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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

AN ANALYSIS AND PERFORMANCE GUIDE OF OLIVIER MESSIAEN'S
CHANTS DE TERRE ET DE CIEL

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Arts

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College of Performing and Visual Arts
School of Music
Collaborative Piano

August 2022

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has been approved as meeting the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Arts in the College of Performing and Visual Arts in the School of Music, Program of Collaborative Piano

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation presents an analysis of musical elements in Olivier Messiaen's *Chants de terre et de ciel* in order to facilitate performance preparation of the work. To begin, general information about Messiaen's religious and musical upbringing is introduced, as well as relevant details of his marriage to Claire Delbos and the birth of their son, Pascal. This is followed by a discussion of the poems which Messiaen set in the *Chants* and their surrealistic aspects. The musical analysis begins with an examination of Messiaen's compositional techniques as outlined in *Technique de mon langage musical*, followed by discussions of those elements as they appear in the *Chants*. The songs are analyzed according to Messiaen's modes of limited transposition, *accords spéciaux*, other means of pitch organization, and rhythmic organizations. Finally, the author presents practical guidance to aid performance preparation of the *Chants*. This guidance addresses several performance considerations particular to Messiaen and includes specific counting and coordination strategies to assist the pianist, singer, and ensemble. The analysis of the poetry, music, and performance considerations in this dissertation aims to support performers in developing an understanding of musical organization in the *Chants* and devising strategies for effective rehearsal of the work.

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DEDICATION

To Harold Brown

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines specific aspects of Olivier Messiaen's song cycle *Chants de terre et de ciel* with a view to facilitating performance preparation for those seeking to master it. The six songs' poetic content, musical material and compositional processes are discussed, and pianistic and ensemble issues inherent in the cycle are explored. Existing literature and research about the *Chants* have not thoroughly addressed pianistic and ensemble issues which may arise during preparation of the cycle.

This introduction provides relevant biographical information and a literature review. Messiaen's biography is discussed in as far as it supports an understanding of the *Chants*. His upbringing by a mother who was a poetess and a father who was an English teacher provide context for Messiaen's literary background and inspirations. His professional life as a young musician from the time of his completion of studies at the Conservatoire de Paris in 1930 through the publication of the *Chants de terre et de ciel* in 1939 is explored. It was during this period of his early career that Olivier met his first wife, Claire Delbos, who stands as a major figure in the subject matter of the *Chants de terre et de ciel* as well as his earlier song cycle *Poèmes pour Mi*, composed in 1936-1937. Their son, Pascal Emmanuel, to whom two of the songs of the *Chants de terre et de ciel* are dedicated, was born in 1937. Following this biographical information is a brief discussion of Messiaen's concept of "theological music" as an

artistic approach distinct from that of religious or liturgical music. This chapter concludes with a review of the existing literature that focuses in whole or in part on the *Chants de terre et de ciel*.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 focus respectively on the poetic content, musical material, and performance issues of the cycle. The discussion of the poems aims to elucidate Messiaen's poetic tendencies, including the numerous religious references, his predilection for the poetic style of the surrealist tradition, and references to Messiaen's familial and religious life. Chapter 3 discusses Messiaen's early compositional style, as outlined in his *Technique de mon langage musical*, with numerous examples from the *Chants de terre et de ciel*. This includes discussions of Messiaen's strategies of pitch organization, form, rhythmic organization, and other aspects of his style. Where applicable, these compositional strategies are connected to subject matter or aspects of the forms of the songs. Chapter 4 begins by outlining general characteristics of Messiaen's writing for the piano, followed by discussions of the different types of pianistic issues that frequently arise in the cycle, including issues at the keyboard, in the use of the pedals, and in maintaining clarity and balance among the musical layers. A discussion of Messiaen's rhythmic language follows, including a detailed approach to how the ensemble may reconcile certain coordination challenges relating to Messiaen's treatment of pulse and rhythm.

Biography and Background of the Cycle

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) was a composer, organist, and ornithologist whose music reflects the deeply held beliefs of his Catholic faith. He was born in Avignon, France to a literary family, and his interests in both music and literature were fostered by his parents from a young age. His father, Pierre Messiaen (1883-1957), was an English teacher who translated the works of Shakespeare into French, and his mother was the poetess Cécile Sauvage (1883-1927).

Through his interests in music and literature, Messiaen sought to write music which reflected his experiences of the Catholic faith.

Messiaen claimed that as a child he lived daily in the midst of Shakespearean heroes, acting out all of Shakespeare's plays in front of home-made sets made of colored cellophane for an audience of one, his younger brother Alain (1912-1990), who would become an author and poet.¹ Among his literary and artistic influences was certainly his mother, and in particular a set of her poems called *L'âme en bourgeon* (The Budding Soul), which she wrote while pregnant with Olivier. Cécile would pass away in 1927 when Messiaen was only nineteen years old, and he positions her as his most formative influence in his *Technique de mon langage musical*.² Messiaen claimed that this set of poems she wrote about her unborn child influenced his entire life, and even believed that it had power over his destiny.³ The love of the written word and drama was strong in the Messiaen house, and it is clearly manifested in Olivier's musical works.

When Messiaen completed his studies at the Paris Conservatory in 1930, he had been the assistant to Charles Quef, organist at the Église de la Sainte-Trinité, for one year. Quef died in 1931. At the age of twenty-two, Messiaen was far younger than any other titular organist in Paris, but with the help of Charles Tournemire and Marcel Dupré, he was awarded the position. At the time, many viewed Messiaen as a controversial choice, partly due to his age and his only having two years' experience as a church organist, but also because of his music. Before Quef's death, Messiaen had already felt that some viewed his music in a negative light, prompting him to write a letter to the church curate at the time of the search for a replacement organist in order

¹ Bernard Gavoty, "Who are you, Olivier Messiaen?", *Tempo* 58 (Summer 1961): 34, <https://jstor.org/stable/944251>.

² Olivier Messiaen, *Technique of my musical language*, trans. John Satterfield (Paris, France: Alphonse Leduc, 1944; repr., Paris, France: Alphonse Leduc, 2001), 7.

³ Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 11.

to defend himself against the idea that he was “incapable of writing anything but dissonances,” a musical criticism he would regularly defend against throughout his life.⁴ In the early years of his position, Messiaen was still learning how to reconcile his artistic instincts with the necessities of his job and the sensibilities of the members of the congregation, later recalling that he was “the object of hatred and protest from the parishioners, especially the old ladies who heard the devil in the organ pipes.”⁵ Messiaen would hold this position at the Trinité for sixty years, up until his death in 1992. Although Messiaen wanted to make his name as a composer rather than an organist, this appointment marked the beginning of his professional career as a musician.

Aside from his duties at the Trinité, which he fulfilled diligently, Messiaen received a second appointment as teacher at the École Normale de Musique, perhaps as early as 1932 (Messiaen himself was inconsistent in his accounts of when he began this position). These positions, along with his being elected as member of the Société nationale de musique in 1932, solidified his standing within Parisian music circles. His election to the Société nationale was of particular significance because it gave him sway over which pieces of new music would be accepted and given support for performances.⁶ He would be tasked with sight reading up to two-hundred pieces up for selection at a time, and it was through this work that he came to know many young composers, among them André Jolivet, who would become one of Messiaen’s most kindred artistic spirits.

Although Messiaen was private about his personal life, it was certainly around this time that he began forming a relationship with the violinist and composer Claire Delbos (1906-1959),

⁴ Christopher Dingle, *The Life of Messiaen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 42.

⁵ Claude Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color*, trans. E. Thomas Glasgow (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1994), 118.

⁶ Dingle, *The Life of Olivier Messiaen*, 43.

for the following year, on June 22nd, 1932, Messiaen and Delbos were married. Claire was already an accomplished composer at the time of their marriage, and she was a significant influence on Messiaen both personally and musically. He names her as an influence in the *Technique de mon langage musical* second only to his own mother.⁷ Perhaps because of the care with which Messiaen had to navigate his music making at the Trinité, he wrote surprisingly few organ works during the early 1930s, and in an effort to advance his compositional career, he was more focused on pieces for the concert hall. One such piece was the *Thème et variations* for violin and piano, written for the newlywed couple to perform together. Claire would serve as the subject and direct inspiration for other works, most explicitly his three song cycles: *Poèmes pour Mi* (1936), *Chants de terre et de ciel* (1938), and *Harawi* (1945).

The early years of their marriage were generally happy, although Messiaen began National Service for the French military in 1933, putting even greater constraints on his work as a teacher and organist, sometimes requiring him to be away from family and work for weeks or months. While demanding of his time, his Service was not physically taxing, as Messiaen may have been judged unfit for certain tasks even within a conscript army and was eventually assigned the duty of giving harmony lessons to the officers and soldiers, preparing two assignments for them every day.⁸ Personally, the young couple suffered the pain of several miscarriages during the first five years of their marriage. During this time, Messiaen composed the *Poèmes pour Mi*, his first song cycle comprising nine of his own poems centered around the celebration of his domestic life with Mi, his affectionate name for Claire.

⁷ Messiaen, *Technique*, 7.

⁸ Dingle, *The Life of Olivier Messiaen*, 46.

In 1937, on July 14th, Olivier and Claire's first and only child was born. He was named Pascal Emmanuel, with his baptismal names signifying the resurrection and deliverance from bondage (Pascal), and the name given to the child who shall be born of a virgin and whom the Christian tradition identifies as Jesus (Emmanuel; Hebrew for "God with us").⁹ Messiaen referred to his son by the affection name "Pilule," which literally means pill in English. The birth of Pascal was a momentous occasion for Messiaen and Delbos and was the event that inspired the writing of the *Chants de terre et de ciel* (Songs of heaven and earth), the focus of the present study.

The *Chants de terre et de ciel* (hereafter *Chants*) is a cycle of six songs for which Messiaen composed both the poems and music. The songs are domestically inspired, based on his familial life with his wife Claire and their newborn son Pascal. They can be divided into a "trptych of diptychs," with the first two songs focused on Claire, the central two songs dedicated to Pascal, and the final two songs turning towards Messiaen and a contemplation of the Resurrection.¹⁰ Messiaen composed nothing for the remainder of the year of Pascal's birth, limiting himself only to orchestrating the *Poèmes pour Mi*. The young family relocated to the east side of Paris, and in 1938 Messiaen began work on the *Chants* the following summer, which the family spent in Petichet outside Grenoble, Messiaen's regular summer home.¹¹

⁹ Richard D. E. Burton, *Olivier Messiaen: Texts, Contexts, and Intertexts*, ed. Roger Nichols (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 17.

¹⁰ Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 86.

¹¹ Harry Halbreich, *Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, France: Fayard, 1980), 328.

The work premiered in 1939. Sources differ on the date of this event. Some say the performance took place on March 6th of that year,¹² while others claim the premier took place in January.¹³ The performance certainly took place as part of the Concerts du Triton, a concert series dedicated to contemporary music. The premier was given by Messiaen himself and the French dramatic soprano Marcelle Bunlet.¹⁴ Messiaen wrote all three of his song cycles with Bunlet in mind, who also performed Claire Delbos's *L'Âme en bourgeon*, a setting of the poems by Messiaen's mother. Messiaen praised Bunlet as "a marvelous singer and wonderful musician who had a very flexible voice and extended tessitura and who sang *Isolde*, *Kundry*, and *Brünnhilde* effortlessly."¹⁵ The premier was given under the title *Prismes: Six poèmes d'Olivier Messiaen* and was changed to *Chants de terre et de ciel* for publication in April of that year.

The joy of Pascal's arrival would remain, but not without significant hardship in the coming years. In September of 1939, France would mobilize its army and Messiaen was called to duty, forcing him to leave his wife and young child. In May of 1940, he was captured and sent to Stalag VIII-A, a prisoner-of-war camp outside Görlitz, Germany, where he famously wrote the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*. Messiaen had returned to France by March of 1941, rejoining Claire and Pascal. As terrible an experience as this may have been for Messiaen and his family, far worse were the signs of dementia he began to see in Claire during the 1940s. Claire's condition weighed heavily on Messiaen until 1946 when he made the decision to move her to a care facility in Lourdes, France. In 1949 she had to undergo a procedure which caused her to

¹² Siglind Bruhn, *Olivier Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death* (Hillsdale, New York: Pendragon Press, 2008), 89; Halbreich, *Olivier Messiaen*, 328.

¹³ Burton, *Olivier Messiaen: Texts Contexts, and Intertexts*, 18.

¹⁴ Bruhn, *Olivier Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death*, 89.

¹⁵ Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color*, 128.

suffer, as Messiaen said, “a post-operative shock as a result of which she lost her memory, all her memory, and then, little by little, her sanity. It was dreadful, for her above all, but more appalling still for my little boy who didn’t understand what was happening.”¹⁶ By 1953, Claire had lost the use of her eyes, movement, and her ability to recognize people. Despite the loss of her mental faculties, Claire remained in fair physical health until her rather unexpected death in April 1959. By the end, Claire had suffered from her illness for about fifteen years and the couple had been married for twenty-seven.

Messiaen would write one more song cycle, *Harawi*, in 1945. Although not so explicitly associated with Claire as his first two, the cycle was certainly written with Claire in mind.¹⁷ *Harawi* was the first of three pieces that constitute Messiaen’s “Tristan trilogy”, which also includes the *Turangalîla* symphony and the choral work *Cinq Rechants*, and all focus on human – as opposed to divine – love. Messiaen experienced Claire’s mental decline of the early 1940s as a deathlike loss, as depicted by the valedictory images of the cycle.¹⁸ Such is the text of “adieu,” which reads: “Farewell to you, my heaven on earth, Farewell to you, desert who cries, Mirror without the breath of love, Of flower, of night, of fruit, of heaven, of day, Forever.”¹⁹ Claire was still at home with her family at this time, only being admitted to full-time care the following year. Following *Harawi*, Messiaen would never again return to the song cycle genre so deeply linked to his wife. The period of gradual decline in Claire and her eventual death weighed

¹⁶ Dingle, *The Life of Olivier Messiaen*, 98.

¹⁷ Dingle, *The Life of Olivier Messiaen*, 109.

¹⁸ Robert Fallon, “Dante as Guide to Messiaen’s Gothic Spirituality,” in *Messiaen the Theologian*, ed. Andrew Shenton (Farnham, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2010; repr. Abingdon, England: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 130.

¹⁹ Dingle, *The Live of Olivier Messiaen*, 110.

heavily on Messiaen. Antoine Goléa, a musicologist who published interviews with Messiaen, said:

For a long time, Messiaen kept these terrible things to himself, and when asked about his wife, he limited himself to vague answers about her illness, and that she had been a very fine artist before falling ill. Later, when he could no longer hide the truth, he spoke of her as a saint, owing to her long and tragic martyrdom.²⁰

In the *Chants*, we have the last song cycle of Messiaen which is characterized by unbridled joy. At the time of its composition, Messiaen would have been enjoying the successes of his early career as a composer and organist as well as those of his roles as husband and father. Pascal had just passed his first birthday when Messiaen likely began composing the cycle, and the couple had been married for six years. Throughout his life, Messiaen remained joyful through his faith, and later through his marriage to the pianist Yvonne Loriod, but the years in which the *Chants* were composed and first performed were certainly some of Messiaen's most joyous.

Literature Review

In the newest edition of Vincent Benitez's *Olivier Messiaen: A Research and Information Guide*,²¹ there is one entry that focuses solely on the *Chants de terre et de ciel*: Sally Freeland's doctoral dissertation *The Divine in Messiaen's Chants de terre et de ciel: Theological Symbolism and Suggestions for Practice and Performance*.²² Freeland provides robust biographical context and an investigation into the religious references of the poetry. The first two chapters provide information on Messiaen's musical and religious upbringing and a summary of the contents of

²⁰ Dingle, *The Life of Olivier Messiaen*, 153.

²¹ Vincent Benitez, *Olivier Messiaen: A Research and Information Guide*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018).

²² Sally Freeland, "The Divine in Messiaen's *Chants de terre et de ciel*: Theological Symbolism and Suggestions for Practice and Performance" (DMA Diss., Indiana University, 2012), <https://hdl.handle.net/2022/14330>.

his treatise *Technique de mon langage musical*,²³ arguing that Messiaen's music is theological as well as evangelical. Messiaen himself preferred the label "theological" for his music,²⁴ and the idea that Messiaen's music was evangelical is also explored by Messiaen scholar Andrew Shenton.²⁵ After this general discussion of Messiaen's compositional style and artistic vision, Freeland highlights important aspects of the poetry, form, motivic content, and relation between the poetry and music in a song-by-song analysis. These chapters each end with a lengthy discussion of vocal matters and ways to address performance issues for the singer, focusing primarily on the production of correct pitches and rhythms, and navigating challenges related to tessitura, musical character, dynamics, and tone production. In Messiaen's own words, the *Chants* and his other cycles are "very long, very tiring for the breath, and require a very wide vocal range."²⁶ Freeland's investigation of the religious meanings of the song texts is thorough and supports a full understanding of the cycle.

Freeland's work is the most comprehensive existing dissertation dedicated to understanding the *Chants*, but the omission of certain types of analyses is notable. Aside from references to the relationship between text and form, there are few specific references to Messiaen's compositional approach in the individual songs. Theoretical analysis manifests only in broad observations about the texture and sound profile of each song. Messiaen's use of non-retrogradable and Hindu rhythms, modes of limited transposition, and his "special chords" are all mentioned at least once in the introductory chapters, but none of these are identified in the

²³ Olivier Messiaen, *Technique of my musical language*, trans. John Satterfield (Paris, France: Alphonse Leduc, 1944; repr., Paris, France: Alphonse Leduc, 2001).

²⁴ Aloyse Michaely, *Die Musik Olivier Messiaens*, (Hamburg: Karl Dieter Wagner, 1987), 4.

²⁵ Andrew Shenton, *Messiaen's System of Signs* (Farnham, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2008; repr. Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2016), 18-19.

²⁶ Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color*, 128.

analyses aside from two passing references to Messiaen's use of modes. Little discussion of Messiaen's rhythmic and text-setting strategies is provided, and the dissertation notably contains no musical examples. The document also lacks any suggestions for practice for the pianist and makes no reference to any rehearsal strategies for the ensemble.

Two earlier Master's theses on the *Chants* are also available. These are *Analysis of Olivier Messiaen's "Chants de terre et de ciel" from the perspective of The technique of my musical language*²⁷ by Lizanne Keith and *Olivier Messiaen, a biographical inquiry and analysis of Chants de terre et de ciel*²⁸ by Patty Darrough. Keith takes as the basis for her thesis a statement Messiaen made in the closing paragraph of the *Technique de mon langage musical*, in which he advises readers who desire to understand his music better to begin by reading his first two song cycles, *Poèmes pour Mi* and *Chants de terre et de ciel*.²⁹ Based on this statement, Keith's research aims to identify the elements mentioned in the *Technique* in a song-by-song analysis of the *Chants*, and in one sense the thesis focuses more on identification of what is described in Messiaen's writing than on thorough analysis of the cycle itself. Each song analysis is structured around identifying the formal, rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic aspects mentioned by Messiaen in the *Technique*. The thesis is strictly a theoretical analysis, making no reference to poetic content, musical meaning, sound, or performance considerations. While the analysis is accurate and informative, the guiding light of the thesis is the *Technique* rather than the music of the *Chants*. Darrough's thesis is a biography of Messiaen in the 1930s and an overview of his early style that uses the *Chants* as a basis for the discussion of his musical style. It does not

²⁷ Lizanne Keith, "Analysis of Olivier Messiaen's "Chants de terre et de ciel" from the perspective of The technique of my musical language" (MM thesis, University of Tulsa, 1997)

²⁸ Patty Darrough, "Olivier Messiaen, a biographical inquiry and analysis of Chants de terre et de ciel" (MM Thesis, California State University Fullerton, 1984).

²⁹ Messiaen, *Technique*, 109.

provide a thorough musical or poetic analysis, although some aspects of each are included in the discussion of each song. Similarly to Keith, this thesis uses the *Chants* as a vehicle for discussing aspects of Messiaen and his early style.

Important biographies of Messiaen are also referenced. Most important among these is *Messiaen*³⁰ by Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, unique among Messiaen biographies due to Yvonne Loriod's permission for the authors to draw from Messiaen's personal archive of letters, diaries, musical notebooks, and other documents. Other traditional biographies include Roger Nichol's *Messiaen*³¹ and Christopher Dingle's *The Life of Messiaen*.³² More specifically related to the period of the *Chants*, the dissertation *Recontextualising Messiaen's Early Career*³³ by Stephen Broad examines Messiaen's position within the French tradition, questioning the perception of Messiaen as a musician divorced from the main artistic currents of the twentieth century. The dissertation provides a comprehensive study of Messiaen's own published writings, as well as his relationship with and care for Claire Delbos.

Messiaen was unusual among composers for his use almost exclusively of his own poetry in his songs, choral works, and opera, and his poetic style shares many commonalities with that of surrealism. An overview of his poetry in relation to the poetic tradition of surrealism is given in the chapter "Messiaen and Surrealism: A Study of his Poetry" by Larry W. Peterson in the book *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love*, edited by Siglind Bruhn.³⁴ Further information

³⁰ Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

³¹ Roger Nichols, *Messiaen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

³² Christopher Dingle, *The Life of Messiaen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³³ Stephen Broad, *Recontextualising Messiaen's Early Career* (DPhil Diss., Oxford University, 2005), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

³⁴ Siglind Bruhn, ed., *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998).

about the biographical and religious context for Messiaen's poetry is provided by Richard Burton in his book *Olivier Messiaen: Texts, Contexts, and Intertexts*.³⁵ Given Messiaen's penchant for the application of extra-musical meanings even in his non-vocal works such as the *Vingt regards sur l'enfant-Jésus* or the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, this book examines Messiaen's epigraphs, vocal texts, preface notes, and other writings from the cultural contexts to which Messiaen belonged. Much comparison occurs between the texts of the *Chants* and the *Poèmes pour Mi*. The chapter "Messiaen's Theology" from Andrew Shenton's *Messiaen's System of Signs*³⁶ and his book *Messiaen the Theologian*³⁷ are reviewed to form an understanding of religious references and the personal meanings these held for Messiaen. An encyclopedic investigation of all Messiaen's religious metaphors and references as well as literary influences is conducted in the book *Die Musik Olivier Messiaens*³⁸ by Aloyse Michaely.

