

Notes on the Notes:

Extramusical Annotations in the Scores of Messiaen

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NOTES ON THE NOTES:**EXTRAMUSICAL ANNOTATIONS IN THE SCORES OF MESSIAEN**

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) was a major composer of the 20th Century, working his entire life in his native country of France. As a composer, he produced works in a broad array of the major concert-music genres, including symphonic works, choral works, chamber works, art songs, a large output of works for organ, and a single opera, *Saint François d'Assise*.

To an extent unusual for a composer of his generation, Messiaen filled many of his scores, especially the scores of his instrumental works, with volumes of text with no apparent notational or performance value. These texts are of various kinds, to be enumerated below; for the sake of this paper, they will be grouped together under the name of “extramusical annotations.” These texts constitute an unusual layer of commentary, association, and inspiration for the performer, and may be explanatory and enriching for the listener who bothers to acquaint themselves with these texts. The extent to which these annotations constitute part of the musical score itself, and to which they may be considered as integral parts of each work, is an open question, one which this paper intends to explore.

This paper is being written in the Spring of 2020 when, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many resources normally available through brick-and-mortar libraries are inaccessible due to facilities closures. As such, this paper has relied on personal correspondence and interviews, as well as free online resources, for content which the author would have preferred to locate and cite in more authoritative and scholarly sources. In addition, some questions have remained unanswered and will be ripe for future research and follow-up at a time when libraries and

archives may once again be physically accessible. Some of these questions have been brought together in a section titled “Questions for Further Inquiry” at the end of this paper.

Compositional Output of Messiaen

The Wikipedia page, “List of compositions by Olivier Messiaen,”¹ itself drawing primarily on Paul Griffiths’ New Grove article on Messiaen², lists 102 musical works by Messiaen for various instruments and ensembles. This number does not include at least five pieces that Messiaen wrote for “unspecified instruments.” Of the works for specified forces, the earliest listed is a piano work entitled *La Dame de Shalott* (“The Lady of Shalott”) from 1917 (when Messiaen would have been only nine years old), and the latest include a number of partially-completed works in progress during the last year of Messiaen’s life, often completed by others or published posthumously, including the *Concert à quatre* (“Quadruple Concerto”), and *Un oiseau des arbres de vie (Oiseau Tui)* (“A bird of the trees of life (Tui bird)”). Of the 102 works, 29 are listed as “unpublished,” “lost,” or “published...but withdrawn,” and another 15 were only discovered or published after Messiaen’s death. Thus, there remain 58 extant works of Messiaen which were both completed and published during his lifetime and not subsequently withdrawn. This pool of 58 is the most fitting for examination by this study, since these published scores represent Messiaen’s own intended presentation to the music-reading audience. Because this study concerns itself not just with the musical materials, but with the final textual published product of each work--with all the appendices and annotations Messiaen intended for

¹ *Wikipedia*, s.v. “List of compositions by Olivier Messiaen,” last modified on April 12, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_compositions_by_Olivier_Messiaen

² Paul Griffiths, “Messiaen, Olivier,” *Grove Music Online*. Retrieved by the editor(s) of the Wikipedia page on 8 June 2019.

inclusion--, works which were completed, discovered, or published after Messiaen's death are not amenable to this examination. Among these 58 will be found all the works considered "major works" of Messiaen. Although Messiaen did at times work in genres such as musique concrète, these 58 works all have written scores.

Of the 58 works that fall within the scope of this paper, the earliest come from 1928: a piano work entitled *Huit Préludes* ("Eight Preludes"), and an organ work entitled *Le Banquet Céleste* ("The Heavenly Banquet"); and the latest from 1991 (the year before Messiaen's death at age 83): the orchestral work *Eclairs sur l'au-delà...* ("Lightning Over the Beyond..."), and a piano quintet, *Pièce pour piano et quatuor à cordes*. (This piano quintet was not a self-standing, individually-inspired work of Messiaen but was instead written as one of twenty offerings by twenty different composers for the 90th birthday of music publisher Alfred Schlee [1901-99]³. Thus this study will suggest that the quintet is an outlier among Messiaen's oeuvre.) The works under consideration include one opera, seven orchestral works, eight works for orchestra plus soloists, five choral works, six vocal pieces or song cycles, five chamber works, thirteen organ works, twelve piano works, and one electronic work, the *Fête des belles eaux* ("Festival of the Beautiful Waters") for six ondes Martenots.

