

MESSIAEN AND SURREALISM Adrian Evans

Surrealism is a term that has been used in connection with [Olivier Messiaen](#) (1908-1992) more than any other composer. While the term is often used in a lax way, simply allowing hack critics to denote a certain perceived ‘weirdness’ of tone, the relationship between the composer and the surrealist aesthetic is worthy, perhaps, of a brief exploration.

It must be said at the outset that, as a musician and composer, Messiaen did not participate in the Surrealist movement. During the inter-war era the leader of the Surrealists, Andre Breton (1896-1966), was – unlike the Zurich Dadaists – actually opposed to music in principle, excoriating composer-cliques such as *Les Six* as promoted in Paris high society by ‘fake poet’ Jean Cocteau. Furthermore, as ultra-humanist subversives and revolutionaries, the Surrealists’ militant, materialist, anti-clerical, anti-Catholic, anti-religious position would have rendered Messiaen *persona non grata* in their eyes. In the post war era the relationship between Surrealism and music changed, but primarily as a result of the rise of Bebop and the recognition of a fellow feeling with Afro-American black culture as enshrined in The Blues – the relationship between Surrealism and Western ‘classical’ art-music remains difficult and, in the main, uncharted territory.

The evolution of Messiaen’s development can be described as passing through three distinct periods and two distinct phases. Chronologically the Periods are (1) 1917-1936 (2) 1937-1949 and (3) 1949 to date. The first period is, naturally, a formative, early, ‘pioneering’ period. The second period a middle consolidation period, and the later third period, an era of ‘transmutation’, giving rise to works which extend the potentialities of the earlier periods to such a degree as to define a completely new phase of achievement without sacrificing continuity. In some respects, it seems that these three eras can be broadly divided into two distinct Phases of inner evolution. The first two, the ‘pioneering’ era and the ‘consolidation’ era, comprise works that may be defined as microcosmic and subjectivist, the last period comprises works of a more impersonal, macrocosmic mode.

To explain this analysis it is helpful to identify some salient works which also, by comparison with other works in other media, by different artists, may illustrate some overlaps between Messiaen’s music and Surrealism and the Surrealist ethos.

Early Period: 1917-1936

From the beginning Messiaen’s music derived from two modes of thought: a personal, subjectivist mode exemplified by the Preludes (1929) for solo piano, “etiolate mood-pictures still sunk in the prison of the self” to quote Malcolm Troop, and an hieratic, theological mode epitomised by the organ work *Le Banquet Celeste* (1926) or, even more starkly, by *L’Apparition de l’Eglise Eternelle* (1932). The Preludes recall and extend several works by Messiaen’s predecessor Claude Debussy (piano preludes like *Voiles* and *La Cathedrale Engloutie* (1910) or orchestral works such as *Danse Sacree et Danse Profane* from 1903). The label Impressionist has served to obscure the fact that Debussy was closely associated with the proto-Surrealist ethos of the *fin de siecle* French Symbolists, showing deep affinities with poets such as Baudelaire and Mallarme, themselves recognised as precursors of the Surrealist spirit. The piano Preludes of both composers seem like musical renditions of Redon’s lithographs. Messiaen’s *Les Sons Impalpable du Reve* inhabits the same oneiric sphere as Redon’s pictures like the painting ‘*Yeux Clos*’ (1890) or the two lithograph series entitled *Dans le Reve* (1879) and *Songes* (1891)

The iconoclastic, Absurdism of late ultra-Symbolist Pataphysics (Alfred Jarry) and the abrasive nihilism of Dada have worked to obscure the roots of French Surrealism in the world of nineteenth century Symbolism. The Surrealists themselves always tended to emphasise their preference for the Symbolist tradition of poetic anarchism and revolt (Lautreamont, Rimbaud), rather than that of subjective, interior exploration. Despite clear parallels, the work of Odilon Redon (1840-1916) was not seen as proto-Surrealist. Nevertheless from the present historic vantage point it is obvious that there is a line of continuity from the pre-Freudian world of Symbolist painting to the post-Freudian spirit of Surrealist endeavour. This is despite the fact that the neo-conservative religiosity espoused by many Symbolists would be seen as hopelessly retrograde from the Surrealist perspective. In fact both Claude Debussy (1862-1918) and, later, Olivier Messiaen inhabited the same pre-Surrealist cultural landscape of the Symbolist *fin de siecle*.

