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Sentiment beyond Chronometry: *A Performance History of Olivier Messiaen's* Livre d'orgue

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Sentiment bortom kronometri: en interpretationshistorisk studie av Olivier Messiaens Livre d'Orgue

Tonsättaren Pierre Boulez påpekade att hans lärare Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992) stod mitt i en av 1900-talsmusikens mest betydande spänningar: i hans verk är ett fokus på kompositionstekniker avsett att understödja en mer romantisk strävan mot ett intensivt musikaliskt uttryck och känsla. Spänningen kan diskuteras som aspekter av en modernistisk respektive romantisk musiksyn och gör sig direkt påmind i studier av Messiaen som interpret av sina egna verk.

Till skillnad från en rad befintliga undersökningar av Messiaens pianospel har motsvarande analytiska studier av hans interpretation av egna orgelverk inte genomförts tidigare. Under lång tid har en uppsättning kommersiella inspelningar från 1956 utgjort den främsta källan till detta område, vid sidan av diverse kommentarer som spridits genom elevers skrifter. Det har funnits en vitt spridd uppfattning att Messiaen tar sig mycket stora friheter i förhållande till sina egna partitur, utan att bakomliggande konstnärliga ideal diskuterats vidare. Artikeln påvisar att tonsättaren själv upphöjde partituren som gemensam norm för verkens interpretation och betraktade sina egna inspelningar som ett högst personligt uttryck.

I denna studie har tre inspelningar av cykeln Livre d'Orgue med Messiaen som interpret kunnat detaljstuderas, tillsammans med 14 senare kompletta versioner med andra organister. Analysen utgår från tonsättarens egna råd till interpreter i förordet till verket Quatuor pour la fin du temps. Där fastslås att musiker först måste lära sig spela musiken exakt som noterat för att senare vid framföranden enbart behålla notvärdens sentiment och forma musiken med personlig frihet och agogik. I flera av de sju satserna blir det tydligt att Messiaen spelar med en stark känsla för sina bakomliggande idéer, även till en punkt där han inte längre bibehåller kontroll över partiturens notvärden. Trots att en senare interpretationshistoria till stor del bygger på att organister underordnat sig tonsättarens auktoritet sker tidigt en riktning mot ett mer exakt återgivande av notationen.

Analysen påvisar att Messiaen tycks följa de råd han formulerade i sitt nämnda förord. Artikeln lyfter också fram skilda akustiska förhållanden som avgörande för olika versioners tempi och artikulation. En annan slutsats är att Messiaens skivor från 1956 till stor del bör betraktas som uttryck för sitt eget decenniums estetik och synsätt på inspelningar. Den frihet som tidigare kommentatorer tillskrivit Messiaen som interpret kan till viss del förstås i ljuset av hur betydelsen av återkommande lyssning till inspelningar förändrade interpretationsideal under andra hälften av 1900-talet.

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Creative Contradictions in Messiaen as Composer-Performer

Pierre Boulez once described his teacher Olivier Messiaen as "a man who is preoccupied strongly with techniques, but who puts forward, in the first place, expression". Speaking in the year 1988, Boulez added the comment that Messiaen was "exactly in the centre of some very important contradictions of this century" (Dingle 2014, 29).[1] This remark was intended to highlight compositional and aesthetic developments but is equally apposite in regard to ideals of musical performance. The Messiaen scholar Christopher Dingle cites Boulez's remarks in order to highlight how creative contradictions between technique and expression "become especially acute in considering Messiaen as composer-performer" (Ibid.).

A standard trope in discussions of Messiaen's 1956 recordings of his at the time published œuvre for the organ is the remarkable freedom the composer grants himself. In comparison to predecessors in the French organ tradition, Messiaen's scores had attained a new level of technical complexity, not least as pertains to rhythm and an enhanced exactitude in the prescription of timbres (registers). This tendency echoed a broader modernist trajectory towards text-centred ideals of performance, in lieu of performers licensing themselves freedom to correct, rearrange or improvise beyond composers' notation. Such a development was commonly presented as a progression beyond a prevalent Romantic tradition, which emphasized expression and depth of feeling. A corresponding transition took place concerning renderings of musical time, when new chronomet-

1 Comments from "Messiaen at 80", a TV program aired on BBC2 on December 10, 1988.

rical demands transformed performance traditions at least perceived to be grounded in subjective intuition (Philip 1992, 7–93, Hill, R. 1994).

Livre d'orgue (1951–1952) represents a peak of abstract modernism among Messiaen's organ works. Its seven movements exhibit some of his most radical explorations of multi-dimensional serial techniques and rhythmic experiments. To render these structures audible, chronometrical fidelity to the notated text would seem more apposite, at least at first, then subjective intuition or freedom. However, Romantic traits in performance need not necessarily stand opposed to modernist demands for objectivity and metrical exactitude. Messiaen himself defied criticism of lingering Romanticism in his organ music – "I'm not ashamed of being a Romantic" – and reversely implied that this tradition entailed an intensity of perception lacking in his own age (Messiaen 1994a, 120).

This article explores tensions between Romantic and modernist traits in Messiaen's style of organ performance through close analyses of his own recordings of *Livre d'orgue*. It also investigates the further history of interpretation by taking all complete sound recordings of the work into account (as listed among the references at the end of the text).[2] Messiaen recorded the cycle both within the 1956 set and in several radio broadcasts of live performances. The latter sonic sources uniquely permit a comparison of different renderings by the composer and thus allows for more general conclusions than previous commentary on the 1956 recordings (as discussed below). Of particular interest in the wider comparison is to investigate to what extent the composer's own approach continued to shape subsequent interpretations by other performers.

Messiaen's organ playing has, in fact, not yet been comprehensively evaluated, in contrast to the literature on his pianism. More specifically, although reviews and other pieces of criticism many contribute valuable observations, such genres of writing seldomly provide space for a deeper probing of aesthetic outlooks at work in the actual evaluation (for noteworthy examples of criticism in reviews, see Milsom 1992, Sholl 1996). The following analysis adopts a distinct gateway to tensions between Romanticism and modernism in the temporality of performance. It evaluates whether the composer heeded his own advice on how performers can reconcile fidelity to the notated text with a desire for vivid interpretations.

2 Beside commercial and thereby publicly available recordings, other documentation of performances may appear that have been unavailable during the time of the investigation. A good case is Gillian Weir's 1979 recording in Washington for the BBC, which was published as late as 2021 by Decca Eloquence. This version could be used here but similar renderings may in the future find their way from archives to public releases.