Varieties of Extramusical Annotations

In terms of setting/placement, three possible "locations" of Messiaen's extramusical annotations can be identified: prefatory materials, found at the beginnings of the scores of entire works (for example, the *Preface* in the score of the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, or the *Note de*

³ Nigel Simeone, "Pièce pour piano et quatuor à cordes," Hyperion, Hyperion Records, 2008, <https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/tw.asp?w=W15789>

l'auteur from the beginning of the score of *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*); epigraphs, which are generally short imagistic descriptions or quotations found at the head of individual movements; and annotations within the scores themselves, usually short phrases that Messiaen may set alongside a given bar or staff, to draw attention to something occurring at precisely that point in the movement.

In terms of content, two different kinds of annotations are to be noted in Messiaen's scores (this schema is the author's own--other analysts may identify more types or divide the annotations differently). There are what this paper shall call "literary annotations," which include all those writings whose purpose is to suggest images, settings, parallels from the nonmusical arts, theological concepts, or Biblical passages which may correspond to Messiaen's musical content; and then, there are what this paper identifies as "music-theoretical annotations," which include all those instances when Messiaen identifies rhythmic practices, pitch-collections, or formal-organizational processes taking place in the music.

Some annotations may seem to occupy both of these categories at once, such as, for example, the birdsong notations. Messiaen was a knowledgeable ornithologist and transcriber of birdsong, and loved to include birdsong melodies in many of his pieces. When he does so, Messiaen often includes a note attributing the song to the bird from which it originates. When Messiaen labels birdsong melodies within a score, they are at once pointing "out of the work," toward a nonmusical entity in the real world, namely the given bird, and in this sense fall into the category of literary annotations. On the other hand, they are identifying melodic "themes" or "characters" within the piece, and thus may be said to be music-theoretical annotations as well. The same may be said of those instances where Messiaen labels named themes within his scores,

for example, when he writes “(Thème de Dieu)” (“God’s theme”) beside the very first bar of the first movement of *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus* (“*Twenty Glances on the Infant Jesus*”)⁴. Here, Messiaen is clearly pointing two directions at once: “out of the score” toward God, whom the theme signifies, and “into the score” at the particular melodic theme in question (so that, perhaps, it may be recognizable in later appearances and permutations).

Messiaen often slides freely between the “literary” pole and the “music-theoretical” pole within a single sentence or paragraph. Consider, for example, this description of the sixth movement, “Par Lui tout a été fait,” (“By Him all things were made”) from the Author’s Note at the beginning of the *Vingt Regards*:

Here is a fugue. The subject is never presented the same way twice: from the second entry it begins to change rhythm and registers. Notice the episode where the upper voice treats the subject in a non-retrogradable rhythm, truncated from each end, where the fortissimo bass repeats a fragment of the subject in asymmetrical augmentation. Middle section on very short and very long values (the infinitely small, the infinitely large). Resumption of the retrograde fugue, in the manner of a crab canon. Mysterious stretto. *God’s Theme* fortissimo: victorious presence, the face of God behind the flame and the roiling. Creation takes up and sings *God’s Theme* in a canon of harmonies⁵.

Notice how, in this passage, Messiaen’s description of his musical process and his description of his theological concept / literary image are intertwined and inextricable.

⁴ Olivier Messiaen, Mvt. I, “Regard du Père,” *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus* (Paris: Durand, 1944).

⁵ “C’est une fugue. Le sujet n’y est jamais présenté de la même façon: dès la seconde entrée il est changé de rythme et de registres. Remarquez le divertissement où la voix supérieure traite le sujet en rythme non rétrogradable éliminé à droite et à gauche, où la basse fortissimo répète un fragment du sujet en agrandissement asymétrique. Milieu sur des valeurs très brèves et très longues (l’infiniment petit, l’infiniment grand). Reprise de la fugue rétrogradée, à l’écrevisse. Strette mystérieuse. *Thème de Dieu* fortissimo : présence victorieuse, la face de Dieu derrière la flamme et le bouillonnement. La création reprend et chante le *Thème de Dieu* en canon d’accords.” Olivier Messiaen, “Note de l’Auteur,” *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus*. (All French-to-English translations by Justin Birchell unless otherwise noted).