Messiaen was also known for the use of symbolism in his music and complex semiotic depictions of his titles, epigraphs, and vocal texts. By far the most extensive analysis of the semiotic relationship between the music and texts in this cycle was conducted by Siglind Bruhn in her book *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death*.³⁹ This study provides translations and a song-by-song analysis of striking or symbolically relevant aspects of the work. The complex ways in which Messiaen encoded extra-musical meanings into his compositions have been a

³⁵ Richard D. E. Burton, *Olivier Messiaen: Texts, Contexts, and Intertexts*, ed. Roger Nichols (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016)

³⁶ Andrew Shenton, *Messiaen's System of Signs* (Farnham, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2008; repr. Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315090368>.

³⁷ Andrew Shenton, ed., *Messiaen the Theologian* (Farnham, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2010; repr. Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315091228>.

³⁸ Aloyse Michaely, *Die Musik Olivier Messiaens* (Hamburg: Karl Dieter Wagner, 1987).

³⁹ Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death* (Hillsdale, New York: Pendragon Press, 2008).

subject of interest in Messiaen research, and Bruhn offers many insights in this regard. A more thorough investigation of Messiaen's semiotics is available in Andrew Shenton's *Olivier Messiaen's System of Signs*, although he does not specifically address the *Chants*.

While few publications focus specifically on musical analysis of the *Chants*, several texts focus on portions of the cycle or relevant aspects of Messiaen's style. These include Robert Sherlaw Johnson's *Messiaen*,⁴⁰ Paul Griffith's *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*,⁴¹ and Gareth Healey's *Messiaen's Musical Techniques: The Composer's View and Beyond*.⁴² The articles "Rediscovering Messiaen's Invented Chords"⁴³ and "Messiaen's Chord Tables: Ordering the Disordered"⁴⁴ by Wai-Ling Cheong, "Aspects of Harmony in Messiaen's Later Music: An Examination of the Chords of Transposed Inversions on the Same Bass Note"⁴⁵ by Vincent Benitez, and "Resonance: Unifying Factor in Messiaen's *Accords Spéciaux*"⁴⁶ by James Mittelstadt provide insight into the development from Messiaen's early "invented chords" to his later ones.

⁴⁰ Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975; repr. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989).

⁴¹ Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).

⁴² Gareth Healey, *Messiaen's Musical Techniques: The Composer's View and Beyond* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2013).

⁴³ Wai-Ling Cheong, "Rediscovering Messiaen's Invented Chords," *Acta Musicologica* 75, no. 1 (2003): 85-105, <https://jstor.org/stable/25071211>.

⁴⁴ Wai-Ling Cheong, "Messiaen's Chord Tables: Ordering the Disordered," *Tempo* 57, no. 226 (2003): 2-10. <https://jstor.org/stable/3878858>.

⁴⁵ Vincent Benitez, "Aspects of Harmony in Messiaen's Later Music: An Examination of the Chords of Transposed Inversions on the Same Bass Note," *Journal of Musicological Research* 23, no. 2 (2004): 187-226, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411890490449781>.

⁴⁶ James Mittelstadt, "Resonance: Unifying Factor in Messiaen's *Accords Spéciaux*," *Journal of Musicological Research* 28 (2009): 30-60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411890802414347>.

Invaluable to any research on Messiaen and his works are Messiaen's own writings and interviews. This dissertation relies heavily on Messiaen's treatise *Technique de mon langage musical*, published in 1944 just five years after the *Chants*. The document outlines Messiaen's views on his compositional style, touching on his approaches to rhythm, melody, form, and harmony, drawing on numerous musical examples from his early works through the mid-1940s including the *Chants*. While the *Chants* contain no preface or introductory remarks, the introductions provided in other works from the 1930s are reviewed, most notably that of *La Nativité du Seigneur*⁴⁷ of 1936. A more general source of information from Messiaen is provided in his lengthy interviews with Claude Samuel, conducted in 1967 and published in the book *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color*.⁴⁸ A collection and discussion of Messiaen's writings for journals and other publications from the time of the *Chants* is presented in *Olivier Messiaen: Journalism 1935-1939*⁴⁹ by Stephen Broad. For further background on Messiaen's rhythms, particularly his frequent use of rhythms from Indian music, I reference the first volume of Messiaen's *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie*, translated by Melody Baggech.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Olivier Messiaen's *Chants de terre et de ciel* focuses on the two major facets which pervaded his life at the time of his writing it – his domestic life with Claire, which was deepened

⁴⁷ Olivier Messiaen, "Note de l'auteur," preface to the score of *La Nativité du Seigneur* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1936).

⁴⁸ Claude Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color*. trans. E. Thomas Glasgow (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1994).

⁴⁹ Stephen Broad, *Olivier Messiaen: Journalism 1935-1939* (Farnham, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2012; repr. Abingdon, England: Routledge 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315598802>.

⁵⁰ Melody Baggech, "An English Translation of Olivier Messiaen's *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur et d'Ornithologie* Volume I" (DMA Diss., The University of Oklahoma, 1998), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

by the birth of Pascal, and his relationship with God and the Catholic faith. Messiaen seemed to treat the song cycle as a genre deeply linked to his marriage and to Claire, since his three song cycles focused on her and their marriage, and he never again returned to the genre after her death. He wrote the cycle with the great dramatic soprano Marcel Bunlet in mind, as he did for his other two song cycles. Paul Griffiths posits that the reason Messiaen wrote all his song cycles with the female voice in mind was to avoid a male singer appropriating the husbandly feelings Messiaen expresses in his songs, while a female interpreter leaves them intact as the composer's.⁵¹

Many writers have focused to varying degrees on the *Chants*. The most thorough of these is Sally Freeland's dissertation on the cycle, but certain omissions in her research leave room for additional work. Many other musicologists have addressed portions of the *Chants* as part of larger documents about Messiaen's music. The present dissertation explores facets of the cycle that enable a thorough understanding of the cycle: biographical context, the poetry, and the compositional approaches inherent in the songs. Finally, and most practically, it addresses the main pianistic and ensemble issues that are likely to arise when preparing the cycle for performance.

⁵¹ Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 78.

CHAPTER II

THE TEXTS

This chapter presents an overview of the six poems of the *Chants de terre et de ciel*. This discussion of the poetry begins with general aspects of the cycle, including background information about the subject matter of the poems. A discussion of Messiaen's poetic style and its commonalities with the poetic style of surrealism will clarify the expressive elements of the poems. The discussion concludes by addressing how Messiaen used stylistic elements of surrealism to express his experience of the Catholic faith. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of each poem in turn.

Aside from Messiaen's sole liturgical work, the motet "O sacrum convivium!", his oratorio *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ*, and the song "Le sourire" from *Trois Mélodies*, which is a setting of a poem by Messiaen's mother Cécile Sauvage, Messiaen wrote all the texts for his works which include voice. Messiaen was deeply influenced by his mother, naming her first in his list of influences in the *Technique*.⁵² He described his mother's poetic work as belonging to the symbolist era, while claiming his own poetry belonged to the surrealist era.⁵³ Although Messiaen often noted his predilection for surrealist art in interviews and articles, and similarities between surrealist poetry and his own are obvious (and will be

⁵² Messiaen, *Technique*, 7.

⁵³ Michaely, *Die Musik Olivier Messiaens*, 24.

discussed below), he did not discuss the details of his poetry in his publications or in his notes which accompany recordings of his vocal compositions.⁵⁴

Messiaen wrote all the poems for the *Chants* and composed the cycle as part of a concerted effort to write a religious, Catholic work,⁵⁵ one that would simultaneously focus on Messiaen's family and domestic life as well as his experience of the Catholic faith. For Messiaen, these two aspects of the cycle ultimately rest in pursuit of the same thing, which is God. In an article for *Le monde musical*, he wrote:

Religious art, if it is “one” is also essentially “many”. Why? Because it expresses the search for a single thing, which is God, but a single thing that is everywhere, that may be found in everything, above and below everything. All subjects may be religious when they are held in the eye of a believer. Why should ‘Bail avec Mi (pour ma femme)’ be any less religious than ‘Antienne du silence (pour le jour des Anges gardiens)’? Why can the same spirit of faith not run through ‘Arc-en-ciel d’innocence (pour mon petit Pascal)’ and ‘Résurrection (pour le jour de Pâques)’?⁵⁶

Like *Poèmes pour Mi*, the *Chants de terre et de ciel* are a celebration of the marriage between Olivier and Claire. The texts of both cycles deal with the familial aspects of their relationship, but as with all Messiaen's works, a basis in the tenets of Catholicism underlies all subject matter even when the focus of a given poem is not overtly religious. In the *Poèmes pour Mi*, the relationship of Olivier and Claire is often portrayed in religious contexts (“We shall be leaving this house... We shall be leaving our bodies too” or “The bride is the extension of the bridegroom... As the church is the extension of Christ”) but Claire is relegated to her humanity, focusing solely on qualities such as her voice, her arms wrapped around Olivier's neck, and her

⁵⁴ Larry W. Peterson, “Messiaen and Surrealism: A Study of His Poetry,” in *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love*, ed. Siglind Bruhn (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 215.

⁵⁵ Broad, *Olivier Messiaen: Journalism 1935-1939*, 119.

⁵⁶ Broad, *Olivier Messiaen: Journalism 1935-1939*, 119.

place as a child of God. In the *Chants*, Messiaen focuses on elements of his own humanity (including his fears, anxieties, and joyous observation of his young son) but Claire is elevated to a divine status (she is a “star of silence,” and a “little ball of sun” complementary to Messiaen’s humanity. For Messiaen, metaphors which use celestial bodies as source material show that something is close to God).

Paul Griffiths, in his book *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, describes the poetic structure of the *Chants* as a “triptych of diptychs,” each pair of songs devoted to a member of Messiaen’s young family.⁵⁷ The first song is, like the entirety of *Poèmes pour Mi*, an offering to his wife, in which Messiaen describes the sacredness of their marriage and positions Claire as something he has borrowed from the only thing to which she truly belongs, which is God. In the second song, a guardian angel replaces Claire as the object of contemplation, again contrasting her humanity with what Messiaen may have seen as a faint shadow of the divine.

Between the two cycles, their family had been expanded by the birth of their son, Pascal Emmanuel. Pascal takes center stage, with the two middle songs dedicated to the young child. In the first of these, the young boy appears in joyful outdoor scenes filled with play, singing, and dancing. The two parents joyously sit nearby and observe or participate in the child’s play. In the following song, Pascal is depicted at rest, while Messiaen (as the speaker in the poem) contemplates the child’s perfect innocence and eagerly awaits his waking so the family can return to play. These two poems dedicated to Pascal differ from the others in their lack of elements which posit a contrast between celestial and terrestrial dimensions.⁵⁸ By depicting Pascal as entirely innocent, Messiaen endorses the devotional tradition of Catholicism which

⁵⁷ Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 86.

⁵⁸ Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Explorations of Love and Death*, 90.

views infants as the only human beings untouched by evil, as something not yet separated from God.⁵⁹

In the final two songs, Messiaen turns to himself, first with “Minuit pile et face” to face his own sinfulness, anxiety, and visions of death, completed and crowned by a celebration of the resurrection in the final song, which, for Messiaen, was the only path to redemption. In these two songs, Messiaen openly acknowledges his separation from God, which is the condition brought about by original sin and personal iniquity. “Minuit pile et face” does not describe Messiaen’s misdeeds, but rather the experiences of insomnia and impossibility of escape from the burden of his sins. The final song, “Résurrection,” leaves the Messiaen-Delbos family behind in order to contemplate the ultimate contrast between the worldly and the divine in Christ’s transition from death to life.

The six songs of the cycle, literally “of heaven and earth,” draw upon the different conditions of the connection between humanity and God. In Claire, Messiaen depicts an image of the magnificence which ran through humanity before the fall of man, a living manifestation of the connection to the divine. In Pascal, Messiaen focuses on the state of perfect innocence of a child not yet touched by sin or evil and views all his joy and play as a result of that unattainable innocence. In himself, Messiaen sees the condition of sinfulness which can only be resolved through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. Messiaen’s familial life was yet another facet of his life through which his passionate relationship to God shimmered.

⁵⁹ Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Explorations of Love and Death*, 90. Pascal Emmanuel was baptized on September 22, 1937, just two months after his birth. According to the Catholic church, baptism cleanses one of original sin.

Messiaen and Surrealist Poetry

Messiaen especially loved the poets Pierre Reverdy,⁶⁰ André Breton, and Paul Éluard,⁶¹ all of whom were associated with the surrealist movement in Paris following World War I. Surrealist elements which are common to Messiaen and the surrealist poets include radical imagery and alienated objects, lack of rational logic, and the concept of the artist's work as a direct expression of the artist's soul.⁶² Messiaen made use of the surrealist tradition's artistic and symbolic aspects, but did not accept the movement's anti-Christian, politically anarchic ideology.⁶³ Other important tenets of surrealism, such as the emphasis on the Freudian concept of the mind (in which the subconscious is accessed through dream and hallucination), are not emphasized in Messiaen's meticulous and thoughtful compositional or poetic tendencies. Additionally, humor, a favorite subject in surrealist poetry, rarely if ever appears in Messiaen's work.

In each of the *Poèmes pour Mi* and *Chants de terre et de ciel*, Messiaen reserves a single song to contemplate his fears, sinfulness, and anxiety. In the cycle *Poèmes pour Mi*, the song "Épouvante" serves this purpose with text like "The bloodied shreds would pursue you in the dark, like a triangular vomit." In the *Chants*, the song "Minuit pile et face" serves this role with text such as "unknown beast which devours, drooling in my chest." Particularly in the case of the *Chants*, Messiaen uses dark imagery to describe his own fears and reservations, for which he can

⁶⁰ Michaely, *Die Musik Olivier Messiaens*, 27.

⁶¹ Burton, *Olivier Messiaen: Texts, Contexts, and Intertexts*, 221. Messiaen also names Reverdy and Éluard among his influences in the *Technique*, 7.

⁶² Peterson, "Messiaen and Surrealism: A Study of His Poetry," in *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love*, ed. Siglind Bruhn, 223.

⁶³ Johnson, *Messiaen*, 76.

only find solace through his relationship with God. In the *Chants*, dark, radical imagery only appears in “Minuit pile et face.”

Messiaen frequently includes references to objects seen outside their habitual context, which the surrealists would refer to as an alienated or surreal object. Outside the *Chants*, Messiaen wrote lines such as “bouquet of laughter” (*Bouquet de rire*, in *Trois petites liturgies*), “solar chaos of dizziness” (*chaos solaire du vertige*, in *Harawi*), and “the nebulous spirals, hands of my hair” (*les nébuleuses spirales, mains de mes cheveux*, in *Harawi*).⁶⁴ Two of the titles Messiaen assigned to pieces in his *Livre d'orgue* – “The hands of the abyss” (*Les mains de l'abîme*) and “The eyes in the wheels” (*Les yeux dans les roues*) – were felt by the composer to be particularly surrealist.⁶⁵ These titles display the same kind of alienation. In the *Chants*, Messiaen tends to reserve lines like these for the two central songs dedicated to Pascal. He writes of the “Strings of sun” (*Ficelles du soleil*) and the “Alphabet of laughter at your mom’s fingers” (*C'est l'alphabet du rire aux doigts de ta maman*) to set the joyous scene of little Pascal’s dancing. In “Arc-en-ciel d'innocence,” Messiaen attaches the “rainbows of innocence” which have fallen from Pascal’s eyes to the boy’s tiny wrists (*Attaché à tes poignets fins les arcs-en-ciel d'innocence qui sont tombés de tes yeux*) and instructs Pascal to let those rainbows tremble in the folds of time (*fais les frémir dans les encognures du temps*). Illogical images such as these allow Messiaen to provide meaning to scenes in an indirect way.

In “Bail avec Mi,” Messiaen refers to Claire as the “little ball of sun that complements my earth” (*Petite boule de soleil complémentaire à ma terre*), and earlier as a “star of silence”

⁶⁴ Peterson, “Messiaen and Surrealism: A Study of his Poetry,” in *Messiaen’s Language of Mystical Love*, ed. Siglind Bruhn, 219.

⁶⁵ Michaely, *Die Musik Olivier Messiaens*, 26.

(*étoile du silence*). Robert Johnson explains that the “star of silence” is a reference to Revelations 8:1,⁶⁶ and that the star is a symbol frequently used by Messiaen associated with anything spiritual as distinct from the physical, and that silence refers to the “harmonious silence of heaven,” as Messiaen describes it in the preface of *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*.⁶⁷ Thus, a phrase like “star of silence” at once suggests surrealist thought while elevating Claire to a divine status. Similarly, likening Claire to a celestial object which complements his “earth” draws a distinction between the two that carries certain religious meaning – Claire, as something close to God, and Olivier, as something mortal and sinful.

Many of the examples above exhibit illogical juxtapositions of words which is typical of surrealism. Sometimes, Messiaen will include strings of references, which on their own are not particularly striking, but when heard in sequence display little sense of logical connection. Such sequences include “Light birds, pebbles, refrains, light cream” (*Oiseaux légers, cailloux, refrains, crème légère*) immediately followed by “In blue fish, in blue moons, the haloes of earth and water, a single lung in a single reed” (*En poissons bleus, en lunes bleues, les aureoles de la terre et de l’eau, un seul poumon dans un seul roseau*) in “Danse du bébé-pilule.” Later in the cycle, “Minuit pile et face” begins with the lines “City, stinking eye, oblique midnights, rusty nails driven into the corners of oblivion” (*Ville, oeil puant, minuits obliques, clous rouillés, enfoncés aux angles de l’oubli*). Later in that song, Messiaen uses this kind of fragmentation and disconnectedness to express the despair of the insomniac speaker: the lines “Bell, my bones vibrate, sudden cypher, debris of errors and of the circles to the left, nine, ten, eleven, twelve” (*Cloche, mes os vibrent, chiffre soudain, décombres de l’erreur et des cercles à gauche, neuf,*

⁶⁶ “The lamb had broke the seventh seal, and there was silence in heaven for about half an hour” (King James Version).

⁶⁷ Johnson, *Messiaen*, 58.

dix, onze, douze) allude to the deteriorating mental state of the man amidst his dancing sins and the “carnival of disappointment” along the “cobblestones of death.” The striking of the bell clock leads the man’s bones to quake, followed by the debris of errors and the circles to the left, with this last phrase suggesting all the negative values associated with left-handedness in the Bible and elsewhere. The cypher, Richard Burton suggests, is the twelve strokes of the bell plus the presence of the speaker himself, which totals thirteen and suggests all its traditional associations of evil and betrayal.⁶⁸

The concept of the artist’s work as a direct expression of his or her soul is, for Messiaen, undeniably linked to his Catholic faith. Messiaen claimed that all his music, whether overtly religious or not, was “an act of faith.”⁶⁹ Shenton points out that Messiaen’s view of his music and work as a composer aligns with the three offices of Christ, explaining that “he constantly declared his work to be spiritual sacrifice, and his music became testimony to his loyalty in the ordinary world by asserting publicly and repeatedly his unwavering faith. Self-mastery is apparent in his dedication to his art, and Messiaen’s generosity, especially to struggling musicians, is well documented.”⁷⁰ These three facets of Messiaen’s music and life mirror the three offices of Christ: priestly, prophetic, and royal.

The view of Christ as High Priest of humanity⁷¹ is most deeply linked to the spiritual sacrifice in His death on the cross, Christ’s body presented as a living sacrifice.⁷² Among

⁶⁸ Burton, *Olivier Messiaen: Texts, Contexts, and Intertexts*, 23.

⁶⁹ Michaely, *Die Musik Olivier Messiaens*, 4.

⁷⁰ Shenton, *Olivier Messiaen’s System of Signs*, 18.

⁷¹ Hebrews 4:14 (KJV).

⁷² Romans 12:1 (KJV).

Catholics, prayer and works offered to God take the form of spiritual sacrifice,⁷³ and for Messiaen spiritual sacrifice was offered in the form of his musical work. This idea of Messiaen's musical work as spiritual sacrifice aligns with the priestly office of Christ. Shenton's remarks regarding Messiaen's self-mastery and generosity fall in line with the royal office of Christ.

Messiaen himself distinguished the concept of "theological music" from other types of religious music: "In addition, one must distinguish sacred and liturgical music from that which could be called 'theological music.' By the latter I mean reflective music... which expresses the truth of the Faith realized."⁷⁴ This differentiation also carries the idea that theological music is rather designed for "all times and places, touching the material as much as the spiritual, and in the end finds God everywhere."⁷⁵ This public assertion of faith through his music, which Messiaen intended for believers and non-believers alike, is what Sally Freeland identifies as the evangelical nature of Messiaen's music,⁷⁶ in line with the call of the Catholic church to take part in the prophetic office of Christ by sharing the word and testimony in the ordinary circumstances of life and speaking with the authority of God.⁷⁷ Messiaen's participation in *La Jeune France* in his early career and his bringing of Christian subject matter to the public sphere of orchestral music are evidence of his engagement with secular culture.⁷⁸

⁷³ Hebrews 13:16 (KJV).

⁷⁴ Michaely, *Die Musik Olivier Messiaens*, 4.

⁷⁵ Peter Bannister, "Messiaen as Preacher and Evangelist in the Context of European Modernism," in *Messiaen the Theologian*, ed. Andrew Shenton, 30.

⁷⁶ Freeland, "The Divine in Messiaen's *Chants de terre et de ciel*," 1.