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Another artist of the *fin de siècle* whose works seem to emanate from a similar domain to that traversed by Messiaen in his first pioneering period is the Belgian Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921). Pictures such as 'I Lock My Door Upon Myself' (1891) which project an atmosphere of spiritual isolation and psychic dissociation, or the remarkable '*Geste d'Offrande*' (an image of an immobile figure frozen in ritual pose) encapsulate the muted mysticism of Messiaen's theological mode. Messiaen's title *Les Offrandes Oubliées* (1930) may not be a deliberate allusion to Khnopff - but it looks as if it should be.

Other works of Messiaen in similar vein include *Diptyque* (1929), *Nativité du Seigneur* (1935), *L'Ascension* (1933) and the impressive, archetypal *L'Apparition de L'Eglise Eternelle*. The monumentality of the latter work looks forward to the glacial peaks of *Et Exspecto Resurrectionem Mortuorum* (1964) and, no doubt unintentionally, demonstrates non-rational affinities with Gaudí's unfinished *Templo de la Sagrada Familia* begun in 1883. The parabolic spires and delirious, sensual detail of Gaudí's idiosyncratic Art Nouveau Barcelona cathedral could be an architectural premonition of Messiaen's musical style; like Messiaen, Antoni Gaudí y Cornet (1852-1926) demonstrated, in his creative work, a phenomenological affinity with Surrealism without being, in the formal sense, Surrealist. Like his Catalan compatriot Dali, Gaudí represented an aesthetic phenomenon resistant to the apparent constraints of subsequent Surrealist ideology. Also, like Messiaen, Gaudí produced works of extreme, heretical individuality at variance, in a way, with the professed orthodoxy of belief both artists attributed to themselves. It was as though Religion provided an incitement for the imagination – an operative fiction.

Le Banquet Celeste was Messiaen's first public work, an organ piece of unresolved dissonance and subversive stasis first performed in 1928 (the year of Breton's *Nadja*, Bunuel and Dali's film *Un Chien Andalou* and Aragon's *Traite du Style*) four years after the publication of the *Premier Manifeste* (1924). Had any of the Surrealist avant garde, immersed in experiments with collage, automatism, word-scrambling and the Ducassian Encounter, attended the Paris performance of this piece they might have detected, despite the wilfully archaic façade, some signs of a sensibility attuned to the auditory equivalent of Convulsive Beauty, explosive-fixed and erotic-veiled. However the differences would also have been obvious. Messiaen was clearly establishing a traditional theological basis for his work; the Surrealists were fixated upon the chance incursions of the quotidian marvellous. These were ideologically irreconcilable positions, even though Messiaen was drawn to a 'surrealist' use of language. In his case this stemmed from rejection of the arid neo-classical formulations practised by middle-of-the road artists of the day, rather than the Dada experiments of Tzara, Huelsenbeck and Schwitters or, in France, of Breton and Soupault (*Les Champs Magnetiques*, 1920).

Messiaen's formative, pioneering period corresponds to the proto-Surrealist movements of the previous *fin de siècle* generation. The reason for this is the bipolar modality of Messiaen's creative thought, the complementary desires to penetrate the inner recesses of experience and the 'mystical' or theological imperative. Both tropisms tended to unleash unpredictable and powerful forces, finding expression in Messiaen's unique, violent and monumental musical sound-forms. This musical language cannot be constrained by the Catholic theological framework espoused by the composer and can, therefore, be categorised as a manifestation of sur-reality in music, despite problematic personal, historical and cultural complications.

