

Introduction

Our interest in music arises from its intimate relation to the all-important life of feeling, whatever that relation may be [...]. [The function of music is] not the symptomatic expression of feelings that beset the composer but a symbolic expression of the forms of sentience as he understands them. It bespeaks his imagination of feelings rather than his own emotional state, and expresses what he *knows about* the so-called 'inner life'; and this may exceed his personal case, because music is a symbolic form to him through which he may learn as well as utter ideas of human sensibility.

Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form*

Music, for Olivier Messiaen, was a way of expressing his faith. He considered it his good fortune to have been born a Catholic, and declared that 'the illumination of the theological truths of the Catholic faith is the first aspect of my work, the noblest, and no doubt the most useful'.¹ In order to illuminate these truths, Messiaen assembled a sign system not only to convey objective facts about Catholicism, but also to express the ineffable. He endeavoured to communicate a sense of the divine that is essentially beyond words, in order to 'rejoin the eternal durations and the resonances of the above and beyond, to apprehend that inaudible which is above actual music'.²

It is widely accepted that music has mystical and transformative powers; however, because music without text essentially has no programmatic content, Messiaen sought to refine his compositions to speak more clearly about the truths of Catholicism by developing a sophisticated system of signs in which aspects of music become direct signifiers for words and concepts. Since music has inherent capacities to move people and to affect them in spiritual dimensions but cannot be specific, Messiaen chose to use titles, epigraphs or detailed programme notes as the principal means by which to add meaning to his music. As his message became more sophisticated, so the method by which he communicated it became more complex.

The sign system he developed includes the more well-known elements of his style, such as his modes (scales) with limited capacity for transposition, complex rhythms, plainsong, birdsong and colour, as well as some less familiar innovations, such as his unusual *langage communicable* ('communicable language'), which maps letters and words directly to musical notes and phrases and transliterates texts directly into music. He continued to develop new signs, adopting those that worked

1 Claude Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color. Conversations with Claude Samuel and Olivier Messiaen*, trans. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland, OR, 1994), p. 20. (Hereafter *Music and Color*.)

2 Bernard Gavoty, 'Who Are You Olivier Messiaen?', *Tempo*, new ser., 58 (summer 1961): 33–6 (36).

and discarding those that did not, until his system achieves what may be the height of its sophistication in *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité*, for organ composed in Petichet, Messiaen's Alpine summer home, in 1969.³ The *Méditations*, therefore, provide the case study for my investigation, since, by including the *langage communicable*, they represent probably the composer's most concentrated use of signs, symbols and ciphers to convey an elaborate extra-musical programme.

This study begins with a general introduction to Messiaen's life and works, covering important biographical details and outlining his most significant compositions. It continues by tackling the theological content of his music by analyzing the religious themes in his works in an attempt to describe the type of Catholicism to which he subscribed. The second chapter discusses the field of musical semiotics using the work of several distinguished theorists and then demonstrates how Messiaen established a rudimentary sign system at the start of his career with his innovations in rhythm, scales, colour, and the use of plainsong. The *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* is analyzed in terms of how these early techniques become religious signifiers in Messiaen's exegesis of the biblical text which underscores the work. Chapter three shows how the sign system is expanded and refined in the 1940s (with the addition for example of Messiaen's innovative use of birdsong). It continues with an examination of the experiments with serialism in the late 1940s which eventually found no place in his system. Both chapters refer to the treatises Messiaen wrote (published in 1944 and 1998-2003 respectively), since they contain important first-hand information about the extra-musical intentions for his compositions.

Chapter four traces the history of musical cryptography, noting in particular developments in France in the twentieth-century, especially the work of François-Bernard Mâche, whose compositions from the 1950s to the 1980s went well beyond Messiaen's linguistic experiments. In his *Méditations*, Messiaen added a significant new technique to his already distinctive compositional palette using a cryptographic system of his own devising. The 'langage communicable' is comprised of three elements: a musical alphabet, a simple grammar, and a series of leitmotifs, all of which are used to transliterate texts into music.