⁷⁷ Shenton, *Olivier Messiaen's System of Signs*, 18-19.

⁷⁸ See "Messiaen as Preacher and Evangelist in the Context of European Modernism" by Peter Bannister in *Messiaen the Theologian*, ed. Andrew Shenton.

Love, whether it be divine or human, also figures prominently in Messiaen's poetry as well as that of the surrealists. In an analysis of twenty-seven of Messiaen's poems, Larry Peterson rather objectively points out that Messiaen's use of the word "love" (*amour*) surpasses that of André Breton and perhaps even Paul Éluard, the "love poet of surrealism," appearing forty times in the poems analyzed.⁷⁹ In the *Chants*, the word only appears twice: in "Minuit pile et face," referring to Christ as the "vine of love" (*vigne d'amour*) and in the line "seven stars of love for the pierced one" (*Sept étoiles d'amour au transpercé*) here again referring to Christ in "Résurrection." The first use is a reference to a line attributed to Jesus in John chapter 15 (Jesus says "I am the true vine...") and the latter is derived from Revelations chapter 1, where the wounds sustained during Christ's death are transfigured into seven stars.⁸⁰ Messiaen adds the word *amour* to both phrases derived from these passages. The word *amour* does not appear in the first four songs focused on Claire and Pascal, leaving the numerous allusions to Claire as a benevolent, divine presence and the depictions of Pascal's perfect innocence to connect the two to Messiaen's concept of divine love, which is love in its ultimate form.

Although the *Chants* are devoid of overt references to erotic love and references to human love are minimal, Freeland explains that Messiaen was often criticized for his close juxtapositions of human and divine love.⁸¹ Messiaen believed in a hierarchy of love, placing "the great human love" below maternal love, with divine love at the top of the pyramid.⁸² This view is in line with his description of all experiences being "religious when they are held in the eye of a

⁷⁹ Peterson, "Messiaen and Surrealism: A Study of his Poetry," in *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love*, ed. Siglind Bruhn, 221.

⁸⁰ Burton, *Olivier Messiaen: Texts, Contexts, and Intertexts*, 23.

⁸¹ Freeland, "The Divine in Messiaen's *Chants de terre et de ciel*," 18.

⁸² Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color*, 31.

believer,” with the celebration of marital love in “Bail avec Mi” just as religious in sentiment as “Antienne du silence.” Siglind Bruhn draws a connection to the Song of Solomon (or Song of Songs), which Catholics regard as scripture, explaining that “writers on the Song of Songs have always held that the earthly union of man and woman may be considered as a faint echo of the soul’s union with God, faint because the joy experienced by the human soul is infinitely superior to that experienced by the body.”⁸³ Although love as a topic is not touched on so directly in the *Chants*, Messiaen’s placement of his marital and familial life alongside his religious one demonstrates the sacredness with which he viewed the various facets of human love.

In his conversations with Claude Samuel, Messiaen describes the meaning of Christ’s death: “Christ died on the cross precisely so that we might become again what we should never have ceased to be; we were created magnificent, and through our stupidity we spoiled ourselves, but we will become magnificent again at the resurrection.”⁸⁴ In Claire, Messiaen saw a faint echo of the redemption ultimately available only through Christ, and in Pascal, the magnificent, unspoiled core which once existed in all humanity. In himself, he meditates on the very wounds and disorder which led humanity astray, only to be corrected through the perfect love of Christ and His sacrifice on the cross. Messiaen views these aspects through the lens of surrealism, which allowed him to draw connections between his feelings of love for Claire and Pascal and his concept of the ultimate form of love.

The Poems of the *Chants*

The first song of the cycle “Bail avec Mi” is dedicated to Claire Delbos. The “Mi” of the title was Messiaen’s affectionate name for Claire, based on the pitch of the highest string of the

⁸³ Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Explorations of Love and Death*, 21.

⁸⁴ Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color*, 32.

violin, her primary instrument. The use of the name “Mi” in this first song of the cycle builds a connection to Messiaen’s previous song cycle *Poèmes pour Mi*, also dedicated to Claire. The word *bail* in the title translates to “lease,” referring to the state of marriage as the taking possession of something which ultimately belongs to God.⁸⁵ She is the “sweet companion” to Messiaen’s bitter shoulder, placing her in the realm of the divine and in contrast to Messiaen’s sinfulness.

The greater focus on the worldly compared to *Poèmes pour Mi* is also evident in this first song. The word *terre* appears six times in this short poem, emphasizing the mortality of humanity and our separation from God.⁸⁶ Messiaen recognizes Claire’s humanity (“your earthly eye, our earthly hands”), but he draws an important distinction between himself and his wife by providing her a heavenly status. Most usages of the word *terre* refer to Messiaen’s own mortality, while reserving metaphors for Claire – she is the “star of silence” at Messiaen’s mortal heart and lips and the “little ball of sun” complementary to Messiaen’s “earth.” As mentioned previously, Messiaen frequently references the “star of silence” in his poetry and descriptions of his works. Stars serve alongside rainbows and church windows as the central pictorial elements in his texts and music, as a purely poetic image, as a metaphor for cosmic power, or in purely biblical-theological contexts.⁸⁷ Here, the image of the star is a poetic one meant to distinguish Claire as something heavenly or divine. The musical setting is one of a quiet ecstaticism, at once reflecting the joy brought to Olivier through Claire and his reverence for the link to God she seemed to provide him.

⁸⁵ Burton, *Olivier Messiaen: Texts, Contexts, and Intertexts*, 18.

⁸⁶ Freeland, “The Divine in Messiaen’s *Chants de terre et de ciel*,” 26.

⁸⁷ Michaely, *Die Musik Olivier Messiaens*, 390-391.

In line with Griffiths description of the cycle as a “trptych of diptychs,” the second song “Antienne du silence” does not name Claire explicitly but rather allows an angel to take her place as the object of meditation, completing a pair of songs which are quite literally about earth and heaven.⁸⁸ The text consists of two lines – “Silent angel, write of silence on my hands,” and “how I yearn for the silence of Heaven” (*Ange silencieux, écris du silence dans mes mains* and *Que j’aspire le silence du ciel*), each followed by an extended *alleluia*. In this song, the two chromatic accompanimental lines whirl around the melodic layers, like the silent movement of celestial bodies around a star, moving freely and independent from one another. The lack of any textural variation throughout the song evokes a sense of eternity, as though the beginning and end of the song mark an emergence and recession from the perception of the listener, with the text like whispers to something beyond.

Antiphons are chants meant to be sung before and after the psalm readings as part of the Office liturgy of the Catholic mass, normally sung or spoken in a responsorial fashion. In this song, Messiaen positions the two short statements in the text as antiphons, each preceding an *alleluia*.⁸⁹ The song is dedicated to the day of the feast of guardian angels, which Catholics celebrate as part of the belief that “beside each believer stands an angel as protector and shepherd leading him to life.”⁹⁰ This focus on guardian angels may very well be another reference to Claire, linking her again to the divine.

There is a clear emphasis on silence in the title and text of the song. Freeland surmises that in these first two songs, Messiaen demonstrates the ability to go beyond simply observing

⁸⁸ Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 86.

⁸⁹ Freeland, “The Divine in Messiaen’s *Chants de terre et de ciel*,” 32.

⁹⁰ Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part 1, Section 2, Chapter 1, Paragraph 5, accessed 29 April, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P1A.HTM.

heavenly silence to holding it in his hands, showing that marriage and family have brought him closer to God.⁹¹ Silence is another common symbol in Messiaen's poetry and titles – in the preface to the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, Messiaen describes the awakening of the birds in the early morning hours as a “transposition” of the harmonious silence of heaven to the worldly plane.⁹²

“Danse du bébé-pilule” is the more extroverted and worldly of the two songs dedicated to Pascal, with this text based primarily on images of the child at play. Messiaen described it as expressing the exuberant and unbounded enchantment of childhood.⁹³ The “pilule” of the title, which translates literally to “pill,” was Messiaen's name of endearment for his son, Pascal. Richard Burton notes that the nickname may hardly be judged by Catholics as appropriate for a Catholic child.⁹⁴ The title and text refer to dance, but as Bruhn points out, “the overwhelming impression in this poem, even without Messiaen's music, is one of song.”⁹⁵ This song is the only example Messiaen gives in the *Technique* to demonstrate the influence of folk song in his music, describing it as a “false” folk song.⁹⁶

The text comprises series of unrelated images of actions and playthings of the child, demonstrating some of Messiaen's surrealist influence. The child dances and sings, little birds fly from his hands, raises his nose towards the sky and crystal horizons, and plucks leaves. He

⁹¹ Freeland, “The Divine in Messiaen's *Chants de terre et de ciel*,” 33.

⁹² Olivier Messiaen, “Préface” from *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (Paris, France: Durand, 1942).

⁹³ Broad, *Olivier Messiaen: Journalism 1935-1939*, 120.

⁹⁴ Burton, *Olivier Messiaen: Texts, Contexts, and Intertexts*, 17.

⁹⁵ Bruhn, *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death*, 92.

⁹⁶ Messiaen, *Technique*, 35.

plays with strings of sun, pebbles, light cream, and “the alphabet of laughter” on his mom’s fingers. Although these images alone are lighthearted in isolation, they take on a sacred resonance in the context of French devotional traditions of holy play and spiritual childhood, as well as in the context of *lîla*, a concept in Indian philosophies of “divine play” which would become one of Messiaen’s fascinations through the 1940s (cf. his *Turangalîla-Symphonie*).⁹⁷

The speaker is an observer to the action, only at the beginning of the text inviting his son to dance and smiling as his son picks leaves. Claire is similarly a rather benevolent bystander; her “perpetual yes” is a quiet lake, and her eye observes all the play and joy of the young child. These references to the “perpetual yes” are set simply in a slow tempo, in stark contrast to the surrounding energetic music, again suggesting Claire as a saint-like object of Messiaen’s profound reverence.⁹⁸

“Arc-en-ciel d’innocence” is the second of two songs dedicated to Pascal. The “rainbow of innocence” again immediately puts focus on the purity of the child, and Messiaen makes use of the image of the rainbow, one of the central pictorial elements in all his textual output. Messiaen describes the meaning of rainbows in the preface of the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, explaining that they are a “symbol of peace, of wisdom, of every quiver of luminosity and sound.”⁹⁹ Bruhn describes Messiaen’s use of the image of rainbows as “one of the manifestations of God’s presence in human life.”¹⁰⁰ She later notes that, against Catholic doctrinal

⁹⁷ Burton, *Olivier Messiaen: Texts, Contexts, and Intertexts*, 19.

⁹⁸ Quoting Antoine Goléa, Christopher Dingle explains that as Claire’s health declined, Messiaen would speak of her as if she were a saint. Dingle, *The Life of Olivier Messiaen*, 153.

⁹⁹ Messiaen, “Préface” from *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*.

¹⁰⁰ Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Explorations of Love and Death*, 73.

pronouncements in which newborns are the heirs to original sin, Messiaen seems to depict his son as entirely pure and untouched by evil.¹⁰¹

While this song is dedicated to Pascal, the subject matter deals primarily with the father's contemplation of his sleeping child. The father observes the tiredness of his child, recalling memories ("but we cannot throw it overboard like the pretty cotton doll") while calling on his son to "dream in the folds of time." These memories are set in a slow, sparse musical texture in line with the contemplative nature of the text and the scene of the sleeping child. The father then looks forward to the day ("the sun will write to you on the morning shoulder") before becoming even more eager for the son to wake for play ("let me catapult you into the day like the dragonfly-aviator!"), marked by sudden chordal flourishes in the piano. The poem ends with the son gently waking to his father's greeting. Following from the rather innocent depictions of childhood play in these two songs, Bruhn notes that these poems are the only two in the cycle in which Messiaen does not seem to posit any contrast between celestial and terrestrial dimensions.¹⁰²

The fifth song, "Minuit pile et face," which Messiaen described as "the heart of the work,"¹⁰³ contains some of Messiaen's darkest imagery and the most severe contemplation of the negative in all his poetry. About this song, Messiaen wrote "If you realise that I wanted to depict - in a setting of nocturnal bells - the remorse, the prayers, the anguish, and the agony; followed by the heavenly calm of the dead, then you will admit that the end of the poem can have a

¹⁰¹ Bruhn, *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death*, 90.

¹⁰² Bruhn, *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death*, 90.

¹⁰³ Nigel Simeone, "Offrandes Oubliées," *The Musical Times*, Vol. 141, No. 1873 (Winter 2000): 41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1004732>.

poignant effect.”¹⁰⁴ The piano planes maddeningly across a repeated figure of open fifths while the voice intones on a single note, evoking a feeling of resignation or the facing of a terrible reality. This texture gives way to a fugal section, meant to depict the whirling of the speaker’s many sins around his psyche (“they dance, my sins dance!”).

Siglind Bruhn explains the complicated meaning of the title. In French, the expression “pile ou face” corresponds to the English saying “heads or tails.” The sayings refer to allowing luck or fate to decide an issue when it is unclear which outcome is preferable. The most literal translation of the title would thus be “heads *and* tails,” which Bruhn suggests carries the implication that both possible outcomes determined by the flipping of a coin “must be envisaged at once, that one cannot be had without the other - and if one believes his poem - that the sum total is at any rate horrifying.”¹⁰⁵ Thus, the title can be more literally translated as “Midnight Heads and Tails,” or as in Bruhn’s translation – “The Two Sides of Midnight” – depicting some dark scene in which neither outcome is exclusive of the other.

Richard Burton notes that, in common with many nineteenth- and twentieth-century French Catholics, Messiaen loathed cities, and it is presumably Paris that he describes as the “stinking eye” of “dreadful midnight” in the opening of the poem.¹⁰⁶ The city holds a “rotting corpse” of streets in harsh lantern light. The speaker cries out to the Lamb and Lord before his sins begin to dance in a “carnival of disappointment along the cobblestones of death” followed by “crossroads of fear” and a blanket of “dementia and pride.” The speaker is then caught in “tight knots of anguish,” and Burton explains that the word “knots” (*noeuds*) is the satanic form

¹⁰⁴ Simeone, “Offrandes Oubliées,” 41.

¹⁰⁵ Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Explorations of Love and Death*, 95.

¹⁰⁶ Burton, *Olivier Messiaen: Texts, Contexts, and Intertexts*, 22.

of the liberating “braids” (*tresses*) of the two songs dedicated to Pascal.¹⁰⁷ The stanza ends with strong allusions to the Agony of Christ in the garden of Gethsemane – the speaker’s head sweats, like the blood sweated by Jesus, and he remains “alone at the hour of death that encircles me!”

In the climax of the song, the insomniac speaker cries out to the three persons of the Trinity as the church bells strike midnight. At the end of the poem, the man cries out for the untroubled sleep of a child “under a sky too large, in a blue bed” with his hand under his ear. The speaker seeks the state of sinlessness which humanity once held, which Messiaen described in his depictions of Pascal in the previous songs. A simple melody in this section is doubled in the piano, with a string of sixteenth-note chords spinning and circling in the upper register, like the movement of a mobile above a child’s crib.

In contrast to the dark imagery of “Minuit pile et face,” Messiaen turns in this final song of the cycle to the resurrection of Christ. Freeland explains that the dedication “pour le jour de Pâques,” also known as Easter, is the festival from which Pascal’s name is derived.¹⁰⁸ Assuming the dedication is indeed an intentional allusion to his son, Freeland goes on to link Messiaen’s explorations of his son’s state of perfect innocence and purity earlier in the cycle with the only opportunity for humanity to return to that state, through the act of Christ’s resurrection.

“Résurrection” leaves Claire, Pascal, and Messiaen himself behind to depict some of the events surrounding Christ’s death and resurrection. The poem is rich with theological symbols and allusions. In addition to Burton’s description of the line “seven stars of love for the pierced one” as an allusion to the seven wounds sustained by Christ, Freeland notes that Revelations 1:20

¹⁰⁷ Burton, *Olivier Messiaen: Texts, Contexts, and Intertexts*, 22.

¹⁰⁸ Freeland, “The Divine in Messiaen’s *Chants de terre et de ciel*,” 55.

explains that the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches of Asia.¹⁰⁹ Christ wears his robes of light, like that described in Matthew 17 (“his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light”), and exclaims his gratitude to God: “I have risen from the dead. I rise: toward you, my Father, toward you, my God, alleluia. From death to life I pass.” The accompanying music of this statement attributed by Messiaen to Jesus (these words do not appear in the Gospels) may remind one of the earthquake which coincided with the crucifixion, described in Matthew chapter 27. The angel that sat by Jesus’s tomb after rising from dead appears (*Un ange. Sur la pierre il s’est pose*), followed by the fragrance, gate, and pearls of the heavenly city.

The second portion of the poem’s binary form begins with, as Freeland explains, an allusion to the story of Jesus’s disciple Thomas in John 20, who doubted the accounts of the other disciples who claimed that Jesus appeared to them after his death.¹¹⁰ The text of the poem reads “We have touched him, we have seen him. We have touched him with our hands,” presumably depicting the other disciples’ appeal to Thomas. The second and final Biblical allusion appears in the text “Bread. He breaks it and thereby opens their eyes,” which Burton explains is a reference to Luke 24: “And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight.”

Conclusion

The six poems of the *Chants de terre et de ciel* are at once an offering to Messiaen’s wife Claire, a celebration of the birth of their son Pascal, and a personal contemplation of Messiaen’s

¹⁰⁹ Freeland, “The Divine in Messiaen’s *Chants de terre et de ciel*,” 55.

¹¹⁰ Freeland, “The Divine in Messiaen’s *Chants de terre et de ciel*,” 56.

experience of the Catholic faith. In Claire, Messiaen sees glimpses of perfect, divine love, and in Pascal, the perfect innocence which once obtained in humanity. In himself, Messiaen sees the faults which run throughout humanity in the form of his own sinfulness and anxiety, which can only be resolved through Christ's resurrection. Messiaen displays these sentiments through the lens of surrealism, which allowed him to present juxtaposed images or scenes in illogical, fragmented ways formed of striking combinations of words and phrases. He also relies heavily on the surrealists' predilection for symbols, which gave Messiaen the freedom to represent his sense of the divine and the experience of faith through common, worldly experiences.

CHAPTER III

THE MUSIC

This chapter presents a theoretical analysis of Messiaen's *Chants de terre et de ciel* to the extent that this type of analysis can facilitate performance preparation of the work by making sense of the particular notes and rhythms used by the composer. The analysis illuminates Messiaen's compositional strategies, explore his *Technique de mon langage musical*, and describe the organization of pitch and rhythmic material. Messiaen's idiosyncratic compositional style may at first appear inscrutable to performers new to his music, and this chapter aims to aid performers in understanding and learning the *Chants*. A discussion of Messiaen's rhythmic language – including his use of added values, ametrical style, non-retrogradable rhythms, and Hindu rhythms – concludes the chapter.

In the *Technique*, Messiaen describes the experience of the listener of his music. He says the listener “will not have time at the concert to inspect the nontranspositions and the nonretrogradations, and, at that moment, these questions will not interest him further; to be charmed will be his only desire,” and that the listener will be lead “to that sort of *theological rainbow* which the musical language... attempts to be.”¹¹¹ Messiaen's musical language is built upon specific compositional strategies which pervade his music, such as his modes of limited transposition and non-retrogradable rhythms. He considered his works to be religious in a

¹¹¹ Messiaen, *Technique*, 18.

mystical, Christian, and Catholic sense,¹¹² and it is through an understanding of the technical elements of his compositions that the performer can gain awareness of this sentiment. Although the details of Messiaen's compositional strategies may not always be aurally apparent, some analysis of these elements in the *Chants* will aid the performers in enriching their understanding of the expressive intentions of the music and provide a framework for understanding Messiaen's complex pitch and rhythmic organizations. More generally, Messiaen wrote in the *Technique* "Since [the *Poèmes pour Mi* and *Chants de terre et de ciel*] are particularly "true" in sentiment and typical of my manner, I advise the reader who desires to understand my music better to begin by reading them."¹¹³

Means of Pitch Organization in the *Chants*

Pitch collections in the *Chants* frequently organized around one of three sources: the modes of limited transposition, Messiaen's *accords spéciaux*, or a pentatonic scale. These three approaches are explored through examples from the *Chants*. The theoretical discussion in this chapter, particularly that related to the modes of limited transposition, provides examples of the kinds of compositional strategies seen throughout the cycle in lieu of a comprehensive analysis.

Modes of Limited Transposition

The following two sections present a discussion of the modes of limited transposition and their usage in the *Chants*. Modal organizations appear in each song of the cycle except for "Antienne du silence." For the performer, awareness of Messiaen's modal organization assists in absorbing material in the same way that knowledge of diatonic harmony and scales is necessary for understanding and effectively preparing diatonic music. Messiaen's modal usage carries a

¹¹² Messiaen, *Technique*, 7.

¹¹³ Messiaen, *Technique*, 109.

sense of form and structure, serves as the basis for typical cadences in his music, and invites certain types of chords as harmonizations of melodic material, all of which can provide conceptual grounding once recognized. Further, Messiaen seems to associate modes with particular subject matter – mode 2 with divinity and purity, mode 3 with humanity’s relationship to God’s grace, and mode 7 with mortality or sinfulness – and awareness of these associations is necessary for understanding the expressive intentions of the music.

The modes of limited transposition are one of the most fundamental and well-known characteristics of Messiaen’s early compositional style. The modes were present in his earliest works such as *Le banquet céleste* (1928) and the *Préludes* (1929), and by the 1930s Messiaen had finished formulating his theory of the modes and their usage became a primary means of organization in his music. He described the modes as one of his five “principal means of expression” in the preface to the organ work *La nativité du seigneur* of 1935.¹¹⁴ The modes appeared in the earlier song cycle *Poèmes pour Mi* and large portions of the *Chants* are also organized by the modes. For Messiaen, the allure of his modes was their “charm of impossibilities,” or the ineluctability of limit imposed by the inability to transpose by certain intervals without arriving at the same collection of pitches.

