Introduction

In May and June 1940 the German Chancellor Adolf Hitler conducted a remarkable campaign of war which culminated in an Armistice treaty signed with the French government of Marshal Pétain in a railway carriage north-east of Paris on 22 June. The military thrust which led to this notorious but pragmatic political settlement had begun at dawn on 10 May with an invasion of the Netherlands and Belgium. By the end of the month both countries had fallen; British troops had fled to the coast in their thousands and were being evacuated from Dunkirk by a vast flotilla of boats large and small. At the same time, several hundred miles to the east, many French troops were taken prisoner as the German armies moved relentlessly onward from the Belgian border.

One of these was the young composer and organist Olivier Messiaen. He was thirty-one years of age, round-faced and bespectacled, and was serving in a menial capacity for the medical corps. Messiaen and three companions were captured in a forest by German troops as they reached the end of a journey by foot from Verdun to Nancy.[1] Together with countless others he was held in an open-air camp pending transit from the war zone to the heart of Hitler's empire,[2] and after a long and arduous journey by rail arrived at a prisoner-of-war camp known as Stalag VIIIA, at Görlitz, a small town in Silesia about 55 miles east of Dresden.

In captivity, Messiaen was stripped of his uniform but managed somehow to retain a haversack containing a small and eclectic collection of pocket scores – from Bach's Brandenburg Concertos to the *Lyric Suite* by Alban Berg. This library, he said later, 'was to be my solace at a time when I would suffer, as the Germans themselves suffered, from hunger and cold'.[3]

Messiaen's early career

At the time of his capture Messiaen already had several major works behind him. Born in 1908 to artistic parents and precociously talented, he had entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of 11 and had won first prizes there in counterpoint (1926), piano accompaniment (1927), organ (1929) and composition (1930). Devoutly religious, he had been appointed organist at l'Église de la Trinité in Paris in 1931 – a conventional office curiously at odds with his radical musical sensibilities.

Even before leaving the Conservatoire, Messiaen had composed two works of great imagination and distinction – *Le banquet céleste* for organ (1928) and the eight Preludes for piano (1928–9) – and others, notably the orchestral work *Les offrandes oubliées* (1930) and *L'Ascension* (for orchestra, 1932–3; rewritten for organ, 1933–4) would soon follow. These works are recognised today (though hardly at the time) as remarkably mature in their absorption of a wide range of influences, some of them exotic. Paris in the 1920s was a giant melting-pot of cultures, and whilst in music that decade has come to be dominated in hindsight by the works of Stravinsky and the composers of the group 'Les six', there was in fact a vast range of other strands in Parisian musical life, on some of which Messiaen seems likely to have drawn.[4]

First, there are the influences Messiaen himself acknowledged, such as his composition teacher Paul Dukas (1865–1935). Dukas allowed few of his works to survive, and the popularity of *L'Apprenti sorcier* does not necessarily show him to posterity in his best light. Far more impressive and influential, both on Messiaen and on others – such as those Viennese musicians, including Berg for example, who saw it produced there in 1908 – was his opera *Ariane et Barbe-bleue*.[5] This work shares with Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* its origin in a play by the Belgian symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck, but it is more inscrutable than Debussy's work and its tone is altogether darker. Messiaen knew *Pelléas* perhaps even more thoroughly than *Ariane*, as its score had been a tenth-birthday gift from his boyhood harmony teacher Jehan de Gibon (whom we should thank also):

> A provincial teacher had placed a veritable bomb in the hands of a mere child. … For me, that score was a revelation, love at first sight; I sang it, I played it, and sang it again and again. That was probably the most decisive influence I've received …[6]

Messiaen would later recall that as a student at the Conservatoire he was the only one who possessed the scores of Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* and Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. But these modernist talismans were not at the centre of his musical world: 'I was closer to Debussy. I remained loyal to my childhood loves: Debussy, Mozart, Berlioz, Wagner.'[7] Messiaen's love of Debussy's music and his admiration for Dukas as man and artist meant that despite his appreciation of Honegger and Milhaud,[8] the origins of his style lay firmly with the generation of French musicians that preceded 'Les six' rather than with the post-war innovations of that group.