As articulated in a preface to the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (1940–1941), Messiaen (1942, p. IV) suggests that performers are free to add expressive parameters when they first have mastered a basic chronometrical fidelity to the notated score. A key notion is that performances must "preserve the sentiment" of individual pieces and movements, as embodied both in the text and extra-musical ideas behind the compositions.[3]

Messiaen's performances of the *Livre d'orgue* are investigated from the standpoint of accord or creative divergence between the levels of rhythmic notation and sonic renderings of their musical meaning. Most observations are gained from close and repeated listening to the recordings, but some clarifications of details stem from measurements of durations in the software *Audacity*. An initial résumé of Messiaen's approach to interpretation provides further background. A subsequent introduction to the recordings used in this research also discusses the status of such sources, in relation to the ontology of works, the authority of a composer's interpretation and the proper contribution of individuality in performance.

An Exact Romantic: Messiaen on Interpretation

The preface to *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* contains a brief but significant account on how to interpret Messiaen's music (the following paragraphs all relate to Messiaen 1942, p. IV). He articulates a basic schema, which provides a background even for latter utterances on the same topic. Players are first advised to read the composer's preceding commentary on the subject matter of each movement, together with an exposition of his rhythmic language. Insights into the work's meaning and techniques should apparently establish a basic understanding, but mastery of the score is said to arise on a more practical level. Messiaen clarifies that performers need not preoccupy themselves with ideas during the execution: "[t]hey just have to play the text, the notes and the exact values, to do the indicated nuances well".

To realise correct note values, and to handle absences of a set time signature, Messiaen suggests that performers count a basic underlying flow of semiquavers when learning the piece. To continue doing so in public performance would, however, "weigh down" their playing in an inappropriate manner. At this point, performers "will need to preserve in themselves the sentiment of the values, nothing more". The brief par-

3 Translations from French source texts stem from the author.

agraph explains neither this enigmatic idea nor how Messiaen used the complex term "sentiment". Nevertheless, it is possible to conclude that he posits a progression from chronometrical mastery of the notated values to a subjective apprehension of rhythm. The term is partly a synonym both to feeling and perception. More importantly, it denotes a kind of understanding and appreciation of objects that is intuitive and thereby formed apart from reasoning or empirical observation.[4]

A final stage adds a layer of subjective spontaneity beyond notated values, even though this remains implicit. Messiaen refers to habitual means of enhancing expressivity in a still prevalent Romantic tradition of performance, encouraging interpreters not to relinquish "exaggerated nuances, accelerandi, rallentandi, all that makes an interpretation lively and sensitive" (Messiaen 1942, p. IV).

In a brief paragraph, Messiaen has sketched five stages throughout the process of learning and performing his *Quatuor*. His outline contains some interesting tensions, among them the distinct break between extra-musical aspects and the process of learning the score. The general trajectory from chronometrical control to freedom and vividness is noteworthy, together with the central concept of retaining a "sentiment" of note values. These different stages can be fitted into a flow chart, based on Messiaen's own terms, which outlines the recommended process of interpretation:

Study extra-musical ideas and compositional techniques →
Play the score, exactly as notated →
Count note values when learning the score →
Give up counting, but preserve the sentiment of note values
in performance →
Add exaggerations in nuances and tempo modifications,
in order to achieve liveliness and sensitivity.

Even the final advice is not intended to encourage unbridled subjectivism. Nevertheless, Messiaen calls for an individual contribution beyond the score that distances him from his own influential organ teacher Marcel Dupré. In the latter's philosophy, "the performer must never allow his own personality to appear. As soon as it gets through, the work is betrayed". Organ playing according to Dupré's aesthetics called for fidel-

4 For a contemporary definition in a source of considerable normative import, see the entry *sentiment* in *Dictionnaire de l'Academie française*, 8th ed., 578.

ity to the text, perfect clarity and respect for the dynamics indicated by the composer (Dupré 1984, 43; on similar traits in earlier French organ recordings, see Jullander 2004). As a contrast, Messiaen's emphasis on liveliness and sensitivity harks back to his aspiration, articulated throughout the 1930s, to create a "living" music. Beyond both traditionalism and neo-classicism, he sought a "spiritual" trajectory that would unleash emotions and create a new vibrant atmosphere. Supple rhythms drawn from plainchant and Hindu metrics would set the mind free from constrains in rigid metre (Broad 2012, 61–64 [English translation 123–125]; Schloesser 2014, 241–245).

Messiaen would repeatedly dismiss understandings that his novel rhythms constituted some kind of "notated rubato", i.e., attempts to codify performance practices (Rößler 1986, 133). Rather, as outlined in the 1944 treatise *Technique de mon langage musical*, tensions between freedom and an exact execution of notated rhythms relate to the construction of a new rhythmic language. Messiaen aimed for an "ametrical music", a term which the translator John Satterfield felicitously defines as "music with free, but precise, rhythmic patterns". When the composer cites the opening of "Les anges" from his *La nativité du seigneur* (1935) as an example of a rhythm that is "absolutely free", he evokes neither carelessness nor intuitive spontaneity (Messiaen 2002, 9, 11). His novel rhythmic techniques must rather be rendered with precision, in order to achieve the desired freedom from traditional metric strictures. It is worth remembering that comments in the *Quatuor* and the *Technique* stem from a time when performers still struggled to comprehend Messiaen's notation of rhythm, and when he felt a need to inculcate its originality.

Messiaen later commented on criticism from John Cage that his precise notation left too little freedom for performers. More specifically, Cage deemed that Messiaen's often clearly demarcated sections, with different tempi, failed to provide space for "time-curves" to unfold (Rößler 1986, 132, 170). As a response, Messiaen stressed that he has notated

> very exact rhythms and they have to be performed very exactly. But once one performs them very exactly, one is then in no way prevented from making an "interpretation" which embraces freedom, love, passion, motion and all such things. No one should be allowed to make music as if he were made of wood. One must reproduce the musical text exactly. But not play like a stone. (Rößler 1986, 133.)

This statement was made in 1983 and indicates that Messiaen continued to rely on the dual expectations of exactitude and a layer of added expressive qualities. A stern commitment to the accuracy and precision of the scores remained characteristic of his standpoint (Hill 1994a, 273, 279; cf. Messiaen 1994a, 201–202). Yvonne Loriod – brilliant post-war pianist, Messiaen's second wife and the inspiration behind much of his mature writing for her instrument – continued to stress that "complete fidelity to Messiaen's text is vital". She also highlighted rhythm as a crucial and particularly difficult element to realize (Hill 1994b, 287). At the same time, scores were still regarded a means to transmit works and their extra-musical ideas. As the pianist Peter Hill recollects from private sessions with the composer,

> he emphasized that, despite their meticulous clarity, his scores are not an end in themselves. For Messiaen the "music" was not in the notes, nor in the sounds they represent, but in the meaning which lies beyond and which through sound we hope to reveal. (Hill 1994a, 282.)