The whole-tone scale is the simplest of Messiaen’s modes. It is formed from the intervallic pattern of a whole step repeated at the whole-step level, dividing the octave into six equidistant portions. All Messiaen’s modes are formed from small intervallic patterns that conform to an equally divisible portion of the octave, such as the minor third, major third, or tritone. The degree of symmetry of a mode is inversely proportional to the number of distinct

¹¹⁴ Messiaen, “Note de l’auteur” from *La nativité du Seigneur*.

forms it has,¹¹⁵ such that modes with a pattern based on the minor third produce four iterations of the pattern in a single octave, major third patterns produce three iterations, and tritone patterns produce two. The whole-tone scale, which Messiaen calls mode 1, is one of the least used in his music. The most common modes in the *Chants* are modes 2, 3, and 7, with one short chordal passage in the final song based on augmented triads and conforming to mode 1. Messiaen's notation of his modes, all in their first transpositions, can be seen in Example 1 below.

Ex. 1: The modes of limited transposition.

The image displays seven musical staves, each representing a mode of limited transposition in G major. The notes are as follows:

- Mode 1:** G, A, B, C, D, E, F# (Whole-tone scale)
- Mode 2:** G, Bb, D, F, Ab, C, Eb, Gb
- Mode 3:** G, Bb, D, F, Ab, C, Eb, Gb
- Mode 4:** G, Bb, D, F, Ab, C, Eb, Gb
- Mode 5:** G, Bb, D, F, Ab, C, Eb, Gb
- Mode 6:** G, Bb, D, F, Ab, C, Eb, Gb
- Mode 7:** G, Bb, D, F, Ab, C, Eb, Gb

In all his output, modes 2 and 3 are Messiaen's favored and most commonly used modes, perhaps because they can more easily suggest tonality and a specific tonal center than the other modes.¹¹⁶ Example 1 above clarifies that mode 2 is formed from three notes based on the half-

¹¹⁵ Benitez, "Aspects of Harmony in Messiaen's Later Music: An Examination of the Chords of Transposed Inversions on the Same Bass Note," 191.

¹¹⁶ Benitez, "Aspects of Harmony," 191.

whole intervallic pattern, which occurs four times in an octave because it repeats at the minor-third level (mode 2 is more commonly known as the octatonic scale). Mode 3 is formed from four notes based on the whole-half-half intervallic pattern and repeats at the major third level. The remaining modes all repeat at the tritone level. In the *Chants*, there are several melodic figures that appear to be written in mode 1 (the whole-tone scale), but those figures are rather byproducts of other organizational features based on his *accords spéciaux*, which will be discussed later

Harmonically, Messiaen treats his modes as unordered pitch collections or as one large “source harmony” rather than as scales in the traditional sense.¹¹⁷ They lack an implicit tonal center due to their equidistant properties, and a mode allows for as many possible tonal centers as it has repetitions of its intervallic pattern. In mode 2 in its first transposition, the intervallic pattern which repeats on every subsequent minor third means that C, E-flat, F-sharp, and A can all stand as tonal centers depending on how they are treated. Messiaen describes his modes as being “in the atmosphere of several tonalities at once, without polytonality, the composer being free to give predominance to one of the tonalities or to leave the tonal impression unsettled.”¹¹⁸ He goes on to explain that an unsettled feeling of tonality can be achieved by stopping on these different possible tonalities at different times. A more definite sense of tonality can be achieved by favoring one over the others.

When Messiaen derives harmonies from his modes, the collections of chords stand to express the mode rather than serve as functional harmonies. Many of Messiaen’s harmonies

¹¹⁷ Christopher Dingle & Nigel Simeone, eds., *Oliver Messiaen: Music, Art, and Literature* (Farnham, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2007; Repr., Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2016), 93, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315090375>.

¹¹⁸ Messiaen, *Technique*, 87.

could be interpreted as major, minor, augmented, or diminished triads, or traditional seventh chords, often supplemented by added notes – most commonly the augmented fourth and the sixth,¹¹⁹ and occasionally the second. See the example from “Danse du bébé-pilule” in Example 2.

Ex. 2: "Danse du bébé-pilule," m. 49, *Chants de Terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The piano doubles the vocal line in the upper staff with four-note chords, both of which are written in mode 3 in its fourth transposition. Although not all chords are spelled as if they are conventional diatonic harmonies, all the chords seen in the upper staff can be conceptualized as traditional triads or seventh chords, except for the fifth chord of the sequence. The lower staff is written in mode 2, formed entirely from traditional triads in second inversion with an added tritone above. Messiaen mentions several times in the *Technique* that he thinks in terms of the equally tempered system, with enharmonics equivalent to one another,¹²⁰ and he does not seem to treat the various inversions of a harmony differently. Messiaen had a novel view of the

¹¹⁹ Messiaen, *Technique*, 63.

¹²⁰ Messiaen, *Technique*, 34, 87.

concept of inversion, which he explored through his *accords spéciaux* and which will be discussed below.

Although viewing Messiaen's chords in conventional terms can facilitate the learning or comprehension process, Messiaen typically describes his harmonies as conventional chords with added notes. In the fourth measure of "Arc-en-ciel d'innocence," seen in Example 3 below, the two left-hand chords can be viewed as minor seventh chords in third inversion below a sighing figure in the right hand. Messiaen describes the first left-hand chord and the resolution in the right hand on the second beat as "use of the augmented fourth added to the perfect chord."¹²¹ Messiaen uses the term "perfect chord" in the *Technique* to refer to the major chord, to which is typically added a tritone, major sixth, or both. Thus, the chord on beat two of m. 4 could reasonably be analyzed as an E major chord with added A-sharp and C-sharp (augmented fourth and major sixth). Similarly, the fourth beat of the measure could be interpreted as a D major chord with the same added intervals.

¹²¹ Messiaen, *Technique*, 67.

Ex. 3: "Arc-en-ciel d'innocence," m. 4, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

Modal Organization in the *Chants*

This section highlights the most prevalent uses of the modes of limited transposition, which involve modes 2, 3, and 7. Mode 2 appears at the end of the first song, is a primary means of pitch organization in the third and fourth songs, and appears intermittently in the final two songs. Mode 3 most commonly occurs as part of polymodal organizations alongside mode 2 and is rarely used on its own. Mode 7 is used intermittently, appearing in the first, third, and fifth songs. The only song which contains no modal features is the second song, “Antienne du silence.” The purpose of this discussion is to highlight the relationship between form and modal usage, as well as associate certain subject matter of the text with the modes.

Modal organization is most prominent in the two songs dedicated to Pascal, “Danse du bébé-pilule” and “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence.” The first of these is organized into a symmetrical form represented as A B C B’ A’, with the A sections adhering almost exclusively to mode 2 in its first transposition. The exception to this organization occurs in the short *plus lent* sections which appear twice in each A section. In those brief, slower passages, Messiaen keeps the mode

for the melody only and uses freely composed harmonies, using the entire chromatic set in these two-measure passages. The B sections are based on a pentatonic organization, which will be discussed later in this chapter, and the central C section of this song is a polymodal organization using modes 2 and 3. In the C section (mm. 48-63), the voice and upper strand of chords in the piano cycle through two transpositions of mode 3 while the lower strand uses two transpositions of mode 2. These polymodal passages are coupled with two crashing, gamelan-like chordal passages in mode 7 in the piano in mm. 55 and 58. Siglind Bruhn discusses this section in detail in her book *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death*.¹²²

In contrast to the first two songs of the cycle, which are dedicated to Claire and exhibit many atonal characteristics, “Danse du bébé-pilule” is the first song of the cycle which expresses a clear tonal center. In his discussion of the cycle, Paul Griffiths says that atonality is a “medium of mystery” for Messiaen,¹²³ and perhaps there was a simple clarity in the purity and joy he saw in the childhood of young Pascal, represented by a clear tonal center on A. This tonality is first made apparent by several stops on the note A in the opening section, with the first two phrases ending in mm. 5 and 9 on an E-flat major chord with the voice coming to rest on A, the added tritone. In m. 15, the voice again resolves to A above an A major chord with added tritone and major sixth. The tonality is solidified at the end of the song, with the voice climbing the second mode to a high A.

In “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence,” mode 2 prevails, but Messiaen cycles through its three transpositions frequently. The first twenty-six measures of this song are organized by one of the three transpositions, except for a polymodal passage in mm. 15-18 which uses the same

¹²² Bruhn, *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death*, 105-106.

¹²³ Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 88.

combination of modes 2 and 3 as seen in “Danse du bébé-pilule.” This polymodal passage repeats in mm. 32-35. Aside from the material of mm. 27-31 and 37-40, the entirety of this song is based on mode 2, either on its own or as part of a polymodal organization with mode 3.

Two shorter passages also make use of mode 2. The first is in the coda of the first song “Bail avec Mi,” setting the text in which Messiaen refers to Claire as the “sweet companion of my bitter shoulder.” The other passage occurs in mm. 46-55 of the fifth song, “Minuit pile et face,” where the speaker cries out to the three persons of the Trinity. Here Messiaen cycles through the three different transpositions of the mode when referencing the “Father of lights,” “Christ, vine of love,” and the “consoling Spirit,” with each entity given its own transposition of the mode.

Mode 7 makes its most prominent appearances in the fifth song, “Minuit pile et face.” The form is represented as A B C A’ D, with the C section in mode 2 just discussed. Mode 7 forms the material of the A sections, which consists of a single intoned note in the voice amidst a repeated planing figure of perfect fifths and chords in the piano. The only note in these sections outside the mode is a single, repeating B which appears in the low *sforzando* gong-like chords in the piano. In these A sections, Messiaen provides a key signature of four sharps which serves to represent the terrestrial through the number four.¹²⁴ In the return of the A section Messiaen inverts the patterns in the piano, with the gong-like figure now appearing as an upper resonance of the material below, and with all pitches now adhering to mode 7 in its second transposition. This section gives way to the coda which takes the form of a lullaby, marked *lent et berceur*, using a combination of modes 2, 3, and 7. In this *berceur* section (mm. 67-73), the left hand of the piano doubles the voice in an alternation between modes 7 and 2 while a string of sixteenth

¹²⁴ Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Explorations of Love and Death*, 112.

note chords in the right hand alternate between modes 2 and 3. The use of mode 2 in these accompanimental chords are paired with the use of mode 7 in the melody, and mode 3 in the accompaniment is paired with the use of mode 2 in the melodic chords and vocal line.

“Bail avec Mi” contains some passages which can be interpreted as belonging to mode 7. This song is written in an A B A’ form, with the A sections formed primarily from a technique Messiaen calls “harmonic litany,” in which melodic fragments of two or several notes are repeated with different harmonizations.¹²⁵ These sections cycle through various transpositions of mode 7, but this modal adherence may rather be a byproduct of the harmonic litany technique.

The final song, “Résurrection,” written in a binary form, uses the modes sparsely and intermittently. The first appearance of modal organization occurs in the recurring chord in the piano of mm. 11-16, which is a combination of chords from modes 1 and 3 over a pedal tone D. In m. 17, these two modes are used to form a polymodal string of chords. Mm. 18 and 19 adhere to mode 2 in its third transposition, and Messiaen carries this organization into the middle layer of dotted-eighth-note chords in the following measure. In this passage based on mode 2, the text refers to the angel which sat on the stone that was rolled away from Jesus’s tomb, followed by the three words “perfume, gate, pearl,” in reference to the heavenly city.¹²⁶ In the second section, the form and material is repeated with different harmonies, and relies more heavily on mode 2.

Messiaen reserves mode 2 for references to the divine and their young son, Pascal. The mode first appears when Claire is likened to the divine as “sweet companion” to Messiaen’s bitter shoulder, and appears consistently throughout the two songs dedicated to Pascal. The final significant appearance of mode 2 occurs in the speaker’s cry to God in “Minuit pile et face.”

¹²⁵ Messiaen, *Technique*, 77.

¹²⁶ Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Explorations of Love and Death*, 99.

Siglind Bruhn says that Mode 3, although used almost exclusively as an element of polymodality in the *Chants*, is linked in other works of this period to human gratitude for God's grace and a celebration of the Incarnation.¹²⁷ Messiaen uses the same polymodal combination in "Action de grâces" from *Poèmes pour Mi* (see Example 52 below), which takes the form of a reflective prayer of thanks and gratitude. These polymodal passages of modes 2 and 3 may thus represent the grace of God and humanity's gratitude for that grace. The two longer uses of mode 7 in the first and fifth songs both support text which focuses on humanity and sinfulness. In "Bail avec Mi," Messiaen uses the word "terre" six times, referring to his and Claire's humanity, and the use of mode 7 in "Minuit pile et face" is used to set dark, turbulent imagery through which Messiaen explores his own sinfulness.

Accords Spéciaux

Aside from chords derived from his modes, Messiaen also invented six chords over his compositional career that he referred to as *accords spéciaux* (special chords). This section discusses Messiaen's use of two of these chords in the *Chants*: the "Chord of Resonance" and the "Chord on the Dominant." The Chord of Resonance appears in the fourth and sixth songs only, and the Chord on the Dominant appears in the first, third, fifth, and sixth songs. Messiaen applies to these chords a notable combination of transposition and inversion, and typically uses them in sequences a whole step apart to generate melodies which follow a single whole-tone scale. The Chord on the Dominant figures more prominently in the cycle as a harmonic-melodic motif, and is typically used at points of transition in the music, as will be shown shortly.

By the early 1940s, Messiaen had formulated three of his *accords spéciaux* well enough to name them in his *Technique de mon langage musical*, and it's clear through his writing and

¹²⁷ Bruhn, *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death*, 105.

music that the other three were already germinating but were not at the time yet named. The three chords already labeled were the “Chord on the Dominant,” the “Chord of Resonance” and the “Chord in Fourths.” The Chord in Fourths is described in the *Technique* and first appeared in the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* and contains all the notes of the fifth mode of limited transposition. This chord was rarely used and eventually abandoned, perhaps due to Messiaen’s eventual abandonment of mode 5.¹²⁸ It does not appear in the *Chants*, and thus won’t be discussed here.

The Chord of Resonance (*accord de la résonance*, hereafter CR) contains, according to Messiaen, “nearly all the notes perceptible, to an extremely fine ear,” in the resonance of a low fundamental pitch.¹²⁹ More specifically, the chord consists of the notes of the fourth through fifteenth members of a harmonic series, omitting duplicate pitch classes.¹³⁰ The chord appears in the fourth and sixth songs of the *Chants*. In the *Technique*, Messiaen incorrectly describes this chord as containing all notes of the third mode of limited transposition, when all his examples of CR show that it is rather the third mode less one note.¹³¹ In conventional terms, the chord can be understood as a dominant-seventh chord and a half-diminished seventh chord with a root a minor sixth above that of the dominant chord, as seen in in Example 4 below.

¹²⁸ Mittelstadt, “Resonance: Unifying Factor in Messiaen’s *Accords Spéciaux*,” 58.

¹²⁹ Messiaen, *Technique*, 70.

¹³⁰ Mittelstadt, “Resonance,” 38.

¹³¹ Messiaen, *Technique*, 70.

Ex. 4: The "Chord of Resonance."



The appearance of this chord in the *Chants* marks Messiaen's first independent and structural use of the chord in his compositional output.¹³² The chord appears first in "Arc-en-ciel d'innocence" as an accompanimental, arpeggio-like figure in mm. 29-31, reiterated with identical voicings at different pitch levels one whole step apart from one another. Although Messiaen never labeled the chord in this conventional way, his examples in the *Technique* and usage in the *Chants* always separates the chord into these two components, with the half-diminished part of the chord always above the dominant portion. In that passage of "Arc-en-ciel d'innocence" which is based on CR, the repetition of the chord at different pitch levels a whole step apart results in a melody in both the piano and voice which appears to adhere to a single whole-tone scale. At the end of that passage (and the analogous one in m. 39), Messiaen eventually abandons the half-diminished component of the chord in favor of a string of minor thirds from mode 2. Each layer within the chords also moves along its own whole-tone scale, but the aggregate of pitch material makes use of all twelve pitches. The second appearance of CR is seen in Example 5 below, also from "arc-en-ciel d'innocence."

¹³² Mittelstadt, "Resonance," 38.

Ex. 5: "Arc-en-ciel d'innocence," m. 37, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.



Messiaen describes this passage in the *Technique* as a chord of resonance connected to its second inversion.¹³³ It is likely that Messiaen connected these two chords through a process which combines both inversion and transposition, a technique he experimented with frequently in his later works. Messiaen combines the processes of inversion and transposition in the final song, “Résurrection,” as seen in Example 6.

¹³³ Messiaen, *Technique*, 70.

Ex. 6: "Résurrection," m. 3, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

In the *Technique*, Messiaen describes an example similar to Example 6 above as the “effect of a stained-glass window, arranging the inversions on a common bass note.”¹³⁴ In the example, the first chord is a conventional CR in root position. The second chord is achieved by inverting the root position, placing the E-sharp in the bass, and then transposing the entire chord down by a major third to arrive at the same bass note. The third chord is achieved in the same way, inverting the root position chord to second inversion and transposing down by a perfect fifth. Example 7 below shows an example of how the two chords in Example 5 can be linked to one another.

¹³⁴ Messiaen, *Technique*, 70.

Ex. 7: Demonstrating the combined inversive and transpositional processes on the "Chord of Resonance."

Root position First inversion First inversion of transposed down Second inversion of the transposed chord

In the above example, both staves are inverted independently of one another (just as Messiaen does in his own examples in the *Technique*) to show a way of arriving at the exact pitch and interval content Messiaen uses in the Example 5.

The second *accord spécial* that appears in the *Chants* is the “Chord on the Dominant” (*accord sur dominante*). This chord figures more prominently in the cycle, appearing in the first, third, fifth, and sixth songs, and often forming a kind of harmonic-melodic motif. The chord on the dominant was first used in the organ work *La Nativité du Seigneur* of 1935, and the usage in that organ cycle marks Messiaen’s first usage of any of the six *accords spéciaux* he named throughout his career.¹³⁵ In the preface to *Nativité*, Messiaen listed the chord as one of the work’s “five principal means of expression,” but gave no further description besides the fact that the chord contains all the notes of a major scale and demonstrating its different inversions.¹³⁶

Messiaen also names this chord in the *Technique*, but he did not provide any description of the

¹³⁵ Mittelstadt, “Resonance,” 40.

¹³⁶ Messiaen, “Note de l’auteur” from *La Nativité du Seigneur*.

chord beyond its association with the major scale.¹³⁷ Example 8 shows an example of the Chord on the Dominant.

Ex. 8: The "Chord on the Dominant"



In conventional terms, the chord is a dominant thirteenth chord. After writing about it in the *Technique*, Messiaen would describe it as a modified dominant ninth chord with the tonic in place of the leading tone with two added tones.¹³⁸ In looking at Example 8 above, the five lowest notes constitute the modified dominant ninth chord, with root note B-flat, E-flat as the tonic in place of the leading tone, and with the ninth C in the bass. This is the inversion which most commonly appears in the *Chants*. The two added tones are always a major third and major sixth above the root, seen in Example 8 as the D and G in the upper staff. With this chord, Messiaen emphasizes the added notes with appoggiaturas which resolve downward by whole step, in order to produce a “multicolor work” and to bring forth “the effect of a stained-glass window.”¹³⁹

In the *Chants*, Messiaen exclusively uses the chord with appoggiaturas, but places one of the added tones alongside its own appoggiatura. For this reason, the chord will be referred to here as the “Chord on the Dominant with Appoggiaturas” (*accord sur dominante appoggiaturé*, hereafter CDA). In every appearance of the chord in the cycle, the appoggiaturas either resolve

¹³⁷ Messiaen, *Technique*, 69.

¹³⁸ Mittelstadt, “Resonance,” 40.

¹³⁹ Messiaen, *Technique*, 69.

down or are left unresolved. The first appearance of the chord in the first song demonstrates both uses, as seen in Example 9.

Ex. 9: "Bail avec Mi," mm. 7-8, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is a single treble clef staff with a whole note chord. The middle staff is a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with two measures of music, each containing a whole note chord with appoggiaturas. The bottom staff is a single bass clef staff with two measures of music, each containing a whole note chord. The score is marked 'court' and 'Plus lent' at the top, and 'p expressif' in the bottom staff.

In the first measure above, the characteristic pentad is seen in the lower staff. It is the modified ninth chord, with the C-sharp as the ninth in the bass, the E as tonic replacing the leading tone, and the root B at the top. This voicing, with the ninth in the bass and the root at the top of the pentad is characteristic of almost every instance of the chord in the *Chants*. In the middle staff, two appoggiaturas resolve downward by whole step to the added tones G-sharp and D-sharp. The second chord has identical intervallic makeup as the first, with all pitches transposed one whole step lower. The final two chords at the end of the Example are the same as the first, but Messiaen leaves the appoggiaturas unresolved. Example 9 above shows the first measures of the B section of "Bail avec Mi," marking the departure from the material of the A section.

As with CR, Messiaen often repeats CDA in sequence a whole step apart. This treatment, along with the whole-step resolution of appoggiaturas, results in melodic figures in both the piano and voice that follow the same whole-tone scale, Messiaen's mode 1. CDA as a collection of pitches does not constitute any of Messiaen's modes, and the whole-tone melodies are strictly an emergent property of the chord's usage. He uses CDA at whole-tone relationships to form longer passages throughout the cycle, as in mm. 41-43 and 74-77 of "Danse du bébé-pilule." The first of these can be seen in Example 10 below.

Ex. 10: "Danse du bébé-pilule," mm. 41-43, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The image shows a musical score for Example 10, consisting of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is written in a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The piano accompaniment is written in two staves (treble and bass clefs) with a key signature of one sharp. The music is in 3/4 time. The vocal line begins with a whole note chord (F#4, A4, C5) and a half note (D5), followed by a quarter note (E5) and a half note (F#5). The piano accompaniment features a series of chords, each a whole step apart, creating a whole-tone scale. The lyrics are 'les au ré o les de la ter re et de l'eau,'. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'cresc.', 'ff', and 'ff cresc.'.