The fifth and sixth chapters are devoted to detailed analysis of the 'langage' using a variety of techniques and methodologies from the fields of linguistics and cognition studies. Chapter five concentrates on technical analysis of the structure of the 'langage,' whereas chapter six deals with issues of acquisition, perception and retention.

The *Méditations* are a summation of Messiaen's compositional technique up to this point. In chapter seven, the 'langage' is contextualized as part of a broader semiotic system at work in the *Méditations*, which includes leitmotifs, text superscriptions, unusually complex programme notes, angelic communication, and comparison with the Rosetta Stone. The texts transliterated using the 'langage' are from the *Summa Theologiae* by Thomas Aquinas and these are discussed in relation to the other signs and to Messiaen's exegesis of contemporary Catholic concepts of the Trinity.

3 Olivier Messiaen, *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (Paris, 1973), p. [iii]. (Hereafter the work as a whole will be referred to as *Méditations*, and individual movements referred to as *Méditation I*, *Méditation II* and so on.)

The final chapter discusses the problems associated with meaning in music, and how they relate to Messiaen's sign system. It includes a discussion of the concept of a universal musical language and considers the notion of a type of communication in the arts, which bypasses verbal encryption using the notion of *mentalese* (a word used by Pinker and others for the language of thought). The epilogue concludes that Messiaen was using his music to proselytize and assesses ways in which contemporary audiences may cope with appreciating music that professes a faith that may be different from their own.

Understanding Messiaen's Music

Many people *like* Messiaen's music, but do they *understand* it? Seeking to explain the difference between these concepts, the distinguished semiotician Eero Tarasti draws a clear distinction between the two, noting that some people believe that music can be enjoyed only if it is understood. In an attempt to clarify what he means by 'understanding', he describes an 'awakening' of the musical self in which

music that had been heard earlier only by habit, situation, education and the like, suddenly undergoes a qualitative change. It touches one, it comes alive, it begins to 'speak' and 'move'. Now the message had been *understood*. The music acts as a key that unlocks the door to an unknown world. It has become 'existential'. We are somehow convinced that this message is 'true', 'authentic', and crucial to our being.⁴

What Tarasti describes is a response to a musical stimulus that is intuitive and based solely on the *sound* of the music without the complication or burden of any extra-musical meaning that the work might carry. It is perfectly possible, and probably very common, to be moved by Messiaen's music in this way. Some of the composer's most beautiful and rapturous music, such as the sumptuous slow movement of the *Turangalila-Symphonie* ('Time-Play Symphony', 1946–8), which describes the 'Jardin du sommeil d'amour' ('The Garden of Love's Sleep'), can hardly fail to move or perhaps even transform the listener.⁵ As we shall see, verbalizing the message once it has been understood is extremely difficult; however, we can acknowledge that some sort of transformation has taken place.

Tarasti develops his concept of understanding beyond the intuitive, boldly declaring that 'musical meanings are understood only by competent listeners', although he then qualifies this claim by adding that his statement 'must not be understood normatively, however. One does not *need* to understand music at all; it can be enjoyed even if it is not understood conceptually. We can also understand music even if we cannot verbalize our experience of it'. He continues by noting that 'musical semiotics, however, tries to analyze the musical signs and sign-processes

⁴ Eero Tarasti, *Signs of Music: A Guide to Musical Semiotics* (Berlin and New York, 2002), p. 16.

⁵ Messiaen told Antoine Goléa that the word was chosen for its sound as well as its meaning and that *Lila* means 'life-force, the game of creation, rhythm and movement', while *turanga* 'has a sense analogous to our use of tempo'; see Antoine Goléa, *Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1960), p. 84.

that enable us to experience and understand music'.⁶ What becomes clear very quickly is that Messiaen's music needs competent listeners, and we need semiotics to gain competence.