Despite this bleeding-over between the categories, it is still useful to note these two very different uses of extramusical text by Messiaen: one essentially imagistic and suggestive, the other essentially analytic.

Distribution of Extramusical Annotations Over Messiaen's Career

As noted above, the earliest works examined in this study come from 1928. Already in works written this year, Messiaen begins his practice of extramusical annotation. The work *Le Banquet Céleste* features an epigraph on the first page of the score with a quotation from the Gospel of John, "He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him"⁶. Already, at the age of 20, in his earliest published work, then, Messiaen is inclined to throw a net of verbal description over his entirely-instrumental work.

The practice would last throughout Messiaen's compositional life. The 1991 score of the *Pièce pour piano et quatuor à cordes* contains no literary or analytical notes. Inasmuch as its title is also totally abstract and aprogrammatic, it belongs to a rather small minority of Messiaen's work which has no programmatic aspect whatsoever. However, it has already been mentioned how this piece is an outlier and arguably does not belong to the main body of Messiaen's output. This quintet notwithstanding, one finds the presence of extramusical annotations up to the very last phase of Messiaen's compositional life. From the same year, Messiaen's score for his last-completed work, the orchestral *Éclairs sur l'au-delà...* contains a literary or biblical

⁶ Olivier Messiaen, *Le Banquet Céleste*, (Paris: Leduc, 1928). The epigraph as rendered in the score reads, "Celui qui mange ma chair et boit mon sang demeure en moi et moi en lui" and is attributed to "(Evangile selon Saint Jean)". The wording and punctuation match the French "Darby" Bible and belong to John 6:56.

epigraph at the head of each movement. Thus, Messiaen's practice of extramusical annotation spans a period of at least 63 years, his entire compositional life.

The literary-type annotations remain a consistent presence from beginning to end. The analytical-type markings do not appear to have arisen until slightly later--for example, although later analysts have gone to great trouble locating the appearance of Messiaen's "modes of limited transposition" in the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* ("*Quartet for the End of Time*")⁷, Messiaen has not in fact labeled them himself. In later works, such as, for example, the *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*, Messiaen will save analysts the trouble by identifying the modes where they prominently arise⁸.

Messiaen's Music-Theoretical Annotations: Their Provenance and Purpose

If his music-theoretical annotations were later to arise than his literary annotations, perhaps their arrival is correlated to Messiaen's moving into the teaching phase of his life (Messiaen was appointed to the faculty of the Paris Conservatoire in 1941)⁹. In any case, they do seem to become firmly established after the 1944 publication of *La Technique de mon langage musical* ("*The Technique of My Musical Language*"), in which the major music-theoretical concepts governing Messiaen's composition are publicly elucidated for the first time¹⁰. Thus, they can perhaps be viewed as his retroactive elucidation, or even defense, of his avowed

⁷ See, for example, Anthony Pople's small volume *Messiaen: Quatuor Pour la Fin du Temps*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

⁸ See, for example, the opening two bars of Mvt V, "Regard du Fils sur le Fils," where each of the three staves has a label denoting a mode and its transposition, according to the numbering system laid out by Messiaen in *La Technique de mon langage musical*. (In this same location Messiaen also has the analytical annotation "Polymodalité et canon rythmique par ajout du point" ("polymodality and rhythmic canon by added values").)

⁹ Vincent Benitez, *Olivier Messiaen: A Research and Information Guide* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 155.

¹⁰ Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical* (Paris: Leduc, 1944)

theoretical system. The prominent Messiaen interpreter Mark Robson, a major exponent of the piano and organ works, suggested as much in a personal interview with the author of this paper. (Robson is well-known as a performer of Messiaen's major keyboard works, and was for three years a student of Yvonne Loriod, the concert pianist who was Messiaen's second wife, dedicatee of many of his major works, and performer of many premieres of his piano pieces).