Comprehension of the meaning behind the notation obviously remained central. It also comes across in Messiaen's advice "not to be over-literal, for if too pedantic the pianist may miss the overall sense". He also called for performers "always to phrase with flexibility, to allow the music to breathe" (Hill 1994a, 278). In piano recordings, the composer added vitality and drama to the text through a liberal use of articulation marks, fermatas and caesuras, and an "almost unbelievable tempo rubato" (Ngim 1997, 132, for a complete list of Messiaen's recordings as a pianist, see Dingle 2014, 47). These traits confirm a lasting dependency on a Romantic style of performance that would continue to set Messiaen apart from modernist ideals of interpretation and recording from the 1950s.

Comparisons of two recorded versions of Messiaen's *Visions de l'Amen* (1943) indicate that most such alterations were constant features of his interpretation, albeit executed in slightly different ways. His gestures depart from notated values, often adding further emphasis, contrasts, or accentuating passages of particular expressiveness (Ngim 1997, Dingle 2014). Messiaen brings out drama even in his abstract *Quatre études de rythme* (1949–1950), not least by making clearly audible gestures out of shifting metrical units, and shaping birdsong passages with a splashy rubato (Hill 2007). A marked incongruity between Messiaen's performance and his articulated understanding of a piece arises at some points. The composer insisted that performers maintain a metronomic approach to the extremely slow representations of eternity in the two "Louange" movements

in the *Quatuor*. As a contrast, his own renderings are marked by extensive agogic shifts, emphasizing their harmonic structure (Dingle 2014, 36–40). This example indicates that "Messiaen the performer" at times clearly departed from the vision of "Messiaen the composer".

Recordings as Records

In June 1956, Messiaen recorded his then complete organ works in Sainte-Trinité in Paris, the church where he had served as permanent organist since 1931. The project was timely after a decade of rapid developments in sound technology. Messiaen could record onto tape, which provided the benefit of being able to edit different takes into complete versions of each piece (Day 2000, 19–26). However, the mono technology used by the Ducretet-Thompson label was not on par with the most prominent stereo recordings of the time. Messiaen's recordings come across as impromptu documentary sessions in comparison with the lush sonic impressions provided by Mercury for his teacher Dupré (recorded from 1957) or the meticulous preparations behind Jeanne Demessieux's organ albums for Decca (recorded from 1947). Messiaen used no more than six days for the entire production. The taxing *Livre d'orgue* was recorded on a single day, together with the five movements in *Messe de la Pentecôte* (1949–1950) and the early works *Le Banquet céleste* (1928) and *Diptyque* (1930). Quite a feat, at least if the documentation of dates truly is correct.[5]

In addition to this limited amount of time, Messiaen faced the Trinité organ in a poor state, with dead notes, problems in air supply and severe shortcomings in tuning. The sonic result of "Les eaux de la grâce" from *Les corps glorieux* (1939), has been deemed to simulate "the giddy sensation of drowning. A watery gurgle haloed in phantom squeaks and groans, it must surely rank as one of the oddest noises ever heard coming out of an organ" (Milsom 1994, 59, on the instrument, see Glandaz 2014). Considering these unsatisfactory conditions, the decision to go ahead with the recordings can appear surprising – at least on the assumption that the intended result was a definite or perfect sonic rendering. The undertaking can be understood in light of the commercial success of LP records at the time, which prompted a string of important documentation projects

5 First issued on LPs from the Ducretet-Thompson label, the recordings have later been remastered and reissued on several labels. See details on dates of recording in the booklet accompanying the "Olivier Messiaen edition" from Parlophone (further details in the list of references).

of previously unheard and brand-new repertoires (Day 2000, 92–108). As an example, Yvonne Loriod had commenced her recordings of Messiaen's piano music for Véga records a few months earlier.

Recordings by composers were also topical, having been promoted since the late 1920s by Igor Stravinsky as the optimal medium for a composer-performer to establish a correct manner of interpretation. Stravinsky argued that performers should use composer's recordings as "a sure means [- -] of learning exactly how the author demands his work to be executed" (Stravinsky 1962, 150, Philip 2004, 140–182). In retrospect, Pierre Boulez rejected the implied sense of a timeless authenticity in such an outlook, but also confirmed its influence when he launched his own recording career in 1955:

> I do not consider my recordings as examples *ad vitam aeternam*. There was a given moment in the realm of the disc, this obsession with saying "There, I make my discs, and that must be the model for all that is going to follow!" That was Stravinsky. (Boulez 2011, 21.)

Messiaen's French premiere of *Livre d'orgue* took place within the Domaine Musical concert series, which propelled its organizer Boulez to become a conductor and a recording artist. According to anecdotes, both Messiaen and Boulez were unprepared for the crush of some 2000 people who gathered at Sainte-Trinité on 21 March 1955 to hear the composer perform this already legendary work. The Boulez connection situates Messiaen's concert performance and his ensuing recordings within a musical context that itself was instrumental in establishing the centrality of objectivity, purity, and fidelity to the text, not least in recordings (Hill and Simeone, 2007, 1–19, for Boulez's influence on recording practices, see the index to Day 2000).

Boulez's mature stance echoes Messiaen's own view of the authority of recordings. He voiced deep concerns with the increasing medialization of music, arguing that musicians must not seek to learn their craft "through sterile recordings, as far removed from music as photography can be from painting" (Messiaen 1994b, 53, my translation). Jennifer Bate described how Messiaen toyed with the purported authority of his recordings after having heard her perform his organ works for the first time, but only to turn around and dismiss the idea:

> Messiaen's initial reaction to my performance was not encouraging. "Well, I suppose you have my records?" Embarrassed, I had to confess otherwise. The point was pursued inexorably until, in desperation, I promised

> next day to buy everything he had ever recorded. This brought a shout of laughter – "But that is how I play it on my records, and no one plays Messiaen like that." (cited from Milsom 1994, 60.)

As a teacher of his own music, Messiaen granted a similar license for individuality and plurality – at least to gifted performers who submitted themselves to his judgment. Hill remembers an openness to consider novel perspectives on his works and relates how the composer "never showed the slightest inclination to impose an alien style on my playing". Furthermore, "neither of us had in mind producing an 'authentic' performance, if by that one means the performer copying with exact fidelity a composer's own perceptions of his music" (Hill 1994a, 281). Further evidence of such hospitability is Messiaen's praise of very different pianists who performed his works. Most conspicuous is the contrast between his own Romantic style of playing and the modern fiery precision characteristic of Yvonne Loriod. The composer could also commend interpretations based on unmistakably different perceptions of the works than his own, as in the case of Peter Serkin (Messiaen 1994b, 202, Dingle 2014, 42–43).

Such evidence suggests that Messiaen never posited that his recordings constituted an "ultimate authority" in matters of interpretation (cf. Jullander 2012). There is also no evidence that he perceived them as prescriptive "hypernotations", providing other performers with a sonic layer of information beyond the limits of textual notation (cf. Burlin 2012). When queried by Gillian Weir about discrepancies between his scores and recordings, Messiaen consistently gave priority to the printed text (Weir 1992). At the same time, however, he did use the recordings with students in his analysis class at the Paris conservatoire (Ahrens 1992).