If we are to try to comprehend Messiaen's music on a semiotic level, it is important to understand how he tries to invest it with extra-musical meaning. In the preface to the *Méditations* the composer makes the following observation:

The different languages known to us are, above all, a means of communication. They are generally vocal in character, but is that the only medium for transmission? One can very well imagine a language based on movement, images, colours or smells, and everyone knows that the Braille alphabet uses touch. In each case one begins with the established convention: it is agreed that *this* means *that*.⁷

This statement contains three important ideas about Messiaen's philosophy of language: first, that language is primarily a means of communication; second that verbal language is only one of several different languages; and third that languages begin with a convention 'this expresses (or means) that'. Messiaen continues in the preface by noting that: 'Music on the other hand does not express anything directly. It may suggest, create a feeling, a state of mind, touch the subconscious, expand the dream faculties, and these are its immense powers; however, it is not able to 'speak', to inform with precision.' If we consider that this was written in 1969, after Messiaen had made many successful attempts to invest music with meaning (the leitmotifs in the *Turangalila-Symphonie*, for example), it is strange that he still felt that music was unable to 'speak' or 'inform with precision'.

Linguist Raymond Monelle slightly refines the notion of expression in a way that is relevant to our discussion of Messiaen, suggesting that for some philosophers the view that music either imitates nature or expresses feeling is not what constitutes current thinking. According to Monelle,

Modern expression theory departs from the assumption that an emotion, felt by the composer, is transmitted to the listener. Music is a *presentation* of a feeling rather than a direct expression; we should say, according to [philosopher] Peter Kivy, that music is 'expressive of sadness' rather than it merely 'expresses' sadness.⁸

Messiaen seems to agree with Kivy that music is a *presentation* of a feeling rather than a direct expression. He also believes that it has an effect on the subconscious mind and has transcendent properties. Accurate or not, Messiaen's view is important to understanding the development of his sign system and especially of his *langage communicable*, which speaks in an extremely precise way.

6 Tarasti, *Signs of Music*, p. 21 (original emphasis).

7 Messiaen, *Méditations*, p. [iii].

8 Raymond Monelle, *Linguistics and Semiotics in Music* (Chur and Philadelphia, 1992), p. 5 (original emphasis).

Music and Language

Musical Meaning

There have been many attempts to describe music as a language and to define what music might mean. At its most basic level, music is *imitative*; for example, it uses rising notes to indicate ascent and falling notes to indicate descent. A more sophisticated understanding of the power of music is seen in the Baroque theory of the *Affektenlehre*, the ‘doctrine of the affections’, in which certain musical devices were believed to produce specific, involuntary emotional responses in the listener. In this sense music is *expressive*, since it is expressing an emotion (such as sadness) and communicating it directly to the listener. Given that music has such power, Baroque composers were careful not to include too many different stimuli in one piece in order to avoid confusion. A modern interpretation of the doctrine of the affections has a place in the analysis of Messiaen’s music and will be considered during the course of this study; but, as we shall see, unlike Baroque composers who kept to one or two motifs and expressed them in various forms in a single piece, Messiaen often used extremely intricate means to stimulate the affections.

Even more germane than the idea of *imitation* is the theory that music is *transcendent*. Monelle notes that, with philosophers such as Schopenhauer at the beginning of the nineteenth century, music came to be regarded as having the capacity ‘to bypass the representation of real feelings and [allow people to] get in touch with their inner essences. The meaning of music, in philosophical terms, was transcendent; it was something not accessible to ordinary experience.’⁹ This idea of transcendence is of paramount importance in Messiaen’s music. Regardless of the specific subject of one of his compositions, be it the Trinity, the Resurrection or another Christian theme, Messiaen hoped that his music would have the power to transform. It is the numinous qualities, therefore – those that have a deeply spiritual effect, are uplifting or reveal the divine – that are of particular interest in my investigation. What we need to discover is to what degree the sign system in Messiaen’s music helps or hinders access to the transcendent, and how much of that system is, ultimately, irrelevant to an experience of transcendence, whether by Catholic, non-Catholic or non-believer alike, and may therefore be dispensed with.

Linguistics and Semiotics

Monelle’s succinct and readable survey covers the history of the debate concerning music and meaning and notes the primacy of semiotics as a study.¹⁰ He argues that

⁹ Monelle, *Linguistics and Semiotics in Music*, p. 5.