Middle Period: 1937-1949

The evolutionary difference between the works of Messiaen's second period and his first is a difference in 'depth', not in a qualitative sense, but in a progressive sense: Messiaen's musical explorations took him 'deeper', as it were, into the hinterland of his chosen terrain. In some respects the works of his second period are more extreme, or appear so. The delicate, subjective mode of the piano preludes is overtaken by a series of works that are the most overtly surrealistic of the composer's output.

Firstly there are the *Poèmes Pour Mi* (1936) and secondly, *Chants de Terre et de Ciel* (1938), two song-cycles influenced by the translucent verse of Pierre Reverdy (hailed by Andre Breton as a

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precursor), set to piano music which complements rather than accompanies the words. This music echoes and cascades amid the metallic membranes on an inner cosmos where landscapes metamorphose into female bodies, like Pavel Tchelitchew's painting 'Fata Morgana' (1940). *Harawi*, *Chant d'Amour et de Mort* (the title of a third song-cycle) marks a further, distinctive evolution of sensibility. It is the first part of a trilogy, the other two parts being the *Turangalila-Symphonie* (1948) and *Cinq Rechants* (1948). In *Harawi* (1945) the fluidity of the imagery and the unearthly pianism of the music combine to produce one of the most sensational and 'surreal' works of our age. The protagonist Piroutcha, a Peruvian incarnation of Wagner's Isolde, participates with her lover in an extraordinary ritual dance amid atoms, rainbows, giant staircases, sacred birds and exploding galaxies of onomatopoeic utterances. The whole scenario is set in a vertiginous abyss where the moment of love-death is prolonged into an infinite star-less night:

Dans le noir, colombe vert,
Dans le noir, perle limpide
Dans le noir, mon fruit de ciel...

In *Rencontres Avec Olivier Messiaen* (1961) by Antoine Golea the composer says that a picture by the English Surrealist Roland Penrose called 'The Invisible Isle' (1936), also known as 'Seeing is Believing', inspired the section of *Harawi* entitled *Amour Oiseau d'Etoile*. The picture depicts the blond head of a beautiful young woman suspended upside down over an island city; her neck penetrates the low-lying cloud entering into planetary space above. From the bottom of the picture, extending upwards, are two hands in a gesture of yearning. Messiaen has said that this picture encapsulates the whole of *Harawi*.

The incantatory language of *Harawi* and *Cinq Rechants* is perhaps the most remarkable element in Messiaen's 'surrealism'. On the one hand it links him with a pre-surrealist tradition of linguistic experimentation, stretching back to Edgar Allan Poe. On the other hand it shows how close he was, coincidentally or otherwise, to contemporaneous Surrealist poetics – particularly the work of Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), who was to die the year of *Cinq Rechants*. Although utterly apart philosophically, there is a trans-ideological affinity between Artaud and Messiaen, particularly the Messiaen of *Harawi* with its pre-Columbian *mise en scene* and cosmic-mythical scenario. There is an extremism in the work of both Artaud and Messiaen which discloses a universe of ritualistic 'cruelty' and depends, in part, on the creation of personalised hermetic languages based on dextrous collages of Eastern and Western elements. Artaud, in his dramaturgic researches, helped push Surrealist thought away from Western models, towards non-European themes and obsessions. This was, in some ways, an extension of the exoticism that attracted Debussy to the Balinese *gamelan*. Artaud saw in the stylised formalism of Balinese dance a way of rejuvenating the staid formalisms of Western theatre.

Messiaen's linguistic usage evolved into a hybrid of French, Hindi and personal images encapsulated in names like Viviane, Ysault, Meduse and Orphee, all protagonists of Symbolist inner dramas, immortalised in paintings by, for example, Jean Delville and Gustave Moreau. Messiaen wrote glossolalia utterances such as

Ahi! O Mapa nama mapa nama lila, tchil...

or

Mayoma kalimolimo mayoma kalimolimo
t k tk t k t k...