Among other influences that Messiaen was to acknowledge from his teachers the most far-reaching was that of Marcel Dupré and Maurice Emmanuel, who between them introduced him to ancient Greek rhythms and trained him in their musical application.[9] Dupré (1886–1971) was both Messiaen's organ teacher and his link with the great French organ tradition exemplified in the 1920s also by Widor and Tournemire. He used improvisation on Greek rhythms as a pedagogical tool and wrote about them in his *Traité d'improvisation*, which was published in 1926 while Messiaen was still a pupil at the Conservatoire. Emmanuel (1862–1938) was Messiaen's music history teacher, though he regarded himself primarily as a composer. His course on Greek metre, though of a year's duration, merely whetted Messiaen's appetite, encouraging him to visit libraries in search of further information from which he developed his own understanding of the subject. In Messiaen's own words:

> Greek metres rely on a simple and essential principle: they are composed of shorts and longs; the shorts are all equal and a long equals two shorts. … Metre is quite simply the grouping of two feet, the foot being a rhythm composed of a certain number of short and long values each having a precise name.[10]

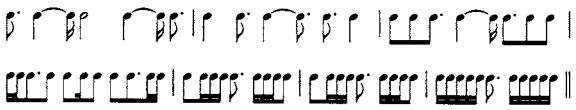
He goes on to explain how one foot may be substituted for another – not necessarily of the same overall length – and how the total of the note-values in a verse is thus not infrequently a prime number. These observations underpin what Messiaen terms his 'secret predilection for prime numbers (5, 7, 11, etc.)' in his preface to the score of the *Quatuor*.[11]

Translated from poetry to the domain of musical rhythm, this view of metre as a consequence of the interplay of long and short values may

be seen as a foundation of something highly characteristic of Messiaen's style from the mid-1930s onwards. Instead of the even beats and bars which are the traditional basis of Western musical metre, Messiaen worked, in effect, with beats of irregular length: not, for example, regular crotchets, but groups that are three, four or five semiquavers in length, all juxtaposed in apparent freedom.[12] There is still an underlying regular pulse, but it is at the level of this tiny 'short' value rather than that of the slower perceptible beat, which is delightfully uneven.

Messiaen's study of Greek metre was not the only catalyst for this stylistic development, for he had also made a study of classical Indian rhythms through a chance encounter with the *Saṅgītaratnākara* ('The Ocean of Music'), a thirteenth-century treatise authored by Śārṅgadeva.[13] Although the *Saṅgītaratnākara* is only one of many ancient Indian sources on Saṅgīta – the art of song, instrumental music and dance[14] – it was on this treatise that he alighted and from which he learned of the deçi-tâlas ('regional rhythms'). These were rhythmic formulæ not dissimilar to the Greek 'feet' in their combination of short and long values to produce effects quite alien to the Western classical tradition, and which Messiaen clearly found both fascinating and musically invigorating. He used the deçi-tâlas in his own compositions and also took from a study of the *Saṅgītaratnākara* the principle of 'non-retrogradable rhythm':

> Whether one reads from right to left or from left to right, the order of their values is the same. This peculiarity is found in all rhythms divisible into two groups each of which is the retrograde of the other, with a 'shared' central value.
>
> For example ... A succession of non-retrogradable rhythms (each bar contains one such rhythm):



> This is used in the sixth movement of the *Quatuor*: 'Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes'[15]

The synthesis of Indian and Greek elements that developed in Messiaen's mind is shown by his keen identification of a non-retrogradable

long–short–long pattern in rhythms typical of the dance music of Crete.[16] To this mix should be added his devout appreciation that the neumes of plainsong were similarly liberated from the bars and beats of Western music.[17] Messiaen's understanding of this wealth of ancient precedent allowed him to acknowledge Stravinsky's use of additive rhythm, most famously in *The Rite of Spring*, without being beholden to Stravinsky as a source of his own style.[18]