In both passages, each iteration of CDA is identical in its intervallic makeup and its positioning of the ninth in the bass. The voice roughly doubles the appoggiatura figure through the beginning of these passages until it begins descending in contrary motion in the final measure. Like the usage of CR, the whole-tone properties of the passage are apparent when tracking any single layer within the texture and is particularly apparent in the voice. Messiaen also uses CDA to introduce the coda of this song, seen in Example 11.

Ex. 11: "Danse du bébé-pilule," m. 119, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

Messiaen again begins on CDA with root B and bass note C-sharp, but the chord is arpeggiated instead of played as a block. It contains the pitch class a major third above the root (respelled as E-flat) and the two appoggiaturas a tritone and major seventh above the root (respelled as F and B-flat). Following the arpeggio, the chords are played as blocks with unresolved appoggiaturas moving downward by whole step. The voice follows this whole-step movement. Interestingly, Messiaen begins the vocal line on the non-chord tone G, which is itself a whole-step appoggiatura to the chord's appoggiatura F.

CDA appears twice in the fifth song, "Minuit pile et face." Here, Messiaen uses it as a pair of two transpositions as in the first usage in "Bail avec Mi" and as a single, isolated chord. The first usage appears in m. 9, introducing a fugal dance section, and again in m. 37, introducing the transition to the C section, both seen in Example 12 below.

Ex. 12: *Left*, "Minuit pile et face," m. 9; *right*, "Minuit pile et face," m. 37, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The image contains two musical excerpts. The left excerpt is for the piece "Minuit pile et face" at measure 9, marked "Lent". It features a vocal line with the lyrics "Agneau, Seigneur!" and a piano accompaniment. The right excerpt is for the same piece at measure 37, marked "Au mouvt". It shows a piano accompaniment with a dynamic marking of "fff" and a fermata over a chord.

In the measure on the left, the same two CDA as seen in "Bail avec Mi" are seen, transposed by a major ninth instead of a major second, producing a dramatic interval in the voice. This measure closes the A section and begins the transition to the fugal B section. In the measure on the right, Messiaen introduces a single instance of the chord and uses it to mark the beginning of the transition to the central, climactic C section. In both examples, CDA is followed by two chords from mode 7. Because these appearances of the chord are used in relative isolation compared to the strings of CDA seen previously, their use as an indication of transition may be less apparent at first glance.

In the final song, "Résurrection," Messiaen relies heavily on CDA. It appears frequently, in mm. 2, 5, 9, 10, 24, 27, and in a long passage from m. 32 to m. 37. The first three appearances of the chord in this song are like those described above. In m. 10, seen in Example 13 below, CDA appears first in its typical usage, followed by the first appearance in the cycle of an alternative voicing.

Ex. 13: "Résurrection," m. 10, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The image shows a musical score for the 10th measure of 'Résurrection' from Messiaen's 'Chants de terre et de ciel'. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has the lyrics 're.vê.tez votre ha . bit de clar . - té.' The piano part includes markings for 'püf (m.d.)', '(m.g.)', and 'ff'. Three green boxes highlight specific chords: the first box on the left shows a chord with appoggiaturas, the middle box shows a novel usage of the chord, and the final box on the right shows the chord in its typical voicing.

In the first box on the left, Messiaen writes the chord in its typical voicing, with the appoggiaturas appearing as the final notes of the previous measure. The final box shows the chord in the same voicing with no appoggiaturas present in or preceding the chord. The box in the middle shows a novel usage of the chord. James Mittelstadt identifies this chord as Messiaen's first usage of another special chord, the "Chord of Transposed Inversions on the same Bass Note."¹⁴⁰ The details of this other chord are not important here, other than to point out that it is remarkably similar to and developed out of CDA.¹⁴¹ The chord of transposed inversions is formed from the same pentad, but the two appoggiaturas of CDA are treated as the added tones fundamental to the chord of transposed inversions. One may note that the two tones above the pentad immediately resolve downward to F and B-flat, forming CDA on the second eighth note of the beat.

The appearance of a new inversion in this final song carries some cyclical significance. Throughout the cycle, Messiaen's use of CDA places C-sharp, the ninth of the chord, in the bass,

¹⁴⁰ Mittelstadt, "Resonance," 42.

¹⁴¹ For a more detailed history of Messiaen's *accords spéciaux*, See Wei-Ling Cheong, "Rediscovering Messiaen's Invented Chords" and "Messiaen's chord tables: ordering the disordered."

but here Messiaen inverts and transposes the chord so that C-sharp remains in the bass but also serves as the root. The pitch C-sharp carries cyclical significance through Messiaen's persistence on the note in the motif from the first song, recurrence in passages based on CDA, and as a pedal tone in the final section of the last song. This long pedal passage with a low, repeated C-sharp octave in mm. 32-37 uses the chord in this new inversion. In mm. 24 and 27, Messiaen treats CDA with the same process of transposed inversions as seen previously in CR. M. 24 can be seen in Example 14 below.

Ex. 14: "Résurrection," m. 24, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

Messiaen describes this measure in the *Technique* as chords on the dominant “with other added notes.”¹⁴² The top notes of each chord (D, C, and E, respectively) are non-chord tones. The chords are seen with the root, ninth, and the modified leading tone in the bass, respectively.

¹⁴² Messiaen, *Technique*, 70.

In the final chord, the A-flat in the upper register is the root, with the characteristic added tones C and F in the middle of the chord, and the non-chord tone E on top.

The usage of CDA in the final song does not signal a transition the way the other uses of the chord do throughout the cycle, although perhaps Messiaen meant for the chord to indicate a different kind of transition, namely the one implied by Christ's resurrection. Whether musical or celestial, the usage of CDA always indicates the beginning of a transitional period in the music. Despite the function implied by its name, the chord on the dominant does not function as a dominant chord, and in all his output Messiaen never uses the "supposed resolution" he describes in the *Technique*.¹⁴³ CR, with its limited use in the *Chants*, does not appear to carry any cyclical or extra-musical meaning.

Pentatonic Organizations

In many works of the 1930s and 1940s, Messiaen used the pentatonic scale as a means of organization. Paul Griffiths explains that four of Messiaen's large-scale works of this period all contain some pentatonic organization: *Chants de terre et de ciel* (1939), *Les corps glorieux* (1939), *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (1941), and *Visions de l'Amen* (1943).¹⁴⁴ Pentatonic elements also appeared in the earlier *Poèmes pour Mi*.¹⁴⁵ These uses are characterized by the combination of a pentatonic melodic figure with other modal features in accompanimental layers of the texture. This combination of pentatonic and non-modal elements is described by Griffiths as forming the "impression that pentatonic features are fundamental, and that other modalities

¹⁴³ Messiaen, *Technique*, 69. See also Mittelstadt, "Resonance," 40-41.

¹⁴⁴ Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 110.

¹⁴⁵ Emily Bennett, *Songs of Faith and Love: a Study of Olivier Messiaen's Poèmes pour Mi* (DMA Diss., University of Kansas, 2016), 20, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

are the harmonics, sometimes vibrating strongly, but not comprehending the complete work in the way that the pentatonic mode does.”¹⁴⁶

Aside from the pentad of CDA, which is itself a pentatonic collection, there are four instances of pentatonic organization in the *Chants*. All of these are as described above, consisting of a pentatonic melody with non-pentatonic figures in the accompaniment. The first of these is the entirety of the B section of the first song, “Bail avec Mi.” Melodic figures in both the piano and voice are derived from the C-sharp pentatonic scale (C-sharp, D-sharp, E-sharp, G-sharp, A-sharp) within an F-sharp major tonality, a tonality which Messiaen often used as a reference to God (as in “Regard du Père” and many other instances in the *Vingt Regards sur l'enfant-Jésus*).

In this passage, the piano and voice trade melodic prominence back and forth with one another in mm. 7-12 before joining in unison for the final two measures of the section. Each melodic figure contains at least one note that is outside the pentatonic scale, as an ornamental note taking the form of an upper or lower neighbor or to provide Messiaen’s characteristic tritone resolution at the ends of phrases. A portion of the passage can be seen below in Example 15.

Ex. 15: "Bail avec Mi," mm. 9-12, Chants de terre et de ciel. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The entire section is given a key signature of six sharps, and Messiaen comes to rest on an F-sharp major triad with added notes twice in the passage, as seen in mm. 9 and 12 above.

¹⁴⁶ Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 110.

The voice begins this section with a short melodic fragment, beginning in the pentatonic organization and coming to rest on A-sharp following a tritone resolution. This melodic E does not fit the scale, nor does the melodic D octave in the piano in the final chord of m. 11. A similar usage occurs in the final phrase of the passage, in which a melodic C-sharp is followed by its lower and upper neighbor before continuing within the scale. Each melodic phrase comes to rest on A-sharp, a note which holds unifying significance in this cycle and is given special treatment throughout many of Messiaen's works.¹⁴⁷

The chordal passage in Example 15 seen above is quoted in the third song, "Danse du bébé-pilule." Here, the pentatonic organization is much more apparent, with melodic material derived exclusively from an F-sharp major pentatonic scale for the entirety of mm. 33-38 and less strictly in the two measures that follow. This usage occurs again in the return of the B section in that song, seen in mm. 66-73. The quoted chordal passage appears in both sections, without the lower neighbor which breaks the pentatonic organization. As mentioned previously, this pentatonic organization applies only to the melodic material; in this passage, Messiaen frequently makes use of all twelve pitches. Messiaen breaks from the pentatonic organization of melodic material as the voice arrives on an E-sharp in m. 39 (and in m. 72 in the return of the B section), with a crashing, percussion effect in the piano formed from mode 7.

In "Minuit pile et face," there is one small section that uses a pentatonic organization for melodic material. In the final two measures of a long build towards the climax of the song, Messiaen writes a string of chords in the piano's lower staff that forms a melody in an F-sharp pentatonic scale, seen in Example 16.

¹⁴⁷ Bruhn, *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death*, 67. Messiaen's special treatment of A-sharp leads Bruhn to refer to it as Messiaen's "note of love."

Ex. 16: "Minuit pile et face," mm. 43-44, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

In the voice, alternation between B-flat and E form melodic material from Messiaen's favored interval, the tritone. A persistent C major chord in first inversion is repeated in the upper staff of the piano. In the lower staff, a string of first inversion major chords forms a pentatonic organization in those chords' top notes, and consequently in each layer of these chords individually.

In "Résurrection," two brief instances of pentatonic organization occur. In the closing measures of each of the binary form's two sections, Messiaen writes a "volley in bird style"¹⁴⁸ as the upper layer of a three-part accompaniment. These figures result from a combination of two pentatonic scales set a half step apart, with the pianist's left hand using a pentatonic scale on F, and the right hand using a pentatonic scale on F-sharp.

¹⁴⁸ Messiaen, *Technique*, 59.

These four uses of the pentatonic scale bear relationship to the climactic points of the four songs in which they appear. The first, in “Bail avec Mi,” appears in the quiet, ecstatic middle section of this song dedicated to Claire, which is then transformed for the outward, exuberant depiction of Pascal at play. In “Minuit pile et face,” the pentatonic organization immediately precedes the climax, in which the speaker cries out to the Trinity. The final appearance in “Résurrection” occurs at the climax of each half of the binary form, in which the speaker refers to the heavenly city and the truth of the Catholic faith.

Other Means of Pitch Organization

There are two significant uses of other pitch organizations in the *Chants*. The latter, and more straightforward one, is in the vocal melismas of “Résurrection,” in which Messiaen uses diatonic sets. The use of the dorian mode is apparent in several passages, and Paul Griffiths says that Messiaen also uses the mixolydian mode in the *alleluias*.¹⁴⁹ The first *alleluias* (mm. 1 and 4) appear to adhere to G-sharp melodic minor, and the latter two (mm. 22 and 25) adhere to mode 2 in its first transposition.

Another use of alternative means of pitch organization can be seen throughout the second song, “Antienne du silence.” This song is unique within the cycle for its texture, form, and compositional techniques. “In ‘Antienne du silence,’ I superposed the principal sentence given to the voice upon a melody in anthem form, surrounded by a quasi-atonal double counterpoint,” Messiaen says in the *Technique* in the discussion of the influence of plainchant in his music.¹⁵⁰ The song consists of four voices in strict counterpoint, and Harry Halbreich states that this song

¹⁴⁹ Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 87.

¹⁵⁰ Messiaen, *Technique*, 57.

is a true antiphon representing a modern reincarnation of an aria from a Bach cantata.¹⁵¹ The principal sentence in the voice is accompanied by a countermelody in the piano and surrounded by two chromatic accompanimental lines.

The most obvious organizational feature of the two melodies is that each phrase ends on a note of the F major triad, a tonality which Messiaen used in pieces with references to angels.¹⁵² Although the song is texturally homogenous, a binary form is provided to the song by the text which consists of two short statements each followed by an *alleluia*. Paul Griffiths says that the vocal line and piano melody are modally akin, and that the governing mode is not one of the modes of limited transposition, but rather the five-note set F, G-flat, A, B, D-flat, coupled with its transposition up a perfect fifth, C, C-sharp, E, F-sharp, G-sharp.¹⁵³ The piano melody is indeed limited to this eight-note set, as are the melodies of the two statements and the first *alleluia* in the voice. In the second *alleluia*, Messiaen uses the entire chromatic set less the note G.

Large portions of the piano melody are formed from short melodic fragments which exhibit non-retrogradable contours of pitch. This organization can be seen in Example 17 below, with the rising and falling melodic figures boxed in green.

¹⁵¹ Halbreich, *Olivier Messiaen*, 329

¹⁵² Johnson, *Messiaen*, 43.

¹⁵³ Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 87.

Ex. 17: "Antienne du silence," mm. 1-4, piano melody only, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The image shows a musical score for four staves of piano melody. The first staff is marked 'expressif'. The second and third staves have a '(m.t.)' marking. Green boxes highlight specific melodic cells in each staff, showing a continuous string of sixteenth notes in the upper line and a more complex, chromatic line in the lower line.

The upper and lower accompanimental lines of the piano are plainly chromatic and seem to have fewer organizational features. The primary characteristics of the two lines are their textural aspects. The upper line in the piano is marked *très lié* and consists of a continuous string of sixteenth notes that hover around the top of the treble staff. Sally Freeland claims that the material is a constant variation of itself, with the initial iteration of material ending at the end of the first beat of the second measure.¹⁵⁴ It appears the material that comprises this line is formed partly from a few melodic cells that appear in the first iteration indicated by Freeland, although often inexactly and with much new material introduced. The opening few beats of this upper layer can be seen in Example 18 below, and a later fragment with a high degree of melodic similarity can be seen in Example 19.

¹⁵⁴ Freeland, "The Divine in Messiaen's *Chants de terre et de ciel*," 33.

beginning of m. 6, and after this point the use of melodic cells drops off significantly, formed from melodic units too small to be meaningfully connected to any previous material. Thus, there appears to be some degree of organization in this accompanimental line relating to the repetition and development of short melodic fragments.

The lower accompanimental line is marked *léger, un peu détaché*, and is formed primarily from intervals of various fourths and fifths across a limping rhythm of eighth notes and added sixteenth notes. The layer makes use of all pitches by the beginning of the second measure, supporting Messiaen's description of the two accompanimental layers as atonal. Because of the consistency of interval content, there does not appear to be any meaningful understanding of compositional technique available through analysis for the purposes of performance. The layer remains in roughly the same register, and the most characteristic contour is a succession of two fourths upward followed by a leap of a seventh or octave downward.

The Boris Motif

In his chapter on melody and melodic contours in *Technique de mon langage musical*, the first melodic formula Messiaen provides comes from the opening measures of Mussorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov*. This melodic contour was used frequently by Messiaen and appears throughout his oeuvre.¹⁵⁵ The contour consists of a five-note pattern which Messiaen reinterprets to fit different modal contexts. Example 21 below shows the opening melody of the 1908 revision of *Boris Godunov*.

¹⁵⁵ Bruhn, *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death*, 46.

Ex. 23: "Arc-en-ciel d'innocence," m. 3, vocal line only, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.



The final appearances of the motif occur in “Minuit pile et face,” before and after the central climactic section in which the speaker cries out to God. It appears twice in the voice in mm. 39-40, first with the interval content seen above followed by a slightly modified form, and again three times in mm. 51-54. Mm. 53-54, seen in Example 24 below, illustrate the use of the motif in the piano alone above a typical cadence in mode 2, resolving to C major with added tones.

Ex. 24: "Minuit pile et face," mm. 53-54, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The image shows piano accompaniment for two measures. The top staff is a treble clef with a whole rest. The middle staff is a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with the melody. The melody starts with a half note G4, followed by a half note A4, then a half note B4, and a half note A4-G4. The bottom staff is a bass clef with a complex accompaniment of chords and moving lines. The piece is marked 'expressif' and 'ff'.

Siglind Bruhn suggests that Messiaen sometimes uses the Boris motif to represent the child-parent relationship.¹⁵⁶ This idea appears to be supported by the usage of the motif in the *Chants*, in which Messiaen reserves the most overt uses of the motif for the two songs dedicated

¹⁵⁶ Bruhn, *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death*, 107

to Pascal, and in the material surrounding the speaker's call to the Trinity in "Minuit pile et face," a child of God crying out to the Father.

Rhythm and Meter

The *Chants* exhibit a rhythmic language characteristic of Messiaen in the 1930s. The cycle is written without time signature, in ametrical fashion, consisting of measures and beats of irregular length. In the *Technique*, Messiaen describes four specific styles of rhythmic notation he used in his works. He wrote the *Chants* in his first style of rhythmic notation, which "consists of writing the exact values, without measure or beat, while saving the use of the bar-line only to indicate periods and to make an end to the effect of accidentals."¹⁵⁷ Messiaen labels this style as ideal for the composer since it is the exact expression of musical conception.

Perhaps due to the necessity of expressing the natural rhythm of the text, Messiaen's rhythmic language in the *Chants* does not contain any of the large-scale durational processes such as *durées chromatiques* or rhythmic canons characteristic of his later works. The most common rhythmic technique in the *Chants* is the added value, which Messiaen describes as a short value, attached to any simple rhythm either through the addition of a note, rest, or dot.¹⁵⁸ An example of Messiaen's use of added values is seen in Example 25 below.

¹⁵⁷ Messiaen, *Technique*, 29.

¹⁵⁸ Messiaen, *Technique*, 11.

Ex. 25: "Minuit pile et face," mm. 53-54, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

In this example, the added values are indicated with a + sign above the staff. The added values are easily recognizable as a single added sixteenth note or dot within a rhythmic structure comprised of eighth notes. Added values often appear at the ends of phrases in order to slacken the rhythmic descent,¹⁵⁹ as in the second + in Example 25 above, which is a typical cadence in mode 2 resolving to C major with an added tritone.

Messiaen's well known non-retrogradable rhythms are relatively rare in the *Chants*. These appear in the fifth song, "Minuit pile et face," in mm. 5 and 59, and in the sixth song, "Résurrection," mm. 3, 6, 24, and 26. These uses of non-retrogradable rhythms comprise very short rhythmic figures, in comparison to the much longer and more complex non-retrogradable rhythms Messiaen would use in the 1940s.

Hindu rhythms also appear in the *Chants*. When Messiaen first discovered the 120 deçâtâlas, he did not understand the Sanskrit descriptions of the meanings of these rhythms, but nonetheless studied them for years. Messiaen says it is not possible to discern symbols in his use

¹⁵⁹ Messiaen, *Technique*, 67.

of these rhythms because he did not know them himself at the time of his using them.¹⁶⁰ It was from these Hindu rhythms that Messiaen came to understand the use of rhythmic principles such as the addition of the dot, the augmentation or diminution of one duration in a set of two, inexact augmentation, and non-retrogradable rhythms.¹⁶¹

Messiaen's use of Hindu rhythms varies from straight-forward presentations of the *deçî-tâlas* to significant reworkings of the rhythmic figures. See, for example, Messiaen's use of the rhythmic figure called *Râgavardhana*. The rhythm in its simple form can be seen in Example 26 below.

Ex. 26: The rhythm *râgavardhana*.



The rhythm seen in Example 26 begins with a non-retrogradable pattern over a duration of seven sixteenth notes followed by a dotted half note. In “*Résurrection*,” Messiaen interprets this rhythm as seen in Example 27 below.

¹⁶⁰ Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color*, 77.

¹⁶¹ Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color*, 76.

Ex. 27: "Résurrection," mm. 26-27, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

In the first measure, three chords are presented in quarter notes with an additional chord below in the style of *résonance inférieure*.¹⁶² In the second measure, a non-retrogradable rhythm based on CDA moves across the range of the piano. This rhythm, omitting the *résonance inférieure*, is the Hindu rhythm *râgavardhana* in reverse order and with three quarter notes in place of the dotted half note. Messiaen identifies this passage as an interpretation of *râgavardhana* in the *Technique*.¹⁶³

Messiaen sometimes combines several of the *deçî-tâlas* in succession to form longer rhythmic figures. One such combination was used so frequently by Messiaen from the late 1930s onward that Siglind Bruhn refers to it as his “rhythmic signature.”¹⁶⁴ It combines the three

¹⁶² Messiaen’s describes his concept of *résonance inférieure* and *supérieure* as “effects of pure fantasy, similar by a very distant analogy to the phenomenon of natural resonance” in the *Technique*, 71.

¹⁶³ Messiaen, *Technique*, 57.

¹⁶⁴ Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Explorations of Love and Death*, 108.

rhythms rāgavardhana, candrakalā, and laksmîça. The rhythm Rāgavardhana can be seen in Example 25 above. Candrakalā and laksmîça can be seen in Example 28 below.¹⁶⁵

Ex. 28: two rhythms of the deçî-tâlas.