These chants bear a strong generic resemblance to the archetypal poetic idiolect of Artaud's semi-legendary 'lost' book *Letura d'Eprahi Talli Tetr Fendi Photia O Fotre Indi* (1934):

Calipa

Ke loc tispera

Kalispera

Enoctimi...

born in part, as was *Harawi*, out of a fascination for the myths and codices of Pre-Columbian America.

The trilogy is the high point of Messiaen's para-surrealist output. It also highlights those aspects that set him apart from the Paris Surrealist Group of the inter-war period. His dissociation from politico-revolutionary concerns, the orthodox religious basis for his mysticism, his naïve association of earthly and heavenly love that is apparently at the opposite pole to Breton's 'mad love' or amour fou. Messiaen's explanations of his sublimated eroticism are most unconvincing when decked out in regressive, saccharine Catholic rhetoric.

Second period works comprise some of Messiaen's best known pieces such as *Quatuor Pour la Fin du Temps* (1941), *Les Corps Glorieux* (1939), *Visions de l'Amen* (1943) and *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jesus* (1944). In all cases the convulsive beauty of the works themselves is at odds with the manifest orthodox religious ideological ground-base underpinning the composer's speculative thinking. It might appear that, like Gerard de Nerval and J-K. Huysmans before him, Messiaen pushed beyond the limits of conventional theology into the borderlands of the heretical and occult; the only parallel for his synaesthesia colour-theory, for instance, is to be found in the works of Russian composer Alexander Scriabin (1871-1915), an overt Theosophist. The numerological method he incorporated into his compositional technique can only be regarded as an example of occultism in music, assertions to the contrary notwithstanding. Again, there are precedents in the pre-surrealist world of the Symbolists: Baudelaire and Rimbaud's *Alchimie du Verbe*. With these works Messiaen attempted to resolve the underlying dualism implicit in his creative thought. He was at the limits of charted experience, and the music, particularly the piano music, reflected this, gaining in intensity and violence on every level from the cataclysmic to the insidious.

Later Period: 1949 to date

The works that followed these during the third Period from 1949 onwards are generally monumental, concerned with the outer gulfs and vastness of space or the vertiginous escarpments of glaciers. There are few works dealing with the inner life of the subjective individual. Like Mallarmé with his revolutionary poem *Un Coup de Dés*, Messiaen ventured into *The Abyss*. In this phase there is, however, one key figure with whom Messiaen can be compared: arch-Dadaist and Surrealist Max Ernst (1891-1976). It is intriguing that between these two crucial figures there are a number of points of rapport.

During the late 1930s Max Ernst developed a distinctive form of visionary painting using the 'decalcomania' technique. Ernst continued this style into the 1940s with paintings like 'Europe After The Rain' (1942) and 'The Eye of Silence' (1944). Decalcomania is strongly identified with Ernst, although its discovery is usually attributed to Oscar Dominguez. Similar colouristic effects can be found, in prototype form, in some canvases by Odilon Redon and Gustave Moreau and the technique was also used extensively by Leonor Fini (1918-1996). Many of her paintings from the 1960s seem to emanate from the same creative universe as the music Messiaen was composing during the immediate post-war period. For example works such as 'The Dormant Water' (1962), 'A Breathing Shadow' (1962), 'Sleep In a Garden' (1962), 'The Trough of Night' (1963) and 'The Long Sleep of Flowers' (1964) are almost exactly comparable to the soundscapes of *Harawi* and *Turungalila*. Decalcomania involves the use of colour figurations embedded in wet paint applied according to the laws of Objective Chance. The result is an eroded surface where decoration assumes an autonomous role, just as Messiaen exploited the effects of apoggiaturas and added

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notes. Ernst's painting 'The Stolen Mirror' (1941) featured a ziggurat-dotted landscape strongly reminiscent of the mythical Peruvian setting of Harawi.