¹⁰ For an evaluation of several musical semiological theories see also Frederick Henry Mauk, ‘Aspiring to the Condition of Language: An Examination of the Aesthetic Considerations in the Application of Structural (Semiological) Principles to Musical Problems’, PhD diss., Harvard University, 1982; for an introduction to semiotics as a tool for interpreting classical music see V. Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (Princeton, NJ, 1991); and, for an overview, see Eero Tarasti, *A Theory of Musical Semiotics* (Bloomington, 1994), pp. 3–15.

'linguistics may have been the first to change from a speculative to a scientific study, but language is clearly just one of many systems of signs; semiotics is logically prior to linguistics'.¹¹ In discussing the contributions made to both fields, Monelle refers to his own survey as covering a 'Wittgensteinian family of studies, some explicitly semiotic but not based on linguistics (like the sign taxonomy of Pierce), some derived from linguistics but not avowedly semiotic (the generative analysis of Lerdahl and Jackendoff, for instance), some both linguistic and semiotic (the distributional analysis of Nattiez)'.¹² The present study explores a number of aspects of linguistics and semiotics that shed light on Messiaen's development and utilization of his sign system, including phonology, morphology, grammar, syntax, cognition, transmission, acquisition, perception, retention and, finally, semantics.

Significant developments in linguistics since the early twentieth century have allowed musicians, especially ethnomusicologists, to adopt and adapt linguistic techniques and methodologies to elucidate music. Pioneering work includes George Herzog's investigation into speech patterns in primitive music, and Charles Morris's influential early work in semiology.¹³ In a seminal article in 1974 Steven Feld surveyed the field up to that point and remarked that 'interest thus far in the language–music relationship occurs at two distinct levels; one being the overlap of musical and linguistic phenomena, the other being the possibilities of applying linguistic models to musical analysis', and he noted that 'literature was weighed to the former concern'.¹⁴ Feld also observed that 'research into aspects of the language–music overlap has looked at two types of relations, namely language in music (relations of text, poetics, and stylistics to song structure), and music in language (musical properties of speech)'.¹⁵ With Messiaen's music there is a third type of relation, namely, language that is explicitly but covertly associated with music – hidden language, or musical cryptography. The present study contributes to the discussion of this third category, examining the technical problems of musical cryptography through a systematic analysis of the one particular and unusual aspect of Messiaen's sign system, the *langage communicable*.

The Language of Signs

The basic process of communication, of expression and understanding can be seen from this simple flow diagram:

Messiaen → music → listener

11 Monelle, *Linguistics and Semiotics*, p. 25.

12 Ibid.

13 See especially George Herzog, 'Speech Melody in Primitive Music', *Musical Quarterly*, 20/4 (1934): 452–66; and Charles Morris, *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* (Chicago, 1938).

14 Steven Feld, 'Linguistic Models in Ethnomusicology', *Ethnomusicology*, 18/2 (1974): 179–217.

15 Ibid., p. 197.

The listener either understands the music (sign) from Messiaen or does not. If the latter, the reasons are twofold: either the listener misunderstands the sign because they are using a code or sign system other than the one used by Messiaen; or the listener misunderstands the sign because they do not receive it as an expressive sign (that is, having semantic content). In both of these the listener fails to access the world, and hence the intentions, of Messiaen.¹⁶ In the first case it is possible that a listener may try to interpret Messiaen's music using a sign system such as common-practice harmony; if so, unresolved dominants and chords of contracted resonance, modes of limited transposition and the other aspects of Messiaen's music will be misconstrued. More likely is the fact that misunderstanding occurs because the listener is simply unaware that the music in different aspects is loaded with expressive content.