In “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence,” Messiaen combines these three rhythms in succession in the two polymodal passages of mm. 15-17 and 32-34. The first of these passages can be seen in Example 29 below.

Ex. 29: "Arc-en-ciel d'innocence," mm. 15-17, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

In the first measure, rāgavardhana is presented as before, in reverse order and with three quarter notes replacing the dotted half note. In the second measure, candrakalā is notated with each duration halved when compared to Example 28 above. In the final measure, laksmîça is presented with each duration doubled compared to the same Example.

¹⁶⁵ Mirjana Šimundža, “Messiaen's Rhythmical Organisation and Classical Indian Theory of Rhythm,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (June 1987): 125-126, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/836909>.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown some of the organizational features that appear throughout the *Chants*. Messiaen's musical language is set forth in the parameters of his organizational strategies, which include the modes of limited transposition, the *accords speciaux*, the use of the pentatonic scale, ametrical style of rhythm, added values, and Hindu rhythms. Although his musical language can appear complex and at times freely composed, Messiaen adheres rather strictly to the types of organization outlined in the *Technique*.

Of particular importance for developing an understanding of the cycle is his use of the modes of limited transposition and *accords speciaux*. Both of these means of pitch organization appear to reinforce structural and textual aspects of the cycle, and performers will more successfully communicate the expression of the songs by understanding their usage, even if sudden shifts in pitch organization are not aurally apparent. Messiaen's rhythmic language may pose some difficulty to performers new to his music, and the Chants provide a good entry point for those wanting to familiarize themselves with this aspect of his music – particularly as exemplified in his early works.

CHAPTER IV

PERFORMANCE CONSIDERATIONS

This chapter presents a discussion of pianistic and ensemble issues in the *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Although certain elements of the vocal part will be noted, the primary purpose of this chapter is to aid the pianist and ensemble in discovering and remedying issues which arise as a result of Messiaen's musical language and certain pianistic challenges. Issues that are exclusively pianistic are addressed first; ensemble issues are addressed in the second portion of the chapter.

There are four specific pianistic issues that arise frequently in the *Chants*. These issues relate to the playing of dense chords which often span more than an octave; problematic hand choreography in which both hands play distinct musical layers within a small range of the piano; patterns which move up or down the keyboard with high velocity; and conceptual and technical difficulties relating to multi-layer textures. These four issues are discussed in turn at the beginning of this chapter followed by a discussion of pedaling and Messiaen's use of the piano as an object of resonance.

Ensemble issues relate to balance of the voice against thick chords and textures, managing textural and timbral flow depending on the tessitura of the voice, accommodating breath for the singer and large leaps for the pianist, and counting strategies to facilitate the rehearsal process. For the last of these, a general counting strategy is suggested using a set of symbols described by Messiaen in the *Technique* and used in his orchestral works as shorthand

for the conductor. This strategy can be applied to any measure based on Messiaen's organization of beats and will aid the ensemble in clarifying coordination issues during the early rehearsal process.

Pianistic Style and Issues

Aside from the second song "Antienne du silence," which poses unique challenges to the pianist in terms of conceptual and pianistic difficulty and will be discussed later, Messiaen's characteristic writing for the piano in the *Chants* relies almost entirely on chordal structures. The difficulty in grappling with Messiaen's chordal writing is most significant in faster passages where large chords of four or five notes must be played in quick succession. As shown in chapter 3, modal organization in the *Chants* primarily makes use of modes 2, 3, and 7. Pianists may choose to practice these modes in a scalar fashion in order to learn their intricacies, but Messiaen very rarely writes anything scalar in the *Chants*. For mode 2, the characteristic chords are major chords with an added augmented fourth and minor chords with an added minor second. Exercises derived from Messiaen's use of these chords in mode 2 can be seen in Example 30.

Ex. 30: Typical chords of the second mode of limited transposition.



These typical chords of mode 2 appear frequently throughout the cycle. The first two groups seen at the top of Example 30 are seen throughout the A sections of "Danse de bébé-pilule." These appear in minor-third relationships to one another as seen above, allowing for the same voicing and spacing without violating the mode. The longer string of chords at the bottom

of the Example consists of those same chords but also contain those that fall in between, realizing the entire mode in each voice. This progression alternates between the two characteristic chords of the mode described above. Messiaen uses all these chords in the lower staff of mm. 15-17 and 32-34 in “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence.”

Messiaen also derives more conventional chords from mode 2. Dominant seventh, minor seventh, and half-diminished seventh chords can also be formed without deviating from the notes of mode 2, and Messiaen often uses these in passages written in that mode.

Mode 3, which contains nine notes, allows for even greater variety of chords without leaving the mode. Example 31 shows a chord like what Messiaen describes as a typical chord of the third mode in the *Technique*.

Ex. 31: A typical chord of the third mode of limited transposition.



In Messiaen’s usage of mode 3 in the *Chants*, he never includes large chords like that seen above, rather limiting himself to four-note chords characterized by conventional triadic spacings with an added note. For example, Example 32 shows a collection of chords (organized into scalar motion) in the same transposition of mode 3 used in the upper staves of mm. 15-17 and 32-34 in “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence.”

Ex. 32: Four-note chords of the third mode of limited transposition.



Messiaen's usage of chords derived from mode 3 thus forms thinner textures while still realizing the entire mode. Because of the variety of chordal possibilities afforded by this mode, pianists may choose to organize passages of chords into a scalar pattern like that seen in Example 31 to assist in learning the complicated chord shapes. Like mode 2, mode 3 can also form simpler and sometimes more conventional chords, as seen in Example 33.

Ex. 33: three-note chords of the third mode of limited transposition.



The two sets of chords seen above are transpositional equivalents, with the upper string in the first transposition of mode 3 and the second string in the third. In both strings, all but the second chord are major triads.

Mode 7, which contains ten notes, can be used to form a wide variety of chords of differing qualities. Like mode 2 (which is contained within mode 7) and mode 3, conventional chords can be derived alongside more complicated chords. Because of the wide variety of uses of mode 7 throughout the *Chants*, attempting to form chordal exercises to familiarize oneself with the mode poses a difficulty which may outrun the challenges of learning these passages directly from the score.

Hand-Span and Dense Chord Issues

Messiaen very often writes chords or dyads which require the pianist to reach a ninth or more. Most of such issues arise as a result of his use of the Chord on the Dominant with Appoggiaturas, which comprises a dense pentad in the left hand and two stacked perfect fifths in the right amounting to a reach of a major ninth. This chord is written with the same voicing throughout as described in chapter 3 with only a few exceptions in the final song. Messiaen's usage of the chord varies from slow, ecstatic passages to fast, *pressez* repetitions of the chord at different pitch levels.

There are only two instances of written tenths in the piano part of the *Chants*. The first of these occurs in the first song, "Bail avec Mi." They appear in the left hand in mm. 6 and 19 as open-position major chords below triads which gradually increase in spacing across the passage in the right hand. The passage can be seen below in Example 34.

Ex. 34: "Bail avec Mi," m. 6, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

This passage affords some possibilities of redistribution in the taking of the upper note of the lower staff with the right hand. Doing so with the second chord requires the right hand to stretch a minor ninth from B-sharp to C-sharp, although the discomfort in the hand is

significantly less than it might be due to the little finger being placed on a black key. Here, the most significant stretching occurs between fingers 2 and 5, both placed on a black key and spanning a minor seventh. The third and final chord of the passage does not offer any redistribution solutions, as both chords for each hand are written in open position requiring the stretch of more than an octave. If necessary, the left-hand chords can be broken between the bass and upper two notes, placing the bass notes as grace notes before the beat and aligning the remainder of the chord with the voice's vowel. Comfort in this passage and especially on the last chord is paramount in order to achieve Messiaen's indicated dynamic scheme, which poses significantly more difficulty to the voice in its arrival on a high note in a *pianissimo* dynamic. If the required stretching causes discomfort, the pianist should aim for a non-legato touch, relying on the pedal for legato, in order to reset the hand and minimize the time spent in the stretched position.

The other passage which requires the reach of a tenth occurs in the fifth song, "Minuit pile et face." Messiaen writes a rising pattern of wide dyads in a chromatic passage seen in m. 32. The passage is formed from alternating minor ninths and major sevenths, and is notated with the reach of a minor tenth in the right hand between two white keys near the end of the figure. The difficulty is at least partly attributable to the velocity of the passage and the complex chord shapes, the latter of which also contribute significant conceptual difficulties. The pianist can manage the difficulty with fingerings that alternate 1-4 and 1-5, and one may note that the thumbs remain at a distance of a major second from one another throughout, which provides conceptual grounding as one moves through the passage. Example 35 shows a version of the passage with repeated notes tied to one another, which can serve as a simplified practice strategy.

Ex. 35: An exercise based on the material of "Minuit pile et face," m. 32.

The reach of a tenth appears in the ninth quarter note in the practice strategy above. Beginning at this point in the figure, Messiaen writes *poco rall.*, affording the pianist some musical leeway in managing the reach. Because the top note of the lower staff and bottom note of the upper staff are a major second apart on two white keys, pianists who cannot comfortably reach the tenth in the right hand may take the A and B with the left-hand thumb.

Both instances of tenths in a single hand allow for musically acceptable options for pianists uncomfortable with the reach, the first in “Bail avec Mi” by breaking the chords, and as seen above in “Minuit pile et face” through redistribution. Every song in the cycle requires the reach of a ninth at some point, with the least occurring in the fourth song “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence.” Nearly all such cases offer no option for redistribution.

“Bail avec Mi” also introduces the chordal theme Messiaen uses throughout the cycle based on CDA, first appearing in mm. 7-8 of the song, seen below in Example 36. Breaking of these stacked perfect fifths in the right hand is disruptive to the musical figure and sense of quiet ecstaticism expressed in these passages, nor is it a reasonable technical or musical solution later in the cycle when these chords are played in much quicker succession. Further, any options for redistribution are impossible because of the complex chord shapes in the left hand which always require the use of all five fingers. If pianists struggle for a sense of comfort due to the reach, the

best option is to play in a non-legato fashion, relying on the pedal for aural legato, and allowing the hand to reset to a relaxed state before completing the two-note slur.

Ex. 36: "Bail avec Mi," mm. 7-8, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

Messiaen uses CDA in two other ways later in the cycle. The first is as a single or repeating chord, as in “Minuit pile et face” mm. 9 and 37 and “Résurrection” mm. 2 and 5. The use in these songs poses no more significant challenges than as described above in “Bail avec Mi.” The other, more problematic usage occurs in “Danse du bébé-pilule” mm. 41-43, where the chord is used in quick succession at different pitch levels in a rising figure. The passage begins on chords identical to those seen above in “Bail avec Mi,” but Messiaen runs the sequence up the keyboard such that the chord occurs at a total of six different pitch levels whole steps apart from one another, excluding octave transpositions. The passage can be seen below in Example 37.

Ex. 37: “Danse du bébé-pilule,” mm. 41-43, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The image shows a musical score for three staves. The top staff is the vocal line, starting with a *cresc.* marking and the word *Pressez*. The lyrics are "les au ré o les de la ter re et de l'eau,". The middle staff is the right hand piano accompaniment, marked *ff* and *cresc.*. The bottom staff is the left hand piano accompaniment, marked *f cresc.* and *ff cresc.*. The music is in a complex, chromatic style with many accidentals.

The primary issue in the left hand of this passage relates to the complicated shapes of the pentads played in quick succession. The pianist may practice a simplified version of the passage for the left hand, forming a series of the pentad moving up and down the same whole-tone scale as seen in Example 38.

Ex. 38: Pentad of the chord on the dominant at six different pitch levels.

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff contains seven chords, each a pentad of notes, moving up by a whole step from one chord to the next. The bottom staff contains seven chords, each a pentad of notes, moving down by a whole step from one chord to the next. The chords are complex, with many accidentals.

The chords form an oscillating pattern in mm. 41 and 42, falling by a whole step before rising by a major third. This pattern allows for the resolution of one set of appoggiaturas to become the appoggiaturas of the next, such that the stretching of the right hand involves relaxation on every resolution before moving only the thumb to a ninth below the upper note as before. The exercise in Example 39 below shows how each layer moves along its own whole-tone scale, although the aggregate pattern contains all twelve pitches.

Ex. 39: An exercise for the right hand based on the Chord on the Dominant.



The pianist may choose to become comfortable with these exercises before playing hands separately in the rhythm and patterns of the passage. The stretching occurs in the right hand only, and the chords cannot be broken due to musical reasons relating to the chords' structural and cyclical usage throughout the cycle, and for practical reasons relating to the tempo of the passage.

Hand Choreography and Stacked Hands

Passages which involve difficult choreography and closeness of the hands are perhaps the most significant general pianistic issue in the *Chants*, occurring in all but the first and last songs of the cycle. These issues are characterized by situations where the two hands are nested together with the thumbs reaching into the range of the other hand, hand positions where one hand plays primarily on black keys and the other on white keys directly on top of one another, or patterns which require the hands or thumbs to frequently trade positions above and below one another.

The first example of these is another pattern based on CDA from "Danse du bébé-pilule," mm. 74-77, here lacking the characteristic stacked fifths as seen in all other instances of the chord in the cycle. The pianist plays the same closed-position pentads in the left hand, but with a pattern of running sixteenth notes written in a more closed position based on the open fifths seen elsewhere. The pentads are always followed by a single note which was the bass of the previous chord, allowing the entire hand to move away from the chord in order to reset the hand and give space for the right hand to move in. This figure can be practiced as written in a long-short and

short-long rhythmic framework in order to practice quickly finding the next chord shape.

Shallow pedal changes on each beat are necessary to provide clarity to the characteristic quality of the chord and consistency to the texture. A portion of this passage can be seen in Example 40 below.

Ex. 40: “Danse du bébé-pilule,” mm. 74-75, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "Chan - ter, — chan - ter, — chan - ter, — ah!". Above the first measure is the marking *più f cresc.*. Above the second measure is the marking **Pressez**. Above the third measure is the marking *ff*. The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment. Above the first measure is the marking *più f cresc.*. Above the second measure is the marking **Pressez**. Above the third measure is the marking *ff cresc.*. The piano part features broken and harmonic fifths in the right hand.

This pattern of broken and harmonic fifths in the right hand affords more fingering options than other instances of CDA. Here, one can maintain the connection between notes while minimizing the movement of the right hand towards the left by ending each sequential pattern using the third finger on top. This also helps to facilitate the movement to the next iteration of the pattern by minimizing or eliminating the need to move the whole hand up the keyboard for each iteration.

The second measure in Example 40 above requires the two thumbs to switch above and below one another, as the configuration of the pentads requires the left-hand thumb to be placed on a black key for every other chord. Redistribution may resolve the problems relating to hand choreography but adds to conceptual difficulty and may distort the sense of the musical layers.

The pianist may take with the right hand the black notes on the tops of the left-hand pentads in beats 1, 3, and 4 without adding any significant difficulty in terms of fingering or articulation.

These first two measures can be seen in Example 41 with possible redistribution notated for the second measure.

Ex. 41: Possible redistribution for “Danse du bébé-pilule,” mm. 74-75, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The image shows a musical score for two measures of music. The score is written for piano, with a treble clef on the right hand and a bass clef on the left hand. The music consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some chords. Above the notes, there are fingering numbers: 5, 2, 4, 1, 5, 2, 3, 1 for the first measure, and 5, 1, 5, 2, 5, 2, 3, 1 for the second measure. The second measure also has a '2' above the first note and a '3' above the second note. The notes are black notes on the tops of the left-hand pentads.

Another passage with complex hand choreography appears in the B sections of “Danse du bébé-pilule,” beginning in mm. 33 and 66. In the first of these, chords are written as blocks. Messiaen bases the melodic element of these sections on the pentatonic scale, but freely uses all twelve chromatic pitches in the harmonies, roughly dividing the hands between white and black keys. The right hand is positioned above the left forming a pentatonic melody with some harmonic elements included, and the left hand plays chords exclusively on the white keys. In the return of the B section, the passage is identical in terms of pitch content and meter, but all previously seen block chords are now arpeggiated.

Neither of these analogous cases requires any complex hand choreography or coordination of movement, but the positioning of right hand on top of left obscures the sense of positioning in the topography of the keyboard and obscures the player’s vision with regard to finger placement in the left hand. For these reasons, playing the passage hands together may first

be achieved with the hands an octave apart. In all such cases where the hands are nested together uncomfortably, coordination between the hands can be more quickly gained by practicing with one of the hands displaced by an octave, although this practice will alter the angle of the displaced arm and wrist.

A final example of pianistic issues relating to hand choreography can be found in “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence.” These passages are formed from Messiaen’s chord of resonance, described in Chapter III. The lower staff is always a dominant chord in third inversion and the upper staff begins as a series of half-diminished sevenths in second inversion, transitioning to a series of minor thirds in mode 2 in the second beat of m. 31. As seen before, the difficulty arises here due to the thumbs overlapping and the need for the two hands to switch positions with one another depending on the need to place one thumb or the other on a black key. The pianist is afforded some opportunity to choose the positioning of one hand over the other or to switch frequently for reasons of comfort. In the first beat, the thumb and little finger of the right hand on black keys allows for a higher positioning of the frame of the hand, providing room for the left hand underneath. In the third beat, the opposite occurs, with two black keys on the outsides of the left-hand arpeggio, which favors the placement of left hand over right. Despite the changing position of the hands on white or black keys, the consistency of the composite chord voicing allows the two hands to move in concert, always at the same interval and with the same degree of intertwining of the thumbs. Most issues of hand choreography in this passage and the similar one in m. 39 can be mitigated by avoiding covering the entire right-hand grouping, rather moving the right hand back and forth between the sets of thirds.

Velocity

There are very few instances of fast passages or flourishes. Nearly all these appear in “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence.” Messiaen’s use of the piano in the *Chants* capitalizes on its resonant qualities and as such, the piano part contains few overt shows of velocity.

In “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence,” the pianistic flourishes are formed from short arpeggio patterns meant to depict the visual experience of a rainbow. There is one primary motif which appears seven times (the number of colors in the rainbow), and a few longer ones which are derived from the motif. Examples of these types of flourishes can be seen below in Example 42.

Ex. 42: *Left, “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence,” m. 1; right, “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence,” m. 14, Chants de terre et de ciel. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.*

The image displays two musical excerpts. The left excerpt, labeled 'Modéré', shows a vocal line with the lyrics 'Pi.lu.le,' and a piano accompaniment. The piano part features a series of arpeggiated chords in the right hand, with a dynamic marking of *mf*. The right excerpt, also labeled 'Modéré', shows a piano part with a dynamic marking of *mf cresc. molto*. It features complex arpeggiated patterns in the right hand, including a 9-note flourish and a 5-note flourish (marked '5 (pour 4)').

These passages feature flourishes of short durations in the right hand above arpeggios of conventional chords in the left. The right-hand flourishes can be physically organized into groups of three notes each beginning on the thumb, but musically the figure should be conceived as a single unit. These passages pose some technical challenges to the right hand alone as well as issues related to the coordination between the hands. The flourish can be seen reduced to block and broken chord in Example 43 below.

between the right-hand F and A. Once mastered, this can be extended with attention paid to placing the left-hand B between the second C-natural and the high F. This and all similar passages should aim for a rounded type of sound generated through uniform dynamic and articulation in order to mimic the experience of a singular flash of light and color.

Significant issues derive from velocity of notes, and leaps of an octave with complicated shapes are prevalent in m. 46 of “Danse du bébé-pilule” based on the Boris motif. Due to the spacing in the left hand of a seventh, there are no reasonable options afforded by hand redistribution. Several practice methods may be productive, including playing in rhythms and blocking. A few blocking organizations can be seen in Example 44.

Ex. 44: Practice strategies for “Danse du bébé-pilule,” m. 46.

The rhythmic practice is particularly effective because the main pianistic issues ultimately result from the difficulty of quickly arriving on a single black key in the right hand at the beginning of each iteration of the pattern. Each of the above organizations can be treated with different rhythmic schemes in order to practice the different movements. Hands separate practice will help clarify the allocation of mental energy when the leaps of both hands are performed simultaneously when the two layers are put together.

Complex Textures and Polyrhythmic Passages

Complexity resulting from musical texture occurs several times throughout the *Chants*. These comprise the most significant textural challenge seen in the entirety of the second song “Antienne du silence,” and two polymodal passages in the third and fourth songs.

Due to its texture, “Antienne du silence” poses significant problems to the pianist related to planning, decision making, the technical aspect of playing, and expressing the complexity of the texture. The piano part is formed from a primary melodic line that stands as a countermelody to the voice surrounded by two quasi-atonal accompanimental lines. The higher of these is formed from constantly running connected sixteenth notes based on a few short melodic cells, and the lower is a *détaché* line of eighth notes with added values of a sixteenth note that consists primarily of fourths and other large intervals. The material in the piano falls within a range of three and a half octaves, but any given measure falls within a range of three octaves or less. There is an element of conceptual difficulty in the part due to the necessity of the central melodic line being divided between the two hands, frequently switching from one to the other to maintain the legato.

Of primary importance for the pianist is the clarity in the complex texture, achieving a low overall dynamic level, and bringing out the central melodic line in a legato articulation. The song requires meticulous planning, and there are no options that will suffice for all pianists of varying sized hands. There are a few passages that simply require concessions related to fingering or articulation no matter how the parts are distributed between the hands.

Before practicing the song as written, it is highly recommended that the pianist first learns to play each line individually to internalize the details of its sound and contribution to the overall texture. This should be done with the appropriate hand (right hand for the upper

accompanimental line; left hand for the lower line; and each hand individually for the melodic line), and with any comfortable fingering in order to focus on the melodic aspect of each line and the correct execution of articulation. The pianist should then learn to play all combinations of two lines with the appropriate hand, or in the case of the melody, using the hand whose accompanimental line is being excluded. These steps ensure a confident understanding of the texture, interaction between the parts, and gives the pianist time to process the listening aspect of piano playing.