It was nonetheless through the Franco-Russian cultural axis that Messiaen – who 'didn't approve' of the musical æsthetics inspired among a generation of French composers by Jean Cocteau's *Le coq et l'arlequin* (1918) and *Le rappel à l'ordre* (1926)[19] – may have come to be influenced by a group of musicians younger than Debussy and Dukas. Links between Russian and French music from the latter part of the nineteenth century onwards were legion, including Debussy's formative contacts in Russia with Tchaikovsky's patron Nadezhda von Meck and her family in the early 1880s, and the seminal visits of Sergei Diaghilev's company to Paris that began with a series of concerts in 1907 and developed into the *Ballets Russes* – giving the world such works as *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, *Daphnis et Chloë*, *Jeux* and *The Rite of Spring*. Messiaen's own enthusiasm both for Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov* and for Russian folksong is well recorded.[20] Martin Cooper has compared Dukas's work, and *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* in particular, with the style of Rimsky-Korsakov,[21] but Messiaen's connection with Rimsky comes about more by virtue of the fact that both men associated the senses of sight and sound through synæsthesia – seeing colours when they heard music. A more recent Russian composer who shared this capacity was Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915), who in a series of grandiose and ultimately apocalyptic projects had presented his own creative force as an expression of the divine, inspired initially by the theosophical writings of Helena Blavatsky.

The detailed spiritual content of Scriabin's work must have been repugnant to Messiaen, which may explain why his only public acknowledgement of Scriabin's existence is in connection with synæsthesia.[22] But the points of technical contact between Scriabin's late style and elements of Messiaen's 'musical language' are highly evident (see chapter 2); and, as Paul Griffiths has noted, a number of younger Russian composers strongly influenced by Scriabin were among the

émigrés working in Paris in the 1920s in the aftermath of the 1917 revolution and the civil war that closely followed it. One of these was Ivan Vishnegradsky (1893–1979), whose habitual use of quarter-tones in his mature music was certainly known to Messiaen.[23] Another was Nikolai Obukhov (1892–1954), whose works were considerably more bizarre in their spiritual dimension even than Scriabin's own, frequently relishing as if masochistically the physical details of quasi-Christian martyrdom. It is difficult to believe that Messiaen knew any of this music closely; but he will surely have been aware of the presence and activities of these composers and of other musicians associated with Scriabinism, such as the gifted musical commentator Boris de Schloezer.[24] And whatever his misgivings about their specific beliefs, he would also not have failed to notice their conviction that music had a spiritual dimension – something which set them in significant contrast to the group of 'Les six' and all it stood for.

By the mid-1930s Messiaen was himself preparing to join forces with other French composers in a named group with its own manifesto. This was 'La jeune France', which gave its inaugural concert in June 1936. Its members, other than Messiaen, were André Jolivet (1905–74) – the most prominent in the group at its formation – and two lesser-known composers, Daniel Lesur and Yves Baudrier. Their stated intention was to present 'a living music, having the impetus of sincerity, generosity and artistic conscientiousness',[25] but as Antoine Goléa points out, only Jolivet and Messiaen were intent on achieving this through new musical means.[26] This grouping of four men, always disparate, was made irrelevant by the war, but Messiaen evidently retained his admiration for Jolivet's piano work *Mana* (1935), which in its exotically magical subject matter seems to anticipate some of Messiaen's post-war music.[27]