It is true that the works of Max Ernst are imbued with a corrosive black humour, blasphemy and cosmic irony quite alien to Messiaen's conscious intentions. A typical example would be 'The AntiPope' (1942) which expresses an almost Satanic sensibility completely at odds with Messiaen's joyful ecstasies. Yet nevertheless the static highly textured effect of the music finds a correlation here, as does the collage-like juxtaposition of 'soundblocks' in works like *Et Exspecto Resurrectionem Mortuorum*, which are intrinsically apocalyptic rather than Surrealist. Furthermore, in a series of Ernst pictures entitled, among others, 'The Nymph Echo' (1937), 'Nature at Dawn' (1938) and 'Joie de Vivre' (1936) the viewer is confronted with strangely Messiaen-esque visions: giant bird-headed creatures lurking amid luscious, fantastic blossoms and grotesque vegetation comprised of huge, leathery leaves. The vast dimensions of these alien worlds somehow prefigure the cosmic landscapes of the *Catalogue d'Oiseaux* (1958); crystalline evocations of magical, hyper-real bird-life; bizarre avian deities, monuments to the birds. Messiaen's later works such as *Et Exspecto, Livre d'Orgue* (1951) and *La Transfiguration* (1969) conjure up towering auditory edifices and vast canyons of sound. Mexican step-pyramids, echoing glaciers, vaults of stained glass, forests like giant cathedrals, bird-familars – these are all the auditory counterparts of Ernst's 'great forests' and 'entire cities'. They are the auditory equivalents of the awesome geological landscapes and boundless spatial gulfs depicted in paintings like 'Mundus est Fabula', (1959) 'A Swarm of Bees in the Palace of Justice' (1960), 'Inspired Hill' (1950), 'The Twentieth Century' (1955) and 'The Sky Marries The Earth' (1964).

A shared fascination for avian life links Max Ernst and Olivier Messiaen. Ernst created innumerable bird-monuments. His birds are stylised, linear shapes, as depicted in 'Chaste Joseph' (1928) or 'The Interior of Sight' (1929). They are counterparts, in a visual medium, to the stylisation of birdsong achieved by Olivier Messiaen in numerous musical works. For both artists these supernal birds are more than a fixation, and their simultaneous appearance in the works of two great masters of the twentieth century cannot be merely coincidental – there is a link between Messiaen and the Surrealists, but that link is non-rational. Its existence reveals a creative imperative that transcends ideological, even theological differences.

Postscript: The First Audible Diamond

After the Second World War, in 1946, Andre Breton revised his approach to the problem of music and Surrealism. Acknowledging deep connections between poetry and song he called for a 'reunification' of hearing to accompany the revolutionary programme of the Surrealist reunification of sight. In an article for the magazine *Modern Music* entitled 'Silence is Golden', reprinted in *What is Surrealism?* (1978), he wrote:

...for the first audible diamond to be obtained, it is evident that the fusion of the two elements - music and poetry - could only be accomplished at a very high emotional temperature. And it seems to me that it is in the expression of the passion of love that both music and poetry are most likely to reach this supreme point of incandescence.

If the most crucial feature of the Surreal marvellous is Convulsive Beauty then, even before Breton wrote these words, that unique form of beauty had already found its first, essential musical expression - in Messiaen's *Harawi* of 1945 and many previous pieces composed during the heyday of the Paris Surrealist Group.

Bibliographic Addenda

The first version of this essay accompanied a Messiaen Discography compiled for a Professional Examination in October 1972. The essay was first published in the magazine BRIO (Volume 11, No 2, Autumn, 1974) with Part II of the Discography, the most comprehensive survey of Messiaen's

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work then available in English. The Discography also included numerous literary references to help illuminate the provenance of Messiaen's compositions. The following references are related exclusively to this essay and include a number of items omitted from the first version:

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