There are three technical approaches that the pianist must employ in certain passages to overcome pianistic issues. Not included in these is the possibility of finger substitutions, which may or may not be viable depending on tempo. The first approach involves the use of the same finger (typically the thumb) for several notes of the central legato melody in succession. This is the least ideal approach to the melody but is necessary when large intervals between one accompanimental line and the melody eliminate the possibility of splitting the melody between the hands and fingering options in the available hand are severely limited. A fragment where this is necessary can be seen in Example 45 below.

Ex. 45: "Antienne du silence," m. 4, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.



In the above passage, the two lower staves are always more than an octave apart with some intervals far wider than a tenth. Due to the large or impossible intervals between the two lines, taking the melody in the left hand is not a viable option. The two upper staves have comparatively smaller intervals, but the possibility of connecting the melody with the fingers is only possible by sacrificing the finger legato of the upper line. One may experiment with, for example, placing 2nd finger on the first F-sharp of the melody, but this results in a stretch of a fourth between fingers 2 and 3 to reach the B above, and causes unresolvable legato issues in the subsequent notes. Even if one was to play four thumbs in a row at the beginning of this melody, one still runs out of fingers for the upper line heading into the third beat. Example 46 below suggests to possible approaches to fingering for the passage.

Ex. 46: Possible fingerings and pedalings for "Antienne du silence," m. 4, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The fingering on the right makes use of the left-hand thumb for one melodic note to achieve a truer legato between the E and F-sharp. This option removes one touch of the pedal but adds leaps of the left hand. The role of carefully planned pedaling is paramount throughout the song, relying on shallow pedals never longer than a sixteenth-note duration to produce the illusion of legato in either the primary melody or the upper accompanimental line. The second-to-last pedal marking in the above examples accommodates the upper line only, since the F-sharp to E in the melody can be achieved with finger legato.

A second technique that can be used effectively in this song is the sliding of the finger from a black key to a white key. This option is limited by the configuration of material across the topography of the keyboard but can provide further fingering options to surrounding material. This occurs in the examples above in the final beat, where the little finger of the right hand can slide from E-flat to D.

The third technique is to allow the melodic notes to alternate back and forth between the two thumbs. This option has good applications when the melody is technically within reach of both hands but placing it in a single hand would result in a less-than-ideal fingering like the one seen above with many subsequent thumbs. An example of this technique can be seen below in Example 47.

Ex. 47: Possible fingerings and distribution for "Antienne du silence," m. 7, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

In this passage, legato can be achieved by alternating the melody between the hands. The E and F of the melody is the only pair of notes that are placed in the same hand. Messiaen seems to indicate this approach himself by placing fingering indications for the thumb above and below the melody, followed by an indication to continue with right hand. However, true legato is more possible by placing the following E and F in the left hand, as is typically the case due to the relatively fewer notes and articulation of the lower line. This fingering, as before, is not without its problems; the melody begins with the right hand due to the span of a tenth between the C and the lower A-flat, however the same case arises on the second sixteenth note between the melodic

C and the E above. One may choose to try to catch the first melodic note in the pedal and play the high E with the third finger, changing the position of the hand. This fingering allows for the right hand to be free to produce true legato for the upper line, requiring pedal only once to accommodate that line's two subsequent fifth fingers in the first beat.

There are two general ideas that apply the decision-making process in approaching this song. First, it is my opinion that the melodic line should be taken by the left hand wherever possible due to the *détaché* articulation of the lower accompanimental line and its relatively fewer notes. Taking the melodic line in the left hand generally affords truer legato and avoids stretching since the hand doesn't need to consistently stay with the lower accompanimental line because of its articulation. Second, greater mental convenience is achieved when the primary melody remains in the same hand for as long as possible. Many tempting solutions present themselves in the frequent switching back and forth of the hands. One should weigh the conceptual and technical difficulty these solutions pose, particularly when such solutions require the hands to make large leaps in order to achieve true finger legato.

The C section of "Danse du bébé-pilule" comprises passages of four-note chords in each hand, written in a polymodal and polyrhythmic fashion. The majority of the piano's left-hand chords, except for mm. 55 and 58, are formed from mode 2, which with its limitation to three transpositions is a signifier of the Trinity and God's love for man, while mode 3 of the right hand and voice is linked to human gratitude for God's grace. This pairing of mode 2 and 3 was also employed in the polymodal and polyrhythmic introduction in "Action de grâces" from *Poèmes pour Mi*. The rhythmic makeup of each line is unrelated to the other, without any of the complex rhythmic relationships Messiaen would explore in his later career.

In these passages, the right hand doubles the melodic material and rhythm of the voice throughout. In order to express this texture without overpowering the voice, the pianist can treat their primary melody as that of the upper notes of the lower staff, forming a countermelody in mode 2 and coloring the voice with the chords of the right hand in mode 3. One should aim to conceptualize each layer as a single auditory stream, with its own characteristic timbre resulting from its mode, since superimposed rhythms rely on differences of timbre to distinguish themselves. Because Messiaen limits the number of chords used and repeats them over and over, this voicing of the left hand is especially effective at highlighting the change in transposition that occurs in m. 53, with the melodic note G-sharp at the top of the left-hand chord standing in stark contrast to the previous material. Mm. 55 and 58 are in mode 7 and produce another crashing effect and gamelan-like timbre.

Messiaen writes a similar passage in “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence” in polymodality using the same modes but does so in a homorhythmic fashion. There is no greater difficulty in this passage compared to the passage described above, but the pianist may still choose to give melodic prominence to the lower layer in mode 2 in order to provide contrast and depth to the texture.

Pedaling

In the *Chants*, Messiaen capitalizes on the resonant qualities of the piano, making use of chords left to resonate, low bass notes designed to set off sympathetic vibration higher up the instrument. Messiaen’s treatment of the piano as a source of resonances is even more apparent than in the earlier *Poèmes pour Mi*, and Paul Griffiths posits that this is why the earlier cycle was orchestrated, but not the latter.¹⁶⁶ The accompaniment is much more pianistic and specific to the

¹⁶⁶ Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 84.

piano. As such, the control of sound through the pedals is a vital component of expressing Messiaen's musical intentions, and especially his exploration of the concept of resonance.

Pedal markings are rare in the cycle. Of the eight unique pedal markings Messiaen includes in the score, five are under glissando, glissando-like, or fast flourish passages. The thing these markings seem to have in common is that they indicate a building of sound, with all sound elements within each pedal marking meant to be heard as a single sound object. It is only in the second song that he provides a written pedaling instruction, indicating *mettre un peu de pédale* at the beginning of the first measure. Aside from the use of traditional pedal markings, Messiaen will also write ties which lead to nowhere as a way of indicating pedal usage and ultimately resonance.

In "Danse du bébé-pilule" two pedal markings occur in mm. 46-47, where a pattern is repeated in subsequent octaves moving up the piano at great velocity (for which practice strategies were given in Example 44 above) followed by a glissando-like figure, providing a crescendo and crashing musical texture to the transition to the song's central C section. In "Arc-en-ciel d'innocence," two short pedal indications occur in mm. 37-38 during a true glissando over the span of a quarter note duration. A final marking appears in this song under the flourish in m. 44, ending as the singer descends from her high, sustained G-sharp. In "Antienne du silence," Messiaen indicates pedal for the final two measures, while the piano moves slowly towards its highest register, fading to silence. The remaining markings occur in the A sections of "Minuit pile et face," where the piano repeats a planing figure of chords and open fifths under a single repeated note in the voice, producing an effect of stasis or immobility in line with the resigned mood of the text.

Messiaen often writes ties which lead to nowhere as a way of indicating resonance or drawing attention to the natural decay of the piano. The first, second, fourth, and fifth songs (those which end quietly) are all given such ties on the piano's final chords. This usage of ties is perhaps intended to draw the performers' attention to the role of the gentle decay towards silence in the music. There are two other notable uses of such ties that seem to serve an alternative role, that of drawing attention to a more active and deliberate kind of resonance. The first of these appears in "Arc-en-ciel d'innocence," where the piano suddenly erupts into a flourish formed by a repeating pattern moving up the piano. This passage, seen in Example 48 below makes use of the striking contrast between the active flourish and the timbral quality of its resonance.

Ex. 48: "Arc-en-ciel d'innocence," m. 27, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

A similar usage of ties occurs in the final song "Résurrection," in the enormous chords of the piano which accompany the words of Christ. Since Messiaen typically has no aversion to tying together different note values in order to make long durations read correctly within his metrical frameworks, the use of ties in this case again seem to place importance on the resonance of the chords. Both of these cases also imply the use of long pedals even beyond the indicated

rests (as Yvonne Loriod, the great French pianist and Messiaen's second wife, does in her recording of the cycle with soprano María Orán).

There are four general situations that occur in Messiaen's piano writing one must consider when determining pedaling strategies. The first of these is when he writes melodic material formed from the top line of a string of different harmonies. This is the most common situation throughout the cycle due to Messiaen's penchant for doubling the vocal melody in the piano with a string of chords added to provide melodic color. Messiaen ascribes melody the highest importance in the *Technique*, explaining that "rhythm remains pliant and gives precedence to melodic development," and that "true" harmonies are those wanted by the melody and result from it.¹⁶⁷ When melodic material appears in the piano, and especially when it is a doubling of the voice, the pedal must be reserved only for the aural perception of legato across the strings of harmonies. This is the case for the entirety of the first song, in which Messiaen uses his "harmonic litanies" and chordal passages based on CDA and the pentatonic scale. Large portions of each song (except the second) fall into this category, in which very shallow pedals suffice to produce a sense of legato without any blurring of subsequent harmonies.

The second situation is Messiaen's use of inferior and superior resonance, which is characterized by the appearance of a bell- or gong-like figure in an extreme range of the piano. These occur in the A sections of "Minuit pile et face," during the first chords in "Résurrection" and in the end of each section of that song. Messiaen says that his "effects of resonance" are "effects of pure fantasy, similar by a very distant analogy to the phenomenon of natural resonance." One must imagine that the effect is one of a single physical object emanating many different patterns of vibration, resulting in a complex, multi-colored sonic outcome. Paul

¹⁶⁷ Messiaen, *Technique*, 32.

Griffiths notes that Messiaen's "volleys in bird style" that appear at the end of each section in the final song may just as easily be understood as a shimmer of upper harmonics, resulting from the resonance of the layers in the low bass and middle register.¹⁶⁸ In such cases, the pedal must necessarily be fully depressed in order to allow the primary resonance and its one or more sub-resonances in a given passage to ring out as a single sound entity. An example of this type of imitation of resonance with pedal can be seen in Example 49 below.

Ex. 49: "Minuit pile et face," mm. 1-2, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The musical score for Example 49 consists of two measures. The tempo is marked "Bien modéré". The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The first measure shows a vocal line with a rest and a piano accompaniment with a sustained chord. The second measure shows the vocal line with the lyrics "Vil - le," and the piano accompaniment with a sustained chord. Dynamics include *mf*, *p*, and *sf*. The piano part features a complex texture with multiple layers of notes, some of which are sustained.

The third situation is when multi-layer textures contain long durations in one or more layers while other material occurs above or below the sustained resonance. These occur frequently in the first song and in isolated cases in the third, fifth, and sixth songs. This appears in the first song as a sustained chord appearing before the recurring C-sharp motif in the high register of the piano. Here, the pedal must be fully depressed so that the chord can resonate with the characteristic motif appearing above.

¹⁶⁸ Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 85.

A similar figure occurs in m. 10 of “Minuit pile et face,” where a chord in the middle of the piano is left to resonate while a preliminary presentation of the fugue theme is played in both the extreme upper and lower range of the piano. Later in the song, in mm. 24, 33, and 34, Messiaen writes chords with ties leading nowhere while other material appears in contrasting registers. Examples of this can be seen in Example 50 below.

Ex. 50: *Left*, “Minuit pile et face,” mm. 9-10; *right*, “Minuit pile et face,” m 33, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The image displays two musical excerpts from Olivier Messiaen's "Chants de terre et de ciel". The left excerpt, measures 9-10, is marked "Lent" and "Presque vif, et féroce". It features a vocal line with the lyrics "Agneau, Seigneur!" and a piano accompaniment with a sustained chord. The right excerpt, measure 33, is marked "Au mouvt" and "ff". It features a vocal line with the lyrics "Ri - re, ai - gui - se - toi," and a piano accompaniment with a sustained chord.

In cases like those seen in Example 50 above, in which Messiaen writes a sustained chord with layers of shorter articulations above or below, middle pedal is a viable option.

Another case of multilayer textures where the sustain pedal at its full depth is necessary occurs in the B sections of “Danse du bébé-pilule,” where Messiaen writes a sustained chord with other layers that prevent the pianist from holding the chord with his or her fingers. This instance, seen in Example 51 below, is accompanied by a crescendo to *fortissimo*, suggesting a gathering of sound within a single, full pedal.

Ex. 51: "Danse du bébé-pilule," m. 73, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.



The final situation is when a passage or figure that does not constitute the primary melody comprises a single organization, such as a mode or *accord spécial*. As noted in chapter 3, Messiaen treats his modes as unordered pitch collections rather than as scales in the traditional sense. Thus, filigree passages which are formed from a single mode with no added tones can be treated as an expression of the mode rather than a series of distinct underlying harmonies. This is the case in all the “rainbow” flourishes in “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence” which are formed from a single mode in the same transposition. A longer passage of chords which results from modal organization is the *berceur* section at the end of “Minuit pile et face,” although here the organization of the six measures of constant sixteenth-note triads moves between three different modes or transpositions over the course of the passage. In cases such as these, pedaling for melodic clarity is not paramount because the passages present a modal color rather than primary melodic material.

The same situation arises in Messiaen’s use of *accords spéciaux*. These chords share a common link to Messiaen’s exploration of resonance¹⁶⁹, and their pitch makeup can be

¹⁶⁹ See James Mittelstadt, “Resonance: Unifying Factor in Messiaen’s Accords Spéciaux.”

connected to the harmonic series. As such, these chords stand as individual resonant entities. Arpeggios of these chords, like that seen in m. 119 of “Danse du bébé-pilule” on CDA constitutes a deep pedal in order to express the resonant nature of the chord. Long strings of CR in “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence” and CDA at different pitch levels seen throughout the cycle also constitute pedal changes for each individual chord. As previously noted, Messiaen’s habit of writing strings of these chords at pitch levels a whole step apart does not result in a passage in a single mode or pitch organization; rather, each iteration of one of these chords stands as a unique, isolated entity. Pedaling can help achieve appropriate resonance in these chords, but the pedal must be cleared on each iteration of the chord at a new pitch level.

Ensemble Considerations

There are three important issues that must be addressed by the ensemble to facilitate certain coordination issues. The first of these involves the development of counting strategies or techniques to ensure both partners have a similar sense of how the parts fit together and conform to the meaning of Messiaen’s rhythmic and metrical organizations. The second is awareness of points in the music where one partner must take time for reasons associated with their instrument, namely accommodation of the breath for the singer and large leaps for the pianist. The third issue relates to balance issues within the ensemble.

Counting and Coordination Strategies

An agreed-upon counting strategy can significantly aid the rehearsal of Messiaen’s music and assist the performers in expressing Messiaen’s rhythmic organizations as they appear in the score. Messiaen notated the *Chants* in his first style of rhythmic notation, which “consists of writing the exact values, without measure or beat, while saving the use of the bar-line only to

indicate periods and to make an end to the effect of accidentals.”¹⁷⁰ He says it is best for the composer since it is the exact expression of the musical conception and it is ideal for one performer alone or a small ensemble.

Messiaen also used the first style of rhythmic notation for the piano version of *Poèmes pour Mi*. In the orchestral version, he notated the orchestra parts in his third style of rhythmic notation, which he used when many performers play rhythms which do not gather into normal meters. The third style of rhythmic notation remedies ensemble issues by dividing the music into very short measures and beats. The first three measures of the piano version of “Action des grâces” from *Poèmes pour Mi* can be seen in Example 52 below, followed by the same passage rewritten for orchestra in Example 53, reduced to the grand staff.

Ex. 52: "Action des grâces" mm. 1-3, piano version, Poèmes pour Mi. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1937 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

¹⁷⁰ Messiaen, *Technique*, 29.

Ex. 53: "Action des grâces" mm. 1-3, orchestral version, *Poèmes pour Mi*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1937 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the orchestral version of "Action des grâces" (measures 1-3). Each system consists of a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with piano accompaniment. Above the notes, rhythmic notation is used, including square symbols for quarter notes, three-sided rectangles for eighth notes, and triangles for dotted-eighth notes. The first system shows measures 1-3, and the second system shows measures 4-6. The key signature is B-flat major, and the time signature is 4/4.

In the orchestral version seen in Example 53 above, two important aspects of the notation are apparent. First, Messiaen adds a significant number of bar lines, taking what was three measures in the piano version and dividing it into nine measures for the orchestra. Second, a figure at the beginning of each measure indicates the number of beats. These beats are of unequal duration, causing a metrical discrepancy which Messiaen remedies by adding conducting symbols to indicate beat length. Messiaen defines these symbols in the preface to the orchestral version of *Poèmes pour Mi*. In Example 53 above, the three-sided rectangle indicates an eighth-note duration, while the triangular symbol indicates a dotted-eighth-note duration. Additionally, Messiaen uses two other symbols which represent quarter-note and dotted-quarter-note durations, which will be seen in Example 55-58 below.

The above comparison between the two versions of "Action des grâces" raises important questions about the meanings of Messiaen's rhythmic notation. The purpose of the bar line and the concept of downbeats is drawn into question since Messiaen's own description of the first

style of rhythmic notation implies that the bar line serves no musical purpose, only a notational one. His reorganization for the orchestra appears purely conceptual, applying a rhythmic framework for practical purposes related to the nature of the ensemble. Given Messiaen's description of the purpose of the bar line in the first style of rhythmic notation as "only to indicate periods and to make an end to the effect of accidentals", it seems that bar lines in the *Chants* do not carry the implication of associated strong and weak beats.

Messiaen's concept and philosophy of time is outlined in the first volume of the *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur et d'Ornithologie*. Influenced by the writings of philosopher Henri Bergson, Messiaen distinguishes between the concepts of *structured time* and *true duration*. Structured time is abstract, homogenous in the sense that all its parts are identical and quantitative.¹⁷¹ It is the sense of time given to us by regularity of movement in physical space, such as that of the solar system (years, days, hours), and consequently by regular beats of equal duration in music. True duration, Messiaen says, is the human experience of time which involves evaluating duration by its relation to ourselves. He provides an example by saying "it is evident that waiting and inaction create a void which slows the passage of time. On the contrary, joy, work, and all that occupies us and captivates our attention speeds the passage of time."¹⁷² In music, the sense of true duration is presented to the listener through fluctuations of tempo, changes in rapidity, and its perception relies entirely on the number of musical events that occur.¹⁷³ Messiaen explored this concept through different rhythmic devices in his later works, such as the concepts of *valeurs progressivement ralenties* and *accélérées*, through which patterns of pitch material are

¹⁷¹ Baggech, "An English Translation of Olivier Messiaen's *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie* Volume I," 21, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

¹⁷² Baggech, "An English Translation," 19.

¹⁷³ Baggech, "An English Translation," 18.

extended or diminished by a constant value over a period of time. Messiaen uses these concepts prominently in the opening of “Regard de l’Onction terrible” from *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus*. Thus, true duration is constantly changing and unmeasurable. It is this concept of true duration that forms the basis of Messiaen’s ametrical music.

Messiaen says that the concept of ametrical music results from replacing the notions of “measure” and “beat” with the feeling of a short rhythmic value and its free multiplications.¹⁷⁴ This treatment of a single duration or a short rhythmic figure allows one to generate ametrical music through augmentation, diminution, or the added value, one of Messiaen’s favorite rhythmic devices. The *Chants* are littered with added values typically seen in the addition of a sixteenth note, eighth note, or dot. Added values most frequently appear at the ends of phrases, a use which Messiaen describes in the *Technique* as a slackening or lengthening of the rhythmic descent. In Messiaen’s examples, the added values are indicated by placing a + sign above the notation. Example 54 shows two examples from the *Chants*, with + signs added in accordance with Messiaen’s style of labeling in the *Technique*.

¹⁷⁴ Messiaen, *Technique*, 9.

Ex. 54: *Left*, "Arc-en-ciel d'innocence," m. 7; *right*, "Minuit pile et face," mm. 53-54, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The image displays two musical excerpts. The left excerpt, for 'Arc-en-ciel d'innocence', shows a vocal line with two '+' markings above notes and the lyrics 'les ressorts fonctionnent toujours;'. Below it is a piano accompaniment with complex rhythmic patterns. The right excerpt, for 'Minuit pile et face', shows a vocal line with three '+' markings above notes and a piano accompaniment with complex rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings like 'expressif' and 'ff'.

Messiaen's description of the style of rhythmic notation as consisting of the exact rhythmic values "without beat" also raises some questions. Messiaen's beamings are typically clear in their organization of rhythmic material into short segments that appear to constitute beats, with this organization often being clearer in the piano part than in the voice part. In the examples above, one can see that the example on the left is organized into four beats, and the example on the right into three and five beats, respectively. Messiaen's beats are of differing lengths, which may cause issues for performers unfamiliar with his rhythmic language. Similarly, Messiaen's measures in the *Chants* vary in length and the entirety of the cycle is without time signature. Even "Antienne du silence," which is the song of the cycle with the most distant relationship to conventional concepts of beats and measures, is carefully organized by beamings between three and seven sixteenth notes in length.