Messiaen's pursuit of the spiritual through an innovative musical language drawing on many sources continued in the mid- and late 1930s. The four major works of these years stand close to the *Quatuor* in style, and were likewise cited liberally by the composer in *Technique de mon langage musical*, a two-volume treatise written on his repatriation to France and published in 1944, in which he set out the main elements of his rhythmic, melodic and harmonic techniques, together

with his approach to musical phrasing and form, and much else besides.[28] The prefaces to the published scores of both the *Quatuor* and the organ work *La Nativité du Seigneur* (1935) introduce important concepts that were to be discussed at fuller length in *Technique*. Whereas the preface to the *Quatuor* deals in the main with matters of rhythm, including non-retrogradable rhythms and the 'added value' (*valeur ajoutée*) – an isolated 'short' beat, in the terminology of Messiaen's Greek metrics – the preface to *La Nativité* gives the first introduction to Messiaen's most notable conceptual innovation in the sphere of musical pitch: the 'modes of limited transposition' (see Appendix). Messiaen developed the idea of modal composition from his familiarity with the church modes, from the music of Maurice Emmanuel,[29] and probably also from the Russians.[30] His own most favoured modes are highly characteristic in their melodic and harmonic implications, and feature prominently in the other major works of this period: the song cycle *Poèmes pour Mi* (voice and piano, 1936; voice and orchestra, 1937), the *Chants de terre et de ciel* (voice and piano, 1938) and the organ work *Les corps glorieux*, which was completed in August 1939, just prior to the full outbreak of war and only a matter of months before its composer's capture and incarceration.

Genesis of the *Quatuor*

Messiaen was grateful that his German captors regarded him as harmless and left him more or less alone. Not only was he allowed to retain his collection of scores, but an officer gave him music paper, pencils and erasers.[31] There was no piano yet to be had, but this did not stop him composing. With him in Stalag VIIIA were three other musicians, including his superior from the medical corps, the cellist Étienne Pasquier. The others were a clarinettist, Henri Akoka, who had been with them in the transit camp near Nancy,[32] and a violinist, Jean le Boulaire. In Messiaen's own words:

> I immediately wrote for them an unpretentious little trio, which they played to me in the lavatories, for the clarinettist had kept his instrument with him and someone had given the cellist a cello with three strings. Emboldened by these first sounds, I retained this little piece

> under the name of 'Intermède' ('interlude') and gradually added to it the seven pieces which surround it, thus taking to eight the total number of movements in my *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*.[33]

The 'Intermède' is indeed an unpretentious piece which presupposes little or no familiarity on the part of its performers with the complexities of Messiaen's 'musical language'. Yet some of the other movements in the finished *Quatuor* embody his technical innovations just as rigorously as the *Chants de terre et de ciel* and *Les corps glorieux* had done. It would seem that Messiaen needed to coach his players thoroughly – Pasquier recalled how the German officers would listen respectfully as they rehearsed together every evening at 6 o'clock[34] – and one may readily surmise that the 'Advice to performers' at the end of the composer's preface to the score is a souvenir of this work:

> In the non-metric pieces such as 'Danse de la fureur …', they may count the semiquavers mentally to help themselves, but only in the earliest stages of rehearsal; doing this in a public performance would make it tiresomely dull: they should keep the feeling of these values, nothing more.
>
> … they should not be afraid of the exaggerated nuances – the accelerandos, rallentandos, all that makes an interpretation lively and sensitive. The middle of 'Abîme des oiseaux', in particular, should be full of fantasy. Sustain implacably the extremely slow speeds of the two eulogies [*louanges*], to the eternity of Jesus and to His immortality.[35]

The requirements of this practical work, through which the players gained familiarity with Messiaen's style over a period of time, would seem likely to have been reflected in the order in which the movements were composed. In addition, the numerous cross-references between the movements give clues as to the likely order of their composition after the 'Intermède'. But the situation is rendered more complex by Pasquier's recollection that the movement for solo clarinet that became the third movement of the *Quatuor* was actually written in the transit camp, i.e. before Messiaen had even reached Stalag VIIIA:

> It was in this camp that Akoka sight-read the piece for the first time. I was the 'music stand', which is to say that I held the score for him. He grumbled from time to time, as he found the composer had given him difficult things to do. 'I'll never manage it', he would say. 'Yes, yes, you'll see', answered Messiaen.[36]

Though at first sight incompatible with the composer's version of events, these memories seem too vivid to be dismissed. If the two accounts are to be reconciled, one must surely conclude that the music which Akoka sight-read in a field simply formed the basis for a more developed piece that Messiaen finalised in Stalag VIIIA at a later date. This would in fact strengthen the comparison to be made between the third movement and the other two 'solo' movements – the fifth and eighth – both of which were transcribed from pre-existing works by Messiaen after he had resolved to compose the *Quatuor* as a multi-movement work in which his instrumental forces would be varyingly deployed.

Indeed, the full ensemble of four instruments is used only in the first, second, sixth and seventh movements. Of these, the sixth stands apart in that the instruments play in unison or octaves throughout: the movement could easily have been rehearsed by Messiaen without a piano, and is perhaps ideally written for this purpose. Its rhythms are for the most part firmly in Messiaen's ametrical style, and indeed give a textbook illustration of the 'added value', but there are moments where the music seems to step back momentarily into something more regular, only to launch itself anew into Messiaen's language. All of this, together with the fact that its main theme is taken directly from the 'Intermède', suggest that it was the next of the movements to be composed.

By comparison, the third movement in its final form is rhythmically freer than the sixth, not only in general but also in its treatment of some specific musical materials shared between the two. The solo clarinet writing incorporates imitations of birdsong into its melodic palette, though in a way that by Messiaen's later standards is rudimentary: the calls of individual birds are not differentiated and the birdsong passages are comparatively brief. Nonetheless, Messiaen chose to cite the first such passage from this movement at the very outset of his discussion of birdsong in *Technique*, and one may reasonably speculate that this reflected his memory of the order in which the birdsong passages in the *Quatuor* were composed.

The second and seventh movements are closely related to each other in musical material and, insofar as the seventh movement is in many ways a development of the second, there can be little doubt that

they were composed in the order in which they appear in the finished work. The second movement develops the birdsong materials from the third, whilst in the violin and cello parts it retains to a considerable extent the octave unison textures of the sixth. The seventh movement gives complete independence to the instruments, and – if this supposed order of composition is correct – would have been the first of which rehearsal was next to impossible without a piano. Messiaen's remark that 'I did not have a piano [when I began to put the work together], and I didn't hear what I had written until much later'[37] is not at odds with this interpretation of events, since so much of the material of the seventh movement is taken from the second – which might indeed have been written, and sections of it brought to rehearsal, before Messiaen had an instrument to hand.

As mentioned above, the fifth and eighth movements were transcribed, presumably from memory, from two of Messiaen's earlier compositions. In the *Quatuor*, each is scored for solo string instrument with piano accompaniment. The eighth movement is taken from the second part of the organ work *Diptyque* (1930); its melody is cast in a fairly conventional 4/4 metre and could easily have been practised by the violinist, le Boulaire, without accompaniment. The same may be said – although it is less regular in metre – of the fifth movement. This was rewritten for cello and piano from a section of *Fête des belles eaux*, a work which Messiaen had composed in 1937 for an ensemble of six *ondes Martenots*.

Because these movements share no material with the rest of the *Quatuor*, it is difficult to speculate with confidence about the stage at which they were transcribed for incorporation into it. Whilst in terms of rehearsal requirements they are comparable with the movement for solo clarinet – and it is probably no coincidence that the sixth, third, fifth and eighth movements are those referred to by Messiaen in his 'Advice to performers' – they are more akin to the first movement with regard to their place in the work's overall layout.

Taken together, these three movements – the first, the fifth and the eighth – frame the *Quatuor*, and each is concerned with the contemplation of eternity:

> This *Quatuor* comprises eight movements. Why? Seven is the perfect number, the six days of Creation, sanctified by the Divine Sabbath; the