Written commentary on Messiaen's organ recordings is surprisingly scarce but has tended to concentrate on registration or highlighting disparity between notated texts and sonic renderings. According to Christopher Dingle, "interpretations range from mildly enlightening to the outrageous, usually, though not always, conveying the music in renditions that most protagonists would not even dare to consider. These recordings should be avoided by anyone who believes in definite performances!" (Dingle 1994, 552). In a more modest vein, organist Timothy Tikker observes that "some of what he does in terms of tempo, rhythm, and even registration appears to be at odds with the published scores" (Tikker 2008, 60). In terms of style, Messiaen's propensity for both extremely slow and fast tempi is manifest throughout the set. Standard features of a Romantic performance tradition are clearly audible, such as freedom in the realisation of grace notes and a tendency to shorten brief notes. Flexibil-

ity of tempo is most evident in passages built on birdsong (Tikker 2008, 60–61). A general impression is Messiaen's adherence to Dupré's articulation norms on the organ: a default absolute legato and contrasting clarity in any staccato. In terms of tempo and rubato, however, Messiaen brings the expressive toolbox of a late-Romantic pianist to the organ console.

It is clear that the composer in the year 1956 had refined his choice of timbre (registration) in some of his earlier works. In some cases, tempo relations between different passages also differ notably from the scores. Comments given in Messiaen's teaching and annotations in his own copies of scores also testify to these developments (Latry and Mallié, 2008, Gillock 2010). In regard to these new ways of approaching such aspects of the works, it is only natural that the recordings differ in detail from the printed text.

As a contrast to the case described above, Messiaen's three recordings of *Livre d'orgue* analysed in this article were made only a few years after the work was composed. Any divergences from the score thus reasonably stem from his style of playing or external circumstances, rather than constituting a change in his perception of the work. This situation resembles the case of *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (1969), which the composer recorded in the same year as the first public performance (1972). There is still a marked discongruity between Messiaen's notation and performance, in the realisation of rhythms and renderings of dynamics and tempo relations (Griffiths 1985, 220–224, Shenton 2007, on tempo relations in late works, cf. Hill 1994a, 278). The evidence of the *Méditations* thus suggests that Messiaen's notation and playing constitute different layers within works, even in this case of a large-scale composition that first evolved from improvisations and thereby embodies aspects of his playing in the score itself.

To evaluate the interplay between spontaneity and consistency of interpretation in Messiaen's organ playing was difficult as long as only one recording of each work was available. The original impetus for the present article was a novel possibility to compare no less than three complete versions of *Livre d'orgue* played by the composer.6 The first of them documents the world premiere of the piece, performed on 23 April 1953 in the Villa Berg in Stuttgart, serving as recording studio and concert hall for

6 Messiaen also performed at least parts of the Livre in Brussels for a 1954 radio broadcast. The first half of the first movement is available at *http://euscreen.eu/item.html?id=EUS_EC65D54BD6D84EE68859B5EBA18464BE* [accessed 15 Aug 2022].

the South German Broadcasting company.[7] The hall was equipped with a brand new Walcker organ. Its 72 stops included a broad Romantic foundation but also incorporated a rich set of mutations and mixtures. Messiaen cherished the latter stops, a stance that echoes his 1958 statement that the Karl Schuke organ at the Berlin Hochschule der Künste was 'perfect' for the Livre (Tikker 1989). The Stuttgart instrument is enclosed in a large wooden compartment just below the roof and speaks into a markedly dry acoustics.

The difference from the lush acoustics at Sainte-Trinité spotlights organists' challenge to adapt to new instrumental colours and spatial conditions. This aspect also comes to the fore in a radio documentation of Messiaen's live performance of *Livre d'orgue* in the Göteborg concert hall on 3 December 1957. He played its 1937 Marcussen organ, a large instrument with 100 stops, which like the Stuttgart instrument boasted a warm sonic foundation together with mutations, mixtures and neo-classically voiced reeds (Börjesson 2013).[8] With a reverberation between 1.2 and 2 seconds, the Göteborg hall provides a middle ground between Sainte-Trinité and Villa Berg.

The possibility of comparing three recorded versions by Messiaen opens a path to treat the 1956 recordings not so much as a single or definitive sonic text, but more as documentation of a distinct event. It becomes possible to distinguish between consistent traits of interpretation and particular aspects determined by the distinct acoustic site and the timbres available at the organ in Sainte-Trinité. The existence of several versions constitutes an advantage over commentators prone "to dismiss the more surprising elements of the composer's performance as being accidental, the product of a lack of control or the whim of the moment" (Dingle 2014, 46), without having been able to investigate the matter.

Among the recordings by other interpreters throughout the twentieth century, early versions from Almut Rößler and Jennifer Bate were made under the composer's artistic guidance. Louis Thiry was the first French organist to record the work and would eventually provide a second version at Messiaen's own Sainte-Trinité organ. He was particularly esteemed by the composer. Gillian Weir acquired fame for her Messiaen interpretations and made a set of recordings directly for the BBC at the National

7 Some of the literature erroneously claims that Messiaen performed the *Livre* already in 1952. I thank Prof. Dr. Clytus Gottwald, editor for contemporary music at the SDR at the time, for precise recollections, shared over e-mail in August 2019.

8 The instrument has been removed to give room for a new Rieger instrument, inaugurated in 2021.

Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington, DC, before turning out CD recordings from the Danish Aarhus Cathedral. The Swedish organists Erik Boström and Hans-Ola Ericsson were both in contact with the composer in the process of learning and recording his complete organ music. Rudolf Innig provides listeners with a written transcription of his own conversation with Messiaen on the work. The Dutch player Willem Tanke and the American Colin Andrews studied the works with some of the aforementioned authorities. Olivier Latry holds several of the most prestigious posts in French organ culture and was held in high regard not least by Loriod.

These brief biographical notes indicate how a broad tradition of performance gradually evolved throughout the twentieth century and how it remains at work even in the early twenty-first century. Performers at least of Messiaen's later and more advanced works have typically been publicly endorsed by the composer or have sought advice from him or organists who themselves has studied with Messiaen. There are exceptions and even artists within this distinct tradition of interpretation certainly display individuality and difference. Nevertheless, private tuition within this budding tradition does no less than recordings of Messiaen's works by the same organists remain within the orbits of a delimited "authentic" manner of realisation, harking back to the composer (Milsom 1994, 60). Messiaen was hospitable in endorsing performances of the pieces also on modern neo-classical instruments, adding clarity and force of attack, partly at the expense of the warm tonal palette at his disposal at Trinité and similar French symphonic instruments. The instruments chosen by other performers throughout the twentieth century fulfil this shift towards modern neo-classical timbres. Whereas the famous main organ at Notre-Dame in Paris, as used by Latry, is versatile enough to render both main strands audible, Andrews's and Tom Winpenny's choices manifest a return towards a more symphonic sonic basis in recordings from the twenty-first century.