The process of communicating such expressive content relies, as Messiaen himself notes, in accepting that 'this means that'. Everything that stands for something else is technically known as a 'sign', and in semiotics (the scientific study of signs) a sign consists of two parts, the 'signifier' and the 'signified'.¹⁷ The 'signifier' is that part of a sign that stimulates at least one sense organ of the receiver of a message. For example, the phonological (sound) component of the word 'tree' (represented in written form by linguists as /tri/ and given a specific pronunciation using a phonetic alphabet [tʁi]) is a typical example of a linguistic signifier. A signifier for a tree can also be a picture or photograph of a tree, or one of the many words for tree in a different language (*arbre* in French, *Baum* in German, for example). A signifier may be many other things, such as a scent or a gesture. What is interesting for analysis of Messiaen's music is that nearly all the individual components of his musical language act as signifiers in some capacity. The 'signified', on the other hand, is something that exists in a world that is external (real), mental or emotional and is being represented by the sign's conceptual content. What is signified can be as diverse as a tree, an abstract idea, a perception or a feeling. Again, the variety of signification in Messiaen's music is immense, ranging in the *Méditations* from pictorial representations of drops of water to abstract ideas such as the immensity of God.

Signs are further subdivided into three basic types according to whether the signifier resembles the thing to which it refers – its 'referent'; the signifier is directly linked with the referent in a physical or mechanical sense; or the signifier and referent are arbitrarily associated:

1. 'Iconic signs' or 'icons'. These always bear some resemblance to their referent. A photograph is an iconic sign, as is the silhouette of a female or male on a bathroom door. Iconic signs include onomatopoeic words like 'splat' in

¹⁶ Adapted from Tarasti, *Signs of Music*, p. 18.

¹⁷ For a succinct summary of linguistic theory see Ralph Fasold and Jeffrey Connor-Linton, *An Introduction to Language and Linguistics* (Cambridge, 2006). The examples used here are condensed from the highly recommended volume by William O'Grady and John Archibald (eds), *Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction*, 4th US edn by Mark Aronoff and Janie Rees-Miller (Boston, 2001), pp. 628–33.

English because they somewhat resemble what they signify. Messiaen's sign system in the *Méditations* includes iconic and even onomatopoeic signs.

2. 'Indexical signs' or 'indexes'. These function by 'pointing out' their referent, typically by being a partial or representative sample of it. For example, the presence of smoke is an index of fire. Birdsong may be considered an indexical sign since it points out that a bird is 'present' in some sense in the music and should therefore be included in the wider analysis of such music.
3. 'Symbolic signs'. These are distinct from icons and indexes because they bear an arbitrary relationship to their referents. Human language is highly symbolic because most of its signs bear no inherent resemblance or causal connection to their referents. Messiaen's symbolic language is also largely arbitrary. We rely on supplemental information from the composer in order to understand his signs.

Signs can also be 'mixed'; however, they are always classified according to their major properties. In addition to these properties, all signs can act as 'signals' when they trigger a specific action on the part of the receiver, as do traffic lights, for example. Only a limited subset of human linguistic activity consists of signalling, and it is not an important feature of Messiaen's sign system.

For every type of sign a distinction is also made between 'graded' and 'discrete' sign structure. 'Graded signs' convey their meaning by changes in degree, such as voice volume or even the movement of the hands of a clock. 'Discrete signs' are distinguished from one another by categorical (stepwise) differences. There is no gradual transition from one sign to the next. Words are good examples of discrete signs since there is no intermediate stage between, for example, the words 'stop' and 'go' in English except that which can be expressed by other discrete words or combinations of words, such as 'start to go'. Messiaen's sign system consists almost entirely of discrete signs, although interesting studies could be made of the changes (gradations) of certain motifs such as the 'themes' used in the *Turangalila-Symphonie*. In this study I am concerned only with the distinctions of gradation in so far as it helps us understand what Messiaen might be communicating through his music.

In my attempt to understand what Messiaen's music means, I shall use other techniques and methodologies from linguistics and semiotics, and these will be explained as they occur. But one further definition and distinction needs to be made at this stage, that between 'connotation' and 'denotation'. Briefly, 'denotation' refers to the object signified, while 'connotation' refers to its associated meanings. Denotation is the literal meaning encoded to a signifier, and the definition most likely to appear in a dictionary. Thus, according to *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, the words 'yellow hammer' denote 'a small European bunting (*Emberiza citrinella*) having a yellow head, neck, and breast'.¹⁸ Any other meanings, implications or explanations of the words will be connotative.

