’s cycle. The form is AA’B and creates a balance with the return to prayer and reflection found in the opening song “Action de grâces.” The protagonist is weary and pleading, asking for God to “Ebranlez la solitaire la vieille montagne de douleur” (“shake the lonely old mountain of pain”) and for healing of the soul. The vocal line is a chant that centers on A. The piano begins with a combination of A major, which ties it to “Action,” and C# major. Here again Messiaen references the Eucharist as it was in the opening song, and an extended melisma is sung on the word “âme” (“soul”). Begging for God’s grace, the

poem transforms as it enters the *Très vif* at the B section—musically the prayer has been answered. Messiaen creates onomatopoeic gestures in the vocal line for “Frappe, tape, choque pour ton roi [Dieu]!” (“strike, beat, ring for your king [God]”) (see Musical Example 11). This repetition increases the excitement until it reaches the climax with the “gloire et de resurrection” (“glory and the resurrection”). Here, the singer has a final celebratory melisma on the word “joy” with what begin as the same rhythms, but end with the notes elongated in anticipation of the final realization that “La joie est revenue” (“joy has returned”).

Musical Example 11: Use of Onomatopoeia in Measure 20 of Olivier Messiaen’s “Prière exaucée”



CONCLUSION

It is clear that *Poèmes pour Mi*, though early in his musical output, contains many early illustrations of Messiaen’s most important musical and literary devices: the influence of spirituality, numerical symbols, modal vocabulary, musical colors, and the “Boris motif.” On the whole, *Poèmes pour Mi*, represents a young composer’s efforts to assemble and develop a distinct compositional language. It deserves to be regarded as a significant

and prototypical vocal work of Olivier Messiaen's complete output and an historically significant landmark in the composer's maturation. In studying *Poèmes*, one can gain a better understanding of what Messiaen considered important in a composition, and then determine the most ideal way to perform his works.

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