[Messiaen], of course, had to defend, in a way, his whole system of modes and rhythms. It's not so much a defense in a "me-against-the-world" kind of thing. I think it's more like a theorist that needs to say, "I did come up with this system, and here's how it works," let's say, maybe in a mildly comparable way to a Schoenberg, who also has a strong will to a system. I mean, Messiaen really was all about his system, for all of his potential flexibility around that, or his views on other kinds of music. But he had a great need for this system. So I think it meant that he kept defining it and explaining it.¹¹

The Annotations During Messiaen's Serialist Period

While throughout his life, most compositions of Messiaen bear some manner of programmatic or suggestive title, Messiaen did produce some works partaking of the mid-century vogue for abstract and technical titles. The author is here thinking of the *Quatre Études de rythme* ("Four Rhythmic Studies") for piano of 1950, and the *Chronochromie* of 1960. The researcher is naturally drawn to inquire whether during this phase, Messiaen abandoned or altered his practice of annotating his scores. One finds, on the contrary, Messiaen as explanatory as ever in the two pieces just named. The *Quatre Études* include Messiaen's lengthy note on the movement entitled "Mode de valeurs et d'intensités" ("Mode of durations and intensities"), which is a music-theoretical annotation in which he lays out the serial architecture of the work.

¹¹ Mark Robson, telephone interview by Justin Birchell, California, May 3, 2020.

In other movements of this work, for example, in the first movement, “Île de feu I,” (“Island of Fire 1”), one finds small notations in the staves such as “oiseau” (“bird”) and “résonance” (“resonance,” in this case, labelling a particular harmony which Messiaen referred to as the “chord of resonance”)¹².

In the *Chronochromie*, Messiaen has included two *Notes de l’auteur* at the beginning of the score. The second is a standard note regarding his notational practice, and is actually necessary to the reading of the score, and thus cannot be deemed an “extramusical annotation”; the first, however, is an extramusical annotation containing both music-theoretical and literary information. Thus, we find that even in his “driest” or most “technical” compositional period, Messiaen cannot help himself but insert extramusical annotations into his scores.

However, one category of Messiaen’s works are conspicuously lacking in additional annotations, and those are his vocal works. Neither his song cycles *Poèmes pour Mi* (“*Poems for Mi*,” 1936), *Chants de Terre et de Ciel* (“*Songs of Earth and Heaven*,” 1938), or *Harawi: Chants d’amour et de mort* (“*Harawi: Songs of love and death*,” 1945) contain any prefatory materials or epigraphs in the published scores. Perhaps in these instances, Messiaen felt he could say anything verbal he needed to say in the lyrics, rather than needing to add other texts.

Annotations Outside the Scores: Program Notes by Messiaen

Another textual layer that Messiaen has thrown over certain of his output are program notes of various kinds that he has disseminated through avenues besides the published score. For

¹² Olivier Messiaen, Mvt. II, “Modes de valeurs et d’intensités,” and Mvt. I, “Île de feu I,” *Quatre Études de rythme* (Paris: Durand 1950). Regarding the “chord of resonance,” see, for example, Jonathan Dimond, “Messiaen,” *Theory of Music--Jonathan Dimond*, <http://www.jonathandimond.com/downloadables/Theory%20of%20Music-Messiaen.pdf>

example, a substantial elucidation of the “cyclic themes” and the programmatic intent of the various movements of the 1948 *Turangalila-symphonie* are to be found in the Program Notes that he prepared for distribution to the audience of the Boston premiere in 1949¹³. While these texts are not inside the published scores, they are very similar in kind and in intent to the other extramusical annotations discussed here, in that they represent a layer of verbalizing that Messiaen has inserted between the musical content on the one hand, and the interpreter or audience on the other. As an example, this *Turangalila* program note contains much of the exact same type of information that is to be found in, for example, the *Note de l’auteur* from the *Vingt Regards*. Consider, for example, this description of the fifth movement, “Joie du sang des étoiles” (“Joy of the blood of the stars”): “This is the climax of sensual passion expressed in a long and frenzied dance of joy. The development contains a reversible rhythmic canon between trumpets and trombones, while the piano adds its vehement brilliance to the movement’s wild clamour”¹⁴. An even more thorough-going elucidation of the symphony was written by Messiaen for the Bastille Opera Orchestra’s 1992 CD release under Myung-whun Chung, including this now-widely-known description of the sixth movement, “Jardin du sommeil d’amour” (“Garden of Love’s Sleep”):