The following analysis discusses each movement in turn, focuses on Messiaen's versions and adds points of particular interest from performances by other players.

"Reprises par interversion"
Messiaen's durations: Trinité 6'22, Stuttgart 4'34, Göteborg 5'06

This first movement manifests Messiaen's distinct kind of serialism, with its method of coordinating note values, modes of attack, timbres and registers of pitches. These techniques are employed to stage a dramatic interplay between three rhythmic characters (of Hindu origin). The expanding note values of the *pratâpaçekhara* "attacks" the diminishing *gajajhampa*, while the immobile *sârasa* surveys the scene from the Grand-Orgue. In the composer's Trinité recording, these "personalities" are effectively projected. The forceful Bombarde 16' inspires Messiaen to an energetic attack for each pedal entry and this massive sound lingers as a background behind the following entries on the manuals.

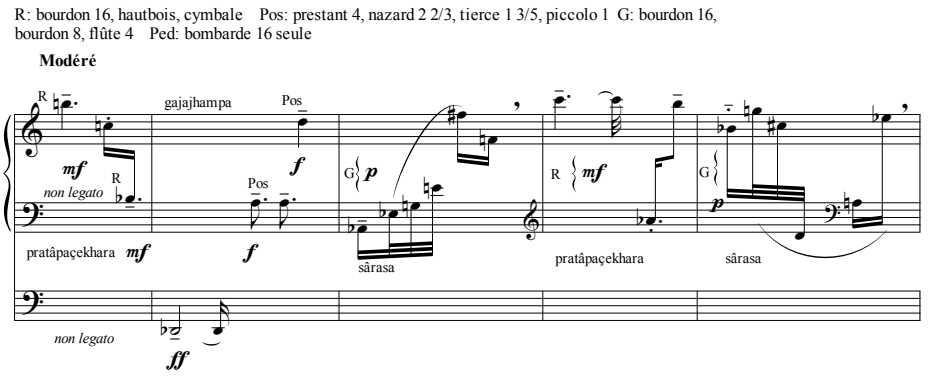

Figure 1. "Reprises par interversion", bar 1–5

The difference in acoustics makes Messiaen perform the piece almost two minutes shorter at the Villa Berg than at Trinité. The Göteborg performance is more similar to the Stuttgart version, both in interpretation and timbres. At Trinité, a flexible and rhythmically sustained legato allows listeners to "imagine the movement of the stork's long neck in motion" (*sârasa* means stork, Gillock 2010, 166). In Stuttgart, the sense of drama arises from a quicker tempo, rather than from the idiosyncratic character of the individual voices. In Göteborg, Messiaen occasionally lingers on the *sârasa*'s figures more in the manner of the Trinité performance, as if wavering between two different attitudes to these motifs.

The basic underlying note value in the movement is the 32nd note, with durations ranging in length from a single 32nd to eighteen 32nds (see pedal note in bar 2). In Messiaen's performances longer note values are shortened, in the pedal considerably so. This feature changes internal relations between note values considerably, not least in the live performances where longer values are quite dramatically abridged. The staging and overall sense of the piece remains intact, but exact note values are simply not respected. Messiaen maintains a sense of the work's overall architecture, with its four parts containing the identical tone material in different orders. Timings for the four parts differ slightly more in the live performances – between 1'28 and 1'33 at Trinité, 1'02 and 1'09 in Stuttgart, and 1'10 and 1'17 in Göteborg – but the third part is always somewhat broader.

Like the composer, Thiry shortens longer note values and, at Trinité, moves forward even though strong pedal tones still dominate the acoustics. This feature in fact constitutes a greater problem at Trinité than in the grand space at Notre-Dame, as Latry's version indicates. Bate establishes a more chronometrically accurate attention to notated values, which later players would follow. In Århus, Weir gives particularly sensual legato to the *sârasa* figures, whereas her Washington rendering is notably more dramatic. Innig, Tanke, Andrews and Michael Bonaventure hold back the momentum and stand out for being more protracted in tempo than Messiaen at Trinité. The contrast between the composer's brief Stuttgart performance and the stately 1956 version highlights acoustics as a central factor in the choice of tempo. The liberties Messiaen grants himself amount to a striking realization of the imperative to retain the movement's sentiment and musical idea, rather than chronometric accuracy in itself.

"Pièce en trio"
Messiaen's durations: Trinité 1'47, Stuttgart 1'43, Göteborg 1'39

This piece represents one of Messiaen's most striking employments of Hindu rhythms to move beyond regular measurements. It consists of seventeen bars, each presenting his adaption of a single rhythm (sixteen in all, as one of them is duplicated). As a very tight structure of three interlocking timbres, it is less dependent on acoustics and is also played in a similar tempo in Messiaen's different recordings.

Messiaen consistently uses the breath mark before the fourth bar as a structural pause before a new section, whereas identical signs elsewhere simply result in a brief break in the legato touch. Grace notes in the pedal are given a sustained melodic quality, whereas 32nd notes and grace notes

in the manuals are unsentimentally played through to the next main note. Although all voices are generally played legato, Messiaen has moved far from any Dupré-style consistency of touch. As fingering in the score indicates, the hands are free to jump for larger intervals, relinquishing smooth cantabile qualities. The close recording from Villa Berg accentuates improvisatory qualities which resemble impressions from Boulez's contemporary aleatory music.

This tendency marks both the composer's and Rößler's renderings, which are the briefest on record. Thiry and Bonaventure displays a similar approach but gives slightly more time. Weir and Innig move towards a cantabile touch and a more thoughtful probing. Boström and Ericsson are both almost as brief as Messiaen, with the former resembling the composer's playing and the latter adopting a flexibility between momentum and repose. Andrews and Winpenny suggest that twenty-first century performances tend towards a warmer and more relaxed interpretation, with the difference that Winpenny at times adopts a notable rubato to enhance expressivity.

"Les Mains de l'Abîme"
Messiaen's durations: Trinité 7'06, Stuttgart 5'16, Göteborg 5'55

This movement depicts the grandeur of the Dauphiné mountains in the French Alps in a spectacular tutti rendering of the Hindu *manthikâ* rhythm. The first bar is repeated identically five times throughout the piece and provides an interesting case study of tensions between exactitude and the imperative to retain a sentiment of the notation.