Although Messiaen is remembered as a great rhythmicist for his extensive explorations of rhythm throughout his career, he places great emphasis on melody in the *Technique*. He says that "rhythm remains pliant and gives precedence to melodic development," and that "true" harmonies are those wanted by the melody and that result from it.¹⁷⁵ Thus, Messiaen's rhythmic

¹⁷⁵ Messiaen, *Technique*, 32.

and metrical organizations are subservient to the phrase, while the use of bar lines and beats serve purposes of visual organization on the page and subsequently of phrasal clarity.

For the purposes of rehearsal, it is important that both members of the duo have a similar concept for how certain passages are counted. For music in his first style of rhythmic notation, Messiaen suggests that the first step for musicians who feel strained by the rhythms can mentally count all the shortest values, which in nearly all cases in the *Chants* means counting the sixteenth notes, with the ultimate goal being to “keep in themselves the feeling for the values” without the need for counting small units.¹⁷⁶

In order for both members of the ensemble to discuss and ultimately feel the same rhythmic framework and to facilitate the earliest steps of the rehearsal process, an intermediary step using Messiaen’s conducting symbols may serve as a visual reminder for how the phrases are to be felt. Simply indicating the beats with the same marking (or something like counting numbers) does not suffice because it fails to address the discrepancies that result from Messiaen’s unequal beat lengths. As an intermediate step between the counting of sixteenth notes and the feeling of the entire phrase, one may use indications like those seen in Example 55.

¹⁷⁶ Messiaen, *Technique*, 29.

Ex. 55: *Left*, "Bail avec Mi," m. 2; *right*, "Bail avec Mi," m. 4, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The image shows two musical staves for Example 55. The left staff is for measure 2, and the right staff is for measure 4. Both staves feature a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. Above the vocal line, rhythmic symbols are used to indicate durations: triangles for eighth notes and squares for dotted eighth notes. The piano accompaniment includes dynamic markings such as *p* and *pp*, and a fermata over a note in the right hand.

Example 55 organizes the rhythms into small units, accounting for the discrepancies in their lengths with symbols indicating an eighth note and dotted eighth note duration. This strategy adheres to Messiaen's usage of the symbols as two distinct sets. Alternatively, one could replace sets of two or three eighth-note durations with symbols which indicate quarter note or dotted-quarter note durations as seen in Example 56. Indicating these larger groupings is more in line with the natural rhythm of the text.

Ex. 56: *Left*, "Bail avec Mi," m. 2; *right*, "Bail avec Mi," m. 4, marking longer durations with conducting symbols. *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The image shows two musical staves for Example 56, identical in notation to Example 55. However, the rhythmic symbols above the vocal line are different: triangles are used for quarter notes and squares for dotted-quarter notes. This approach groups the rhythms into larger units that align more closely with the natural rhythm of the text.

Finally, one can organize the small rhythmic units into the beats indicated by Messiaen's rhythmic notation by adding brackets, showing a truer representation of the rhythm while still expressing the details of Messiaen's rhythmic and metrical organizations, as seen in Example 57.

Ex. 57: *Left*, "Bail avec Mi," m. 2; *right*, "Bail avec Mi," m. 4, marking Messiaen's notated beats with conducting symbols. *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The image displays two musical examples side-by-side. Each example consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. Above the vocal line, there are three rhythmic groupings indicated by brackets and conducting symbols (triangles and rectangles). The first example (left) is for measure 2, with the lyrics 'Ton œil de ter - re,'. The second example (right) is for measure 4, with the lyrics 'nos mains de ter - re,'. Both examples are in 3/4 time and feature a piano accompaniment with a prominent bass line and a treble line with chords and melodic fragments. The conducting symbols are placed above the vocal line, with the first two symbols in the first measure and the third symbol in the second measure of each example.

This final example supports the feeling of the rhythms according to Messiaen's notated beats expresses the similarity between two phrases fundamentally the same in their melodic contour, accompaniment, but differing in duration. Messiaen organizes each of these measures into three groupings in the notation, with the first two groupings of greater duration in the second example. This process of organizing the rhythmic units under gradually larger groupings can help the performer to move from the counting of sixteenth notes to feeling the phrases as unified, timeless entities. When the passage above can be felt in these large groupings, the final step of rhythmic expression would be to feel the phrase, as Messiaen says, without beat.

These symbols are especially applicable to the most challenging coordination problems of the cycle found in "Antienne du silence." In one sense, these symbols do not express anything more than Messiaen's notation style, but they do serve as a shorthand for the feeling of the music

without carrying the implication of counting small durations such as a sixteenth note. An example of their usage can be seen in Example 58.

Ex. 58: "Antienne du silence," m. 7, with conducting symbols. *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The image shows a musical score for Example 58, which is measure 7 of "Antienne du silence" from Messiaen's *Chants de terre et de ciel*. The score consists of four staves. The top staff is a vocal line with a treble clef and a common time signature. Above the vocal staff, there are eight conducting symbols: a triangle, a square, a square, a square, a triangle, a triangle, a square, and a square. The piano accompaniment is written on three staves (treble, middle, and bass clefs). The middle staff has a marking "(m. d.)" above it. The music is characterized by complex rhythms and a lack of traditional meter.

Sometimes, Messiaen's rhythms gather into normal meters, such as much of the A sections of "Minuit pile et face" and "Danse du bébé-pilule." In such cases, one can simply write the conventional time signature above the bar line as a reminder of the metric configuration. Messiaen does so in the orchestral version of *Poèmes pour Mi* for single measures or entire sections that gather into a regular meter.

These symbols serve as an intermediary stage between the counting of sixteenth notes and the feeling of Messiaen's music which flows without reference to meter or beat. They also facilitate conversation between the ensemble to determine how the music should be rehearsed and ultimately felt. The above strategy can be applied to any measure in the *Chants*, usually based on Messiaen's beamings. Sometimes, Messiaen's beamings may not necessarily constitute beats in a conventional sense, as in mm. 31 or 119 of "Danse du bébé-pilule," in which he writes long strings of eighth notes under a single beam. In such cases, the ensemble will need to decide

how an intermediary sense of beat can be gained, but ultimately aiming for the feeling of such a passage without beat. Similarly, the polyrhythmic passage in the same song cannot be grouped into a single rhythmic framework that represents both parts. In such cases, independent groupings can be formed for each layer, but for counting purposes (particularly for the pianist) one line must take precedence over the other.

Ensemble Coordination

Messiaen took care in composing his vocal parts, ensuring that the lines were never unreasonable by learning to sing them himself. He did so to become “aware of the problems of diction, the phonetic value of vowels and consonants, the importance of breathing, the right places to take breaths, and the different registers of the voice.”¹⁷⁷ This attention to detail on Messiaen’s part results in vocal lines suited to the voice with accommodations relating to breath and tessitura built into the part. When Messiaen wrote impossibly long vocal lines, such as in “Antienne du silence,” he included his own breath marks which appear in the middle of words where necessary.

Even when vocal phrases are reasonable, Messiaen still tends to include breath marks based on the rhythm and grammar of the phrase. In all cases, it is up to the singer whether to use Messiaen’s indicated breaths or forego them, so long as the rhythm of each phrase is expressed exactly as notated. Many such breath marks are placed in positions that would seem natural choices to most singers, such as the ends of phrases or in places where the grammar of the sentence is not violated.

The breath marks that appear in “Antienne du silence” are the most unique among the cycle, embedded in the vocal part’s impossibly long lines, and sometimes occurring in the

¹⁷⁷ Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color*, 129.

middle of the long alleluias. This song presents the most significant issues related to breathing and breath accommodation in the cycle.¹⁷⁸ Generally, Messiaen's breath marks come at the ends of notes greater than a quarter note in duration, allowing the singer ample time for a sufficient breath. In only two cases does Messiaen write a breath following a note shorter in duration than a quarter note. These appear in m. 2, just eleven sixteenth notes from the end of the phrase, and in the middle of the long final alleluia in m. 8. In both cases (and for the whole of the song), the pianist may not accommodate the breath with extra time due to the intervening material of constantly running sixteenth notes in the upper accompanimental line. The best strategy here is referred to by Martin Katz as "permit and preserve," in which the pianist chooses a point in the accompaniment after the singer's last note and before the first note of her next phrase, and the pianist ends the preceding phrase at that note, earlier than the phrasing in the voice. This allows for extra time to be taken by the pianist but does so such that the extra time is not vertically aligned with where the singer is taking her own extra time to breathe.¹⁷⁹

One other type of coordination challenges appears throughout the *Chants*. The first occurs in places where a phrase ends and the two musicians must quickly begin a new phrase of a new texture. These situations occur in all the transitions between sections in *Danse du bébé-pilule* (mm. 30-31), as well as following each of the *plus lent* sections in that song. It also occurs in the transition between mm. 14-15 and 31-32 in "Arc-en-ciel d'innocence." In some of these cases, the pianist and singer must begin together on a texture that requires a significant leap or resetting of the hand for the pianist, as in the end of the glissando followed by a chordal passage as seen in mm. 47-48 of "Danse du bébé-pilule." In this passage, the pianist plays a glissando in

¹⁷⁸ In Freeland's dissertation, the topic of breath management is addressed only regarding "Antienne du silence."

¹⁷⁹ Martin Katz, *The Complete Collaborator* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 15.

the right hand and a figure solely on the black keys in the left to produce the effect of a chromatic glissando. Messiaen notates no break between this figure and the chordal passage which immediately follows. An ideal musical solution would be for the glissando figure to arrive in the two four-note chords of the piano in the subsequent measure, but the physical challenge in finding these two differing chord shapes simultaneously may prevent a seamless metrical connection. In cases such as these, the singer must learn the appropriate amount of time to give for the pianist to arrive successfully in the new texture. This slight pause may also be viewed as musically advantageous, giving slight agogic emphasis to the beginning of this central, polymodal and polyrhythmic section of the song.

Balance and Texture Management

Marcelle Bunlet, the soprano Messiaen had in mind when writing the *Chants* and his two other song cycles, was a versatile singer who sang Brünnhilde and other dramatic roles effortlessly.¹⁸⁰ Bunlet gave the premier performances of Messiaen's three song cycles with Messiaen himself at the piano. Because Messiaen wrote the *Chants* with a dramatic soprano in mind, performances of the *Chants* with singers who are less developed or have lighter voices will require careful attention to balance in certain passages. Balance issues can be generally related to Messiaen's use of thick, closed-position harmonies whose top line doubles the voice, and is a particular issue when the singer is in their low to medium range between middle C and the middle of the treble staff. The extent to which this issue occurs also relates to Messiaen's choice of dynamic, which the pianist may need to adjust through energy at the keyboard and pedaling and depending on the issues posed to the singer in a given passage.

¹⁸⁰ Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color*, 128.

Very regularly, apart from the second and sixth songs, the vocal line is doubled in the piano either as a solo melodic line or as the top line of a string of chords. Although this habit of Messiaen may assist the singer in pitch accuracy during the rehearsal process, the doubling can cause balance issues (especially when the vocal line is doubled above chords) and does not contribute significantly to musical interest. For these reasons, the pianist may often choose to voice some internal line in the texture when Messiaen writes a clear secondary layer in the texture.

This technique can be applied in several places throughout the cycle. One of the most musically advantageous uses occurs in the first song, “Bail avec Mi,” in all the passages formed from Messiaen’s “harmonic litanies.” These passages, in which melodic fragments of two or several notes repeated with different harmonizations, contain a doubling of the voice above a second line in the texture with the same motion and directionality as the melody but with chromatic alterations. One of the uses of harmonic litany can be seen in Example 59 below.

Ex. 59: "Bail avec Mi," mm. 1-2, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system is for the voice (CHANT) and piano (PIANO). The voice part is in treble clef and begins with the lyrics "Un peu lent" and "Ton œil de terre,". The piano part is in grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and features a melody that oscillates between two notes, with a secondary line in the upper staff. The piano part is marked "pp" and "p".

This passage and all similar ones feature a melody which oscillates between two notes above the chromatically altered line below. In order to highlight the compositional technique, the pianist may aim to bring out this secondary line against the voice's melody and the doubling in the piano. In all such cases, the pianist can easily take this line in the left hand in order to more easily differentiate between the two lines written in the upper staff.

Another such case appears at the beginning of the third song, "Danse du bébé-pilule." Here, Messiaen writes a top line in the piano which doubles the vocal line, two additional lines that move in similar motion and homorhythmically with the melody, and a bass line of longer durations. The pianist may choose to more prominently voice one of these interior lines that moves with the melody. In this opening material, the voice outlines a diminished-seventh chord above an accompaniment that adheres to mode 2. The A sections of this song have a tonal center on A, but at the end of this first phrase Messiaen comes to rest on an E-flat major chord with the vocal line ending on the added tritone A and the accompanimental lines arriving on a chord tone. Because of the low positioning of the melody in the singer's range and the doubling with closed-

position chords in the same register, balance issues may arise. The pianist can mitigate this issue by treating either of the secondary melodic lines (those beginning on C and G, respectively) as the primary melody of the piano.

Cases in which the vocal line is doubled with closed-position chords in the same register as the singer require other solutions. These instances are characterized by strings of chords which adhere to one of Messiaen's modes or repetitions of one of the *accords spéciaux* and serve to color the voice. Two such examples can be found in the central, polymodal passages in both the third and fourth songs, one of which is seen in Example 60 below.

Ex. 60: "Danse du bébé-pilule," mm. 59-60, *Chants de terre et de ciel*. Composed by Olivier Messiaen. Copyright 1939 by Éditions Durand. Reproduced with the kind permission of Éditions Durand.

In this passage, the singer remains in the lower half of her range with triadic chords doubling the melody and an unrelated string of chords in the lower staff of the piano close to the range of the vocal melody. The entire section is marked *forte* and balance issues may arise. In this case and in the similar passage in "Arc-en-ciel d'innocence," the upper string of chords should serve the vocal line by providing a shimmering timbral quality. When Messiaen writes passages like this where a lower layer of chords serves a more accompanimental role, the pianist may always choose to voice the secondary melody that emerges from the layer which does not double the voice in order to add interest to the texture.

Sometimes, Messiaen writes a melodic line in the piano which the voice joins for only a short time or sings with an altered rhythm, as in much of “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence.” In cases such as these, the pianist need not try to seek out or invent some secondary line in the texture but can rather treat the primary melodic material as it is written.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented discussions of pianistic and ensemble issues that may occur during preparation of the *Chants*. Pianistic issues include challenges related to dense chords which sometimes span more than an octave, complex hand choreography, the management of multilayer textures, and some instance of velocity. Of these, complex hand choreography is the most common issue which arises in the *Chants*. Pianistic issues resulting from hands being placed on top of one another can often be remedied through careful hands-separate practice or by practicing with one hand displaced by an octave. The second song, “Antienne du silence,” poses significant challenges to the pianist due to its complex three-part texture, for which solutions vary depending on the reach of the pianist’s hands. A discussion of pedal indications has shown how Messiaen uses the piano as an object of resonance, and the various types of pedaling strategies were discussed.

In terms of ensemble and coordination issues, the development of a counting strategy is paramount for successful rehearsal of the song. Familiarity with the other performer’s part and the difficulties posed by the vocal and piano writing is necessary for facilitating coordination between the ensemble and to become familiar with the pacing of material, especially in transitional points in the music or very busy textures. Finally, balance issues may arise within the ensemble due to the thick textures of the piano and Messiaen’s intention for the cycle to be sung

by a dramatic soprano. Pianists and singers must take care in addressing these matters for successful preparation and performance of the work.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has explored elements of Messiaen's *Chants de terre et de ciel* which will help performers understand the expressive intentions of the composer and more efficiently prepare the work for performance. It fills a gap in the existing literature by contributing a performance guide that focuses on issues pertinent specifically to the pianist and to the ensemble as a whole.

Messiaen's poetry in the *Chants* draws on his experiences of familial life and his relationship to God and the Catholic faith. In the first two songs, which focus on his wife Claire, the delineation between earthly and spiritual is less clear. Messiaen likens her to a faint shadow of the divine through metaphor and replaces her with a guardian angel in the second of these songs. In the case of the middle two songs, which are dedicated to the composer's son Pascal, the delineation between the earthly and spiritual realms is clear, with the focus entirely on his human qualities and innocence. In the poems that constitute the text of these songs, Messiaen depicts the innocence of his young child in scenes of play and while asleep (in "Arc-en-ciel d'innocence"). In the final two songs, Messiaen turns to his own fears, anxieties, and sinfulness, which can only be resolved through his relationship with God and Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Messiaen achieves his poetic intentions through the lens of surrealism, which allow him to suggest the religious or spiritual in his depictions of the everyday.

In terms of music theory, Messiaen uses various means of pitch organization to provide structure to the songs, and he aligns the subject matter of the text with certain modes of limited transposition and other organizational features. Pitch organization is based on his second, third, and seventh modes of limited transposition, pentatonic organizations, and his *accords spéciaux*. Significant means of expression include his reservation of the second mode for the songs dedicated to Pascal and poetic passages which focus explicitly on God's grace. The third mode appears primarily as part of polymodal constructions with the second mode in the central sections of the two songs dedicated to Pascal, which others have proposed as suggesting a form of gratitude for that divine grace. Some of Messiaen's earliest uses of his *accords spéciaux* appear in the Chants and exemplify idiosyncratic combinations of transpositional and inversion processes that would become an important feature of Messiaen's subsequent output. Appearances of the Chord of Resonance do not appear to carry significant cyclical or expressive meaning. The Chord on the Dominant appears exclusively at points of transition in the cycle. Much of the final song is based on this chord, which Messiaen perhaps intended to signify Christ's transition from death to life.

This dissertation has addressed the pianistic challenges and ensemble issues of balance and rhythmic coordination inherent in the *Chants*. At the keyboard, the main pianistic issues relate to large chords which require a large span of the hand, the voicing of dense chords, complicated hand choreography at the keyboard, and complex multi-layer textures. Aside from the second song "Antienne du silence," the writing for the piano is formed almost entirely of thickly scored chords, which are either used to double and provide color to the voice or stand as objects of resonance, left to vibrate and gradually decay. It is for this reason the *Chants* is uniquely suited to the piano and was never orchestrated like the earlier cycle *Poèmes pour Mi*.

Because of a pianistic style which capitalizes on the instrument's characteristic decay, pedal and fingering choices must be made such that melodic clarity is achieved among dense, resonant chords. Significant pianistic challenges appear in the song "Antienne du silence," which consists of a three-part polyphonic texture of chromatic and starkly independent lines. The issue of clarity in this song is exacerbated by a musical texture which requires the pianist to make carefully planned decisions related to pedaling and fingering due to significant stretching of the hand and distribution of the central melodic line between the two hands. Because of the hand span issues, pianists will need to make a unique set of decisions based on their own reach.

As noted previously, Messiaen intended the *Chants* to be sung by a dramatic soprano with a large voice and wide range. The density of musical texture in the piano may require careful approaches to dynamics and voicing when performed with a singer with a lighter or less developed voice. Even for singers who are capable of Messiaen's difficult vocal writing, pianists must remain particularly attentive in balancing chords which double the vocal line and balancing these melodic chords with the accompanimental layers lower in the texture. Although many of the complex rhythmic organizations Messiaen became known for in his later career are not present in the *Chants*, his predilection for ametrical writing and beats of varying length are consistent throughout the cycle. This rhythmic language may pose challenges to musicians who have not experienced Messiaen's music before. In chapter 4, a discussion of the rhythms of the *Chants* was followed by a description of counting strategies that will facilitate performance preparation in practical ways.

In her dissertation on the cycle, Sally Freeland notes that the songs "Bail avec Mi," "Danse du bébé-pilule," and "Arc-en-ciel d'innocence" are the most accessible for singers new to Messiaen. Due to his musical language, pitch accuracy and rhythm pose significant challenges

to singers taking on this cycle, alongside challenges relating to the wide vocal range, long, tiring melodic lines, diction, and balance. The three songs mentioned are also the most approachable for pianists new to Messiaen, with “Bail avec Mi” the simplest in terms of pianistic and ensemble coordination issues. It is certainly possible to program individual songs from the cycle. Although not without musical and technical challenges for both pianist and singer, “Danse du bébé-pilule” is the most charming and convincing stand-alone song from the cycle in my opinion. “Arc-en-ciel d’innocence” could also successfully stand on its own in a recital setting despite its prevailing quiet, contemplative mood. Both “Antienne du silence” and “Minuit pile et face” pose significant pianistic and ensemble challenges. The final song, “Résurrection” is not terribly challenging for the pianist, but the challenges for the singer are significant. When thinking of excerpting “Résurrection”, one should remember that much of its drama depends on its context within the cycle. Any pair of songs that constitute a diptych in this “trilogy of diptychs” could be appropriate dramatically and expressively in a recital setting.

I hope that this dissertation provides performers with a concise overview of the important expressive and stylistic elements which characterize the *Chants*. Because Messiaen’s poetry is based on biographical details relating to his family and religious faith that are sometimes veiled in metaphor or allusion, the meanings expressed through the poems may not be readily apparent on their own. Although Messiaen is well known for his modes of limited transposition, these means of pitch organization may not be readily apparent to all performers of his music. Aside from making explicit the connections between pitch material and poetic subject matter, the theoretical analysis may help performers understand the structural role of pitch organization in the songs and show the great care with which Messiaen organized the material.

Aside from the *Poèmes pour Mi*, Messiaen's works for voice and piano are not often treated as standard repertoire, especially among student performers. Perhaps due to its charm and the popularity of the orchestral version of the *Poèmes*, numerous studies and performance guides have focused on that cycle. The body of research devoted to performance studies of Messiaen continues to lack comprehensive treatments of his final song cycle *Harawi* and his earlier *Trois Mélodies*, both for soprano and piano. The methodology developed in the present study could be productively applied to those works in the future.

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APPENDIX A

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Paris, Tuesday, April 26, 2022

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- "*Résurrection*": mm. 3, 10, 24, 26-27 (5 measures)
- "*Action de grâces*" from *Poèmes pour Mi*: mm. 1-3 (3 measures)

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 Composer: Olivier MESSIAEN
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