The two lovers are enclosed in love’s sleep. A landscape comes out of them. The garden around them is called Tristan; the garden around them is called Yseult. It is a garden full of shadow and light, of new plants and flowers, of bright and

¹³ Nigel Simeone, “Turangalila-symphonie,” Hyperion, Hyperion Records, 2012, https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dw.asp?dc=W14114_67816 . Kent Nagano informed the author in a personal interview that similar material, perhaps more extensive, is actually to be found as prefatory material in the orchestral score of the *Turangalila*, however, none of the copies of the score available online included this material.

¹⁴ Olivier Messiaen, Program notes for *Turangalila-symphonie*. Boston Symphony. Leonard Bernstein. Symphony Hall: December 2, 1949.

melodious birds. “All the birds of the stars...,” to quote Harawi. Time flows forgotten. The lovers are outside time: let us not wake them.¹⁵

It would seem that Messiaen’s drive to explain himself and illuminate his music found expression through many avenues, some within the published scores and some by other means.

Sources, Influences, Motivations

Due to the volume and consistency of the output, it is also fair to regard Messiaen as an author and to examine the extramusical annotations as literature. What are Messiaen’s motivations for writing? Who are his literary influences? What can be said about his literary style?

As far as subject matter, aside from music itself and topics related to its theory, Messiaen concerns himself with nature descriptions, with theological descriptions, and with mining various metaphors for states of feeling. The description of the first movement, “Liturgie de cristal” (“Crystal Liturgy”) from the Preface of the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* combines all of these thematic threads: “Between three and four in the morning, the awakening of birds: a solo blackbird or nightingale improvises, surrounded by a shimmer of sound, by a halo of trills lost very high in the trees. Transpose this onto a religious plane and you have the harmonious silence of Heaven.”¹⁶ This passage also exemplifies Messiaen’s tendency to encapsulate large and complex concepts in relatively short and, in some cases, counterintuitive turns of phrase (the last

¹⁵ Olivier Messiaen, trans. Paul Griffiths, “Analysis of Each Movement.” *Turangalila-symphonie*. Bastille Opera Orchestra. Myung-whun Chung. Deutsche Grammophon, 1992, Compact Disc. Liner Notes, 6.

¹⁶ “Entre trois et quatre heures du matin, le réveil des oiseaux : un merle ou un rossignol soliste improvise, entouré de poussières sonores, d’un halo de trilles perdus très haut dans les arbres. Transposez cela sur le plan religieux, vous aurez le silence harmonieux du ciel.”

sentence is almost like a Zen koan in its defiance of logic: how can one “transpose” music into “harmonious silence”?).

Mark Robson locates this capacity to be partial, suggestive, and enigmatic in Messiaen’s relationship to the literary movement of Surrealism:

He grew up in a time with people like Valéry and you had surreal poets such as Breton and Apollinaire...He’s very much nurtured by the Surrealist movement, because of his formative years. So, I think that’s going to be the development that allows him to maybe throw out bits of descriptions, or not completely coherent sentences sometimes, or just the wisp of an image, not necessarily a fully-grammatically-developed sentence.¹⁷

The pianist and musicologist Graham Williams identifies five major categories of influences on the thought & writing of Messiaen, of which one is Surrealism¹⁸. Messiaen evinced his knowledge of Surrealist writing throughout his life¹⁹. It may be appropriate, therefore, to class him among his literary contemporaries as a Surrealist, though a Roman Catholic one.

In suggesting reasons for Messiaen’s enthusiasm for annotating in general, in addition to the earlier-mentioned will to educate and to defend his system, Mark Robson suggests four additional explanatory factors, namely, Messiaen’s French-ness, his self-identification as a theologian, the influence of his parents, and his admiration of Claude Debussy:

¹⁷ Robson, May 3 interview.