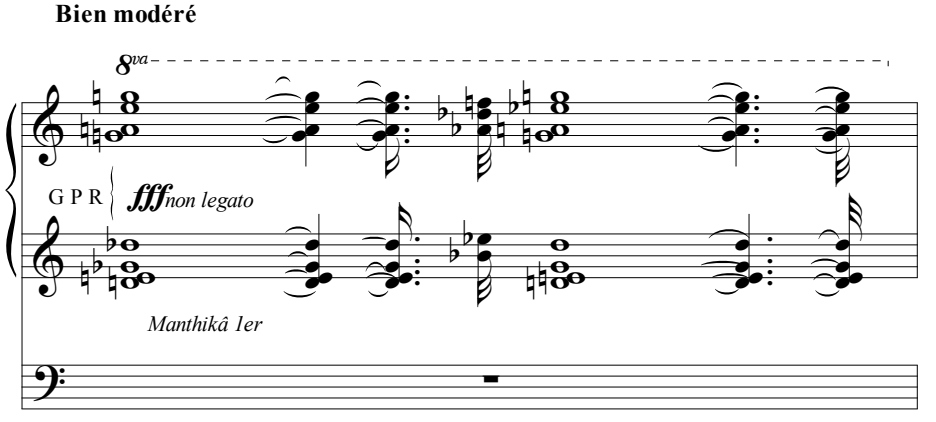

Figure 2: "Les Mains de l'Abîme", bar 1

Organists will typically count the basic note value of 32nds, as an aid to give proper relations between the three chords (equalling 43, 1 and 45 32nds, respectively). Presumably, multiplications of the duration of the single 32nd note chord with the numbers 43 and 45 would approximate the durations of the longer chords. When measured at close range in spectrograms, the 32nd chords in the Trinité performance are consistently around 0.2 seconds in length (sometimes approaching 0.3 seconds). Multiplications with the 43 and 45 would consequently suggest chords lengths of 8.6 and 9 seconds. In Messiaen's rendering, the longer tutti chords range between 5.8 and 7.9 seconds. Interestingly enough, and contrary to expectations created by the notation, the first chord is in every instance somewhat more prolonged than the final (although at times only with a difference of 0.1 second).

A purely mathematical analysis will, however, fail to capture other intentions, among them Messiaen's wish to have a prolonged emphasis on the brief 32nd chords (Rößler 1986, 167). Performers will also have to clear out sonic space for them between the longer massive chords, especially in large acoustics. If rests between the 32nd notes and the attack of the ensuing longer chords are included in the timing of the short chords, they consistently last around 0.4 seconds (sometimes approaching 0.5) in the Trinité recording. On such an account, which carries considerable musical logic, the two longer chords would need to approach 17.2 and 18 seconds, respectively, to provide exact renderings of the notated durations. In this light, Messiaen's long chords in fact fall short of half their note values. This point is made acute in the dry acoustics at Stuttgart. The 32nd chords are typically 0.2 seconds, but the longer chords are as brief as 4.1 and 6.6 seconds (the first here always longer than the third). Having said that, such discrepancies between score and performance will only be perceived in analysis. When experienced in ordinary listening, Messiaen is highly successful in projecting the forceful grandeur of his musical idea in this bar. In this regard, the sentiment of the values is retained, even when performances are chronometrically inexact.

The middle part of the movement provides a case study of the composer's rendering of his meticulously notated spectrum of tempi. Two sections marked *Presque Lent* are almost exactly equal in duration at Trinité, with eight notes around 1.15 seconds in duration. The corresponding number in *Très lent* is 2.33 seconds, although Messiaen adopts a more fluent tempo when septuplets enter. The *Lent* section on p. 9 is played with a typical duration of 2.2 seconds per eight note. As this texture continues, Messiaen plays with an increasing forward momentum, most notable in

the final polyrhythm 9:8. The live takes confirm that his performance is consistent with the notation of tempi, although quicker figures are brought out in a palpably livelier manner. At Stuttgart, his leaning forward towards the end of the *Lent* is so conspicuous that the polyrhythmic figures almost form a separate middle section between the surrounding slow and forceful sections.

Among other performers, only Weir has something of Messiaen's impetuous approach to the long chords, especially in the quick version in Washington (5:37), in which they are cut short. As a contrast, Boström and Tanke stay with the long chords in the *manthikâ* rhythm. Thiry's 1972 version is perfectly controlled but somewhat static, whereas Rößler brings expressivity to figures in the middle part. Ericsson and Thiry at Trinité successfully bring out the durations of chords but also convey their musical grandeur, together with a notable lyric mysticism in the middle sections. Latry has access to a particular majestic sound for the forceful mountain sections. Durations for the entire movement differ considerably, with Tanke and Innig at the far side (9:07 and 9:19, respectively). All other players seek to control the rhythmic element to a far greater degree than the composer's intuitive approach at the console.

"Chants d'oiseaux"
Messiaen's durations: Trinité 7'37, Stuttgart 6'59, Göteborg 7'13

This charming and popular piece provides relief within the *Livre*'s high abstraction. It represented a major step forward in Messiaen's adaption of birdsong into music, being the first work that depicts a distinct species at a specific time of day and a particular geographical site.[9] The composer's playing displays a consistent approach to the lengthy bird solos and the musical characters of the included species (blackbird, nightingale, song thrush, robin). Varying sonic qualities nevertheless convey very different atmospheres. The refrain that launches the piece, and then recurrently re-appears in inversions, is given a broader character in Göteborg. This circumstance can simply reflect hesitation concerning ensuing changes of registration, which appear to be the source of a somewhat wobbly rendering in Stuttgart (and palpable extra-musical noise in Göteborg.)

9 Messiaen refers to Fuligny and the forests of St.-Germain-en-Laye, as well as Gardépée in the department of Charente. This information contradicts his dating of *Livre d'orgue* to 1951, because his first visit to Gardépée took place in April 1952 (Chadwick and Hill, 2018, p. 21, note 9).

Clearly audible cuts in the Trinité recording suggest that it was done in sections, thus avoiding such disturbances.

Throughout the 1950s, Messiaen's *style oiseaux* was evolving in tandem with Yvonne Loriod's characteristic qualities and temperament at the piano. The composer's realisation of birdsong can fruitfully be compared with her contemporary renderings of similar material. A 1953 recording of the newly finished *Réveil des oiseaux* is particularly interesting, as this work's birdsong techniques follow closely in the wake of "Chants d'oiseaux".

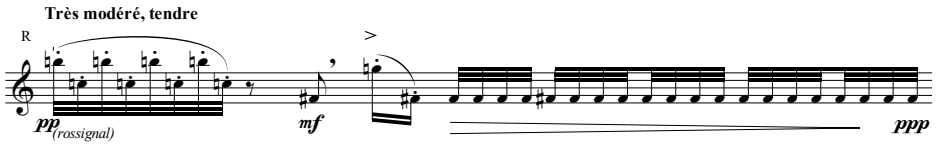

Figure 3: "Chants d'oiseaux", beginning of final nightingale solo

Messiaen's playing in the final nightingale solo resembles aspects of Loriod's version of the corresponding opening solo in the *Réveil*. Her tight rendering of the bird's repeated notes is feasible on the piano, where each new attack remains audible. In contrast to the close recordings of her piano, the spacious Sainte-Trinité requires Messiaen to take a broader tempo. Nevertheless, both here and in the dry acoustics in Stuttgart, repetitions are partly indistinct. Characteristic for Loriod's 1959 landmark recording of the brand new *Catalogue d'oiseaux* is an unsentimental panache and accuracy, even when playing with an almost violent rapidity. Messiaen adopts brisk tempi for the blackbird and robin, but he is less successful in accuracy and evenness of attack. Quick figures are often insufficiently articulated for providing a clear and exuberantly silvery sound. Still, a distinct sense of each bird's character is well achieved. In the shape and direction of individual figures and gestures, Messiaen's playing appears spontaneously crafted and varies between performances. Consequently, breath marks and even notated rhythms appear to suggest a possible manner of phrasing. As suggested by Messiaen himself, they should not be taken all too *fastidiously* (Zacher 1982, 101).