¹⁸ Graham Williams, “The Theories of Olivier Messiaen: Their Origins and their Application in his Piano Music,” (PhD Diss., University of Adelaide, 1978). (The other four are The Catholic Faith, The Philosophy of Time, Cécile Sauvage [Messiaen’s own mother, a poet], and Paul Claudel).

¹⁹ See, for example, Messiaen’s comments to Goléa on the surrealist titles of some of the movements of the *Livre d’orgue* in Goléa’s *Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen*, and his reference to the work of André Breton in his liner notes for the Orchestre National de RTF recording of *Turanglîla-symphonie*, both cited in the Williams dissertation, pp. 181-82.

[Messiaen's reasons for annotating are related to] what is probably perceived about French composers or French makers of art in general. [...] The French enjoy talking about music a lot. They naturally enjoy dissecting or expostulating on art of all kinds, including music, and, in some ways, if you take it to an extreme, you'd say, they'd rather talk about music than listen to it. But that's exceedingly hyperbolized. I don't completely believe that, but, anyway, they have a penchant for verbosity in that regard. And, I'd say, as a human being, in his nature, Messiaen--who is often attributed the quality of being a mystic of some sort--from his own admission did not enjoy that description. He was, rather, a theologian in music. The idea of seeing himself as a theologian means that he is going to be wont to elucidate, or to transcribe feelings or descriptions for the listener/reader, and I think it's just something in his organism[...]And then the other, maybe cliché, thing to say is that he did come from a father who was a translator of Shakespeare, so, naturally attracted to words. And if you want to come back to the mystical, there is also the set--[...]that his mother wrote a cycle of poems dedicated to him while he was in the womb. And the final thing is the inspiration of Debussy. Debussy was quite descriptive in his own indications for tempi and moods within his pieces, and he was known for his literary contributions as a critic.

Performers and Audiences: The Effects of the Annotations

One question this study seeks to explore is that of whether and how the annotations actually affect the performance of Messiaen's music and its perception by an audience. The author interviewed two prominent Messiaen interpreters in hopes of answering this question: Mark Robson, and the conductor Kent Nagano. Nagano was a direct student and close protégé of Messiaen, and studied with Messiaen and his wife the pianist Yvonne Loriod during the period of the composition of Messiaen's opera *Saint François d'Assise*. Nagano would become known as a

champion of Messiaen's orchestral music and would later conduct two major recordings of the opera.

Both men expressed mixed answers to the question of whether the annotations were intrinsic to the given works, and to what extent they affected the performance. Robson drew a sharp divide between the music theoretical-type and the literary-type annotations, finding the former superfluous and the latter more meaningful. Regarding the music-theoretical labelling, Robson told the author:

you could play his music and not know a thing about his modes or his rhythms, or whatever. He does a lot of vivid, almost painstaking, now this introversion has happened, and we're in permutation so-and-so, and this chord which is purple sliced through with orange and quartz and something else. When you're playing, I don't see any way that that's going to help you²⁰.

Regarding the literary-type annotations, however, Mr. Robson was able to provide some examples where the annotations had an effect on his task as an interpreter. He drew the author's attention to the description of the ninth movement of the *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*, which reads, "Mystery of the fullness of Time; Time sees born within it Him who is eternal... Short theme, cold, strange, like the figures of Chirico with heads like an egg; rhythmic canon"²¹.

Robson says:

Something like that can give you the idea of a climate. That immediately gives you a feeling of, almost an aridity, or of a kind of strange neutrality--like being on the moon, or something. Like something that doesn't have an atmosphere. Which also gives, a little bit, the implacable nature of what's being proposed in the music. A lot of use of small retrogrades of rhythm, and the entourages, the

²⁰ Robson, May 3 interview.

²¹ "Mystère de la plénitude des temps ; le Temps voit naître en lui Celui qui est éternel...
Thème court, froid, étrange, comme les têtes en oeuf de Chirico ; canon rythmique."

percussive, quartal chords that he uses. They all, to me--to read that he evokes Chirico gives me immediately a kind of image. So, yes, in that sense, if he writes something like that, that is useful.