Loriod's interpretation had undergone a notable transformation at the time of her second recording of the *Catalogue* in 1970. The close first recording is replaced by a warmer sonic atmosphere and Loriod gives

greater attention to colours. She adds a momentous emphasis at times and employs a manifest use of rubato to accentuate vital high notes (Chadwick and Hill 2018, 185–187). Messiaen's 1972 recording of the bird solos in *Méditations* displays a similar development. Not only is the recording quality and the state of the instrument much improved, but his playing is also marked by higher technical proficiency, greater clarity and a more premeditated use of rubato. The 1956 recording of the "Chants d'oiseaux" thus represents a particular historical conception of birdsong and is not necessarily characteristic of Messiaen's playing throughout his long career.

Other performers respond differently to motifs in the birdsongs. However, while this movement would appear to provide ample space for individuality, all versions display a somewhat paradoxical uniformity. Beginning with Thiry and Rößler, neo-classical tone colours are generally married to renderings of great clarity, evenness of touch and a precise rendering of the score. Innig's registration and dry staccato in the recurrent *ritornello* retains a sense of the sang-froid of Messiaen's own 1950s. Most recordings have a durata of around eight minutes, with Boström's unsentimental coolness and Andrews's protracted poetry being exceptions in opposite direction. Thiry's later version has gained some rubato and Ericsson displays the contrast in tempo between birds. Winpenny's instrument is more similar to Trinité and he allows the soft nightingale to sound conspicuously distant, as does Latry. More exact and carefully crafted than Messiaen's versions, those of other interpreters lack the composer's impetuous spontaneity.

"Pièce en trio"
Messiaen's durations: Trinité 8'30, Stuttgart 7'30, Göteborg 7'13

Like the initial piece, this movement is built upon the interplay of three (Hindu) rhythmic characters. Messiaen's perception is set out in the posthumous *Traité*: "The principal thing is: the rhythmic work of the upper 2 voices", "one must scrupulously make the values stand out; the least false duration would destroy all the rhythmic effect." The rhythms are intended to depict the "geometry of mountains, rocks and peaks", the clarity of registration suggests sun and snow, whereas the so-called "principal melody" played in the pedal instates a "nostalgic" and "melancholic" feeling (Messiaen 1996, 196–198). In Messiaen's own view (1996, 204), he "always executed the 'Pièce en trio' very rigorously, playing each duration very exactly, with a scrupulous precision."

This verdict is largely accurate, because the composer gives clear-cut and objective renderings of the notated rhythms, consistent across different tempi. Clarity is attained through a marked projection of more lively figures, as well as brief articulation pauses in large intervals. Initial legato markings for each voice are thus not allowed to compromise the overarching clarity of structure. Thiry maintains a sense of aleatoric whim that echoes the composer's shaping of lively rhythms. His second rendering appears influenced by the contemplative and stable manner of playing established by Bate and Weir. Rößler equals the forward momentum of Messiaen's live versions, whereas Andrews breaks out of the collective norm with a timing of 12:20 – three minutes slower than Weir's protracted Washington recording.

"Les Yeux dans les Roues"
Messiaen's durations: Trinité 1'32, Stuttgart 1'36, Göteborg 1'29

Messiaen here faces the most ferociously virtuosic piece he ever composed for the organ. When seated at the console, he is anything but lax in his response to the task: the Trinité recording remains the quickest version among all commercial recordings of this showpiece and the Göteborg version is in fact yet a few seconds shorter. This live performance is also the most successful of his renderings, with a clarity of sound that allows notes to blend into a unified sound. In both the Stuttgart and Paris versions, passages of conspicuously uneven articulation appear to stem from technical difficulties, rather than to be interpretative choices. In the mercilessly revealing acoustics at Villa Berg, Messiaen struggles with the daunting task to play the public premiere of the piece in a live version. As a contrast, the crisp penetrating quality of the chamade trumpets of his Metzler organ at Geneva enables Thiry to bring off the piece at an equally quick pace, but with precision and an extraordinary swing to its changing rhythmic groupings. Weir seeks to bring out the rhythms with the aid of rubato, but her instruments and venues unable a similar clarity. Latry also draws spectacular chamade stops but in a blurring acoustics. Boström and Ericsson demonstrate a brilliant even staccato and are only marginally slower than the composer. Tanke's version has the most striking urgency and drama, aided by the forceful impact of his instrument at the Sint Bavo Cathedral in Haarlem. The more mellow sound of Andrews's and Winpenny's organs are a far cry from such sonic ferociousness.

“Soixante-quatre durées”
Messiaen’s durations: Trinité 10’43, Stuttgart 8’57, Göteborg 9’54

The final movement is as technically fascinating as palpably problematic in performance. It is built on durations from a single 32nd to sixty-four 32nds, minuscule differences which Messiaen is convinced that human beings can discern – at least through education. At the same time, he grants that they cannot be grasped in “direct sensation”; “a strong dose of imagination” is required. He also confesses to have feared that listeners would fail to appreciate the rhythmic structure, or simply find it boring! Therefore, durations were “coloured” in different timbres, and gestures from birdsong were added to make the music more attractive (Messiaen 1996, 225–228).

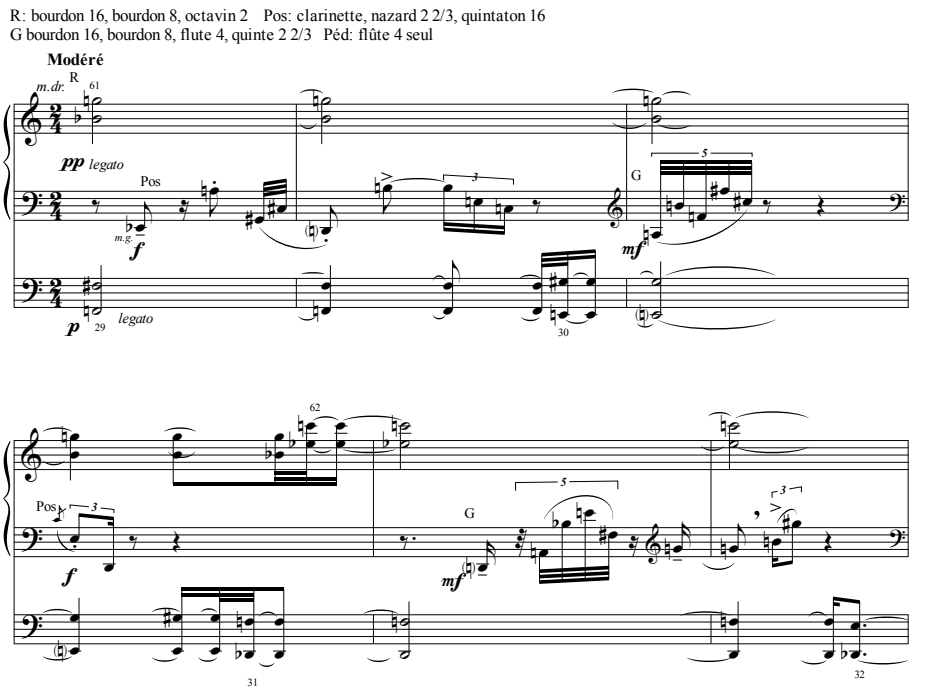

Figure 4: “Soixante-quatre durées”, bar 1–6

In light of Messiaen’s technical aspirations, a rhythmically exact rendering of the 64 different durations seems paramount. The birdsong is to

have a subsidiary function and facilitate comprehension of the durations. In performance, Messiaen quite drastically departs from these priorities. Whereas the score indicates that the dynamics for the birdsong are to be stronger than the durations themselves – even "almost aggressively" so, no other recording accentuates the birds as much as the composer (Messiaen 1996, 227). In all three versions, individual birdcalls are brought out with an almost ferocious energy. Messiaen keeps listeners' attention in a tight grip through his strong-willed projection of their motifs and consistently accentuates quick passages through even livelier tempi. As a result, the final movement contains flashes of brilliantly virtuosic playing. There are some minor but notable textual differences from the score in both live versions, most likely the result of spur-of-the-moment excitement.

Other versions highlight the centrality of timbres and sonic presence in the recording, as vital aspects in making a performance more dramatic or contemplative. Durations range from Thiry's 9:01, at Trinité, to Andrews's 12:17. The choice of basic tempo, however, turns out to have a lesser impact than the presence of sound, especially in the birdsong solos. In the close recording of Thiry's organ at Geneva, there is something of the raw aggression asked for, in spite of the general polished clarity of playing. Sounding from the positive closest to the microphones, the reed stop perfectly captures the dry bass "kik" of a great spotted woodspecker. In later virtuoso passages, drama is allowed to trump evenness of touch. Innig's version is recorded at close range and thereby makes a strong sonic impression. Tanke draws an immensely powerful solo, which turns his slow version into one of the most potent. As a contrast, Bate and Rößler exhibits the most contemplative and balanced timbres, with a concurring control over the tempo (on the priority of counting the underlying rhythm, see Rößler 1986, 149, 168).

The final movement displays Messiaen at the height of his interpretative abilities, with a charismatic authority second to none. His striking artistic perception of the music involves a sovereignty over the notated score that no other performer allows themselves. This success stems from the freedom of the added birdsong, which, however, itself gains priority of attention rather than facilitating appreciation of the 64 durations (Rößler 1986, 174–175). A notable gulf between Messiaen's performances and his basic conception of the movement thus arises. Any retained "sentiment" of the compositional meaning is on the verge of vanishing altogether, when the performer Messiaen conveys the drama that was supposed to be a complementary idea.

Conclusions

Livre d'orgue represents an extreme pole, rather than some middle ground among Messiaen's organ works. Caution is therefore needed before drawing wider conclusions about his art of interpretation. Nevertheless, a number of observations indicate the fruitfulness of highlighting tensions between the composer's calls for comprehension of meaning, exactitude and lively performances. As discussed in the introduction of this article, the constellation of these ideals spotlights a tension between Romantic and modernist traits in Messiaen's style of playing. Chronometrical accuracy is certainly not a characteristic feature of this manner of playing; subsequent performers display a higher level of exactitude or fidelity to the scores in this regard. Some minor differences between score and the composer's performances indicate that the notation at times suggests one of several possible styles of playing, most notably in birdsong passages.

Messiaen's ideal of retaining the sentiment of notation, more than its letter, goes hand in hand with a performance philosophy that partly relinquishes full control over note values. Later authorities on the organ works advice that performers continue to count a basic pulse, a stance that contrasts with the composer's own standpoint and conspicuous deviations in his recordings from note values in the scores. The following tradition of interpretation is in this regard more loyal to the composer's insistence on exactitude rather than to his own manner of rendering. Characteristic of Messiaen's playing is a keen sense of drama and a vivid perception of the ideas behind different movements. He ultimately gives priority to spiritual and theoretical aspects and in the act transforms exactitude and clarity from goals to means. While later organists revel in a more refined technical proficiency, Messiaen maintains a unique role among interpreters of the *Livre* on merits of charisma, vividness, and sheer audacity.

Contradictions between score and performances have often been discussed in terms of freedom. Such a view may support a vision that Messiaen, as a composer-performer, had the authority to license himself liberties beyond what later interpreters may dare. For better or worse, pupils and later players had to consider an emerging trajectory of "authentic" interpretation. The analysis here highlights a shift of focus in which accuracy in the representation of the notation soon became a more pressing concern for recording artists. This circumstance may, however, not least reflect the changing status of recordings themselves throughout the twentieth century. Such sources gradually gained a higher status as significant and permanent renderings of works and artists' abilities. Considering increasing expectations on technical brilliancy and evenness of sound that aro-

se in tandem with possibilities for repeated listening, it is not surprising that subsequent interpreters were unwilling to compromise such aspects in their work. As a contrast, nothing suggests that Messiaen treated his recordings as sources on par with his meticulously prepared scores. Messiaen's teaching and his 1956 recordings certainly set standards in some respects, but other performers did not follow suit in his far-reaching priority of imagination and drama over technical mastery. One of the outcomes of this article is a suggestion that the 1956 set needs to be studied further as a product of a particular post-war context, rather than the composer's own final word on the interpretation of his organ works.

The possibility to hear Messiaen perform at other venues than Sainte-Trinité accentuates the necessity of adjusting basically consistent interpretations to different acoustic conditions. Choices of instrument and their sonic presence on recordings also set later versions apart, more conspicuously than the interpretations per se. Several recent renderings have returned towards the warmth of symphonic instruments. It remains to be seen whether future performers move beyond a previous tradition of interpretation or dare recovering something of the composer's willingness to take risks, in the service of communicating his works and their meaning. In any case, analyses of Messiaen's recordings and their relation to his advice of performance raises a number of intriguing questions. More scholarly and artistic reflection is needed to evaluate Messiaen within broader renegotiations of composition and performance from the 1950s, as well the artistic potential his stance may continue to have for contemporary musicians.

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