Asked for another example, Robson suggested the fifteenth movement of the same work: [Messiaen] describes the lullaby theme. He says, “sleep, the garden, arms opened up toward love, the kiss, shadow of the kiss,”²² this describes an engraving that inspired him[...]There’s a kind of, I mean, there’s an emotional climate of the way he describes something like that. And if you have a penchant, as I do, to take in all the senses when you’re trying to perform a piece of music--I’m strongly image-oriented, and I’m constantly amazed how many musicians aren’t. I think it’s crucial.

Kent Nagano was less inclined to dismiss the music-theoretical annotations, telling the author, “those are telling you how Messiaen has constructed the work. So they’re helping you understand what he had in mind.” However, Nagano expressed a certain ambivalence about the necessity of either type of annotation to a valid performance: “Some people will perform the works without paying any attention at all to what Messiaen has written there. They don’t need to take it into account at all. I always prefer to know, I always take it into account. But you don’t have to”²³.

Regarding his own interpretation of Messiaen, Nagano was adamant that, in his own performances, he considers Messiaen’s annotations to constitute part of the work. He provided several examples where the annotations helped him personally with his interpretation.

²² Messiaen’s movement description reads, in part: “Thème de Dieu en berceuse. Le sommeil - le jardin - le bras tendus vers l’amour - le baiser - l’ombre du baiser. Une gravure m’a inspiré, qui représente l’Enfant-Jésus quittant les bras de sa Mère pour embrasser la petite soeur Thérèse.”

²³ Kent Nagano, telephone interview by Justin Birchell, May 10, 2020.

The score of Messiaen's opera *Saint François d'Assise* follows the composer's usual practice of including and labeling birdsongs within the score. Nagano related to the author an anecdote of an instance when he and Loriod were having a disagreement about one of the birdsong characters in the score, the notou, as to how exactly it should be rendered. According to Nagano, the disagreement was finally settled when Messiaen went into his study and produced an actual tape recording of the notou, which then showed exactly how the transcription should be phrased to match the bird's actual song as closely as possible. This suggests an interpretive use of the birdsong notations in particular: one can always use them to seek an "authoritative rendering," of these melodies, i.e., in the actual song of the bird itself!

Nagano also directed the author's attention to a particularly unusual annotation, namely the Aramaic phrase inscribed into the third movement, "Ce qui est écrit sur les étoiles," ("That Which is Written in the Stars") from his 1974 work *Des Canyons aux étoiles...* ("From the Canyons to the Stars..."). This inscription is slightly different from any other in Messiaen's work. The movement is made up of a series of orchestral chords, each of which has been assigned a letter from the Aramaic phrase MENE TEQELU PARSIN. These letters are engraved in large type within the score²⁴. Nagano told the author that, when he conducts this movement, he speaks the Aramaic phrase to himself, which guides him in his timing and phrasing.

It is apparent, then, that, in ways ranging from the very direct and literal, to the more suggestive and mood-based, Messiaen's annotations do guide the interpretation of performers. But do they affect the experiences of listeners? Robson opines: "I suppose it starts with the

²⁴ Olivier Messiaen, Mvt III, "Ce qui est écrit sur les étoiles," *Des Canyons aux étoiles...*, (Paris: Leduc, 1974)

performer, and then branches out to the listener, if the listener bothers to read all of this music that they're listening to.”

Areas for Further Study

At such a time as physical libraries and archives may once again be open, the author would like to undertake the following additional studies:

- (1) Seek out a first edition score of the *Turangalila-symphonie* to try to find the extramusical prefatory material to which Kent Nagano referred in our interview. This material was not visible in any available online edition.
- (2) Seek out scores of all 58 of the works considered by this study, and arrange them (perhaps in a chart) according to which types of annotations featured in each.
- (3) Conduct even more extensive research into Messiaen's evolving use of this practice over his career and, if possible, discover what correspondence may be uncovered between Messiaen and his printers, to know exactly how he directed for the inclusion of these notes in the published texts.

A multimedia video presentation summarizing this research can be viewed here:

<https://youtu.be/IoPOpd8HS4Y> .

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