To apply this notion to Messiaen's work: the music at the end of the second, fifth, eighth and ninth *Méditations* denotes the song of a yellowhammer but connotes much

¹⁸ 3rd edn (London, 1997).

more. The connotation here works on three levels: first, it refers to a birdsong, which is part of Messiaen's personal belief that birds are 'the greatest musicians on the planet';¹⁹ second, by virtue of its place in the music and by what Messiaen has written about it, it refers to a simple, naïve bird; third, the song is open to interpretation. That is to say, we can perform an exegesis on the *Méditations* and place this birdsong into a broader interpretation of the piece. This aspect is developed further in Chapter 2 where I consider the interpretation of the signifiers for birdsong.

Messiaen's Music as Language

The preceding discussion provides the basic language and concepts of a sign system. How, then, do we apply this to music? In his discussion of the challenges of semiotics in music, theorist Kofi Agawu puts forward several propositions concerning the music-as-language metaphor. In the following paragraphs I deal with those propositions that relate directly to the discussion of Messiaen's sign system.²⁰

1. *Unlike language, which functions both as a medium for communication ('ordinary language') and as a vehicle for artistic expression ('poetic language'), musical language exists primarily in the 'poetic' sense, although it can function for communicative purposes.*

Messiaen's sign system continues to use the 'poetic language' of music for artistic expression but also tries to turn it into a medium for very specific communication concerning Roman Catholic theology. We therefore have to ask if Messiaen's applied meaning supersedes or removes any inherent 'poetic' musical communication, and this in turn leads to questions of how we interpret absolute music.

2. *A musical text, like a verbal text, is organized into discrete units or segments. Music is therefore segmentable.*

Agawu notes that, for many writings in music theory, 'the explicit aim is often to establish the boundaries of rests, notes, motives, themes, phrases, periods, and sections, the implicit premiss is that these constructs actively engender meaning. That is why some writers pursue analogies between musical structure and letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs'.²¹ I shall apply Leonard Bernstein's work on this music-language relationship to Messiaen's music to see if this analogy is useful and to examine if closed semantic units in his sign system (such as a leitmotif followed by a birdsong) may be actively engendering meaning. I shall also discuss how Messiaen's segmented music – nowhere more evident than in the *Méditations* – may be considered as a defining part of any broad narrative structure.

19 Samuel, *Music and Color*, p. 85.

20 From Kofi Agawu, 'The Challenge of Semiotics', in Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (eds), *Rethinking Music* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 139–60 (141–6).

21 *Ibid.* p. 142.

3. *A musical segment (phrase, period, sentence, paragraph, section, movement) exists in two interdependent planes, the plane of succession ('melody'), and the plane of simultaneity ('harmony'). Language lacks the plane of simultaneity.*

This simultaneity is both an advantage and a disadvantage for music. It explains, for example, how Mozart can continue six conversations at the same time in the famous sextet at the end of Act III of *The Marriage of Figaro*, characterizing not only the person singing but also the content of their conversation in the music, so that it is always apparent to the listener what is happening. For Messiaen, the problem is that he has often overloaded the music with multiple signification, making it difficult to comprehend many simultaneous musical and semiotic events. Perhaps his music requires an understanding of the content in advance of a presentation, and an expectation of what is to be heard. What, then, is the point of the performance? I shall also discuss whether or not this multiple signification was intentional on Messiaen's part, or what alternative objectives he may have had for the extraordinary complexity of some of his music.

4. *Units of language have more or less fixed lexical meaning, while units of music do not.*

As with proposition (1) above, for Messiaen the reverse of Agawu's fourth point is true, since he deliberately applies specific lexical meaning to units of music. Those used in the *Méditations* will be subjected to rigorous linguistic analysis and conclusions drawn from the results.

5. *Whereas language interprets itself, music cannot interpret itself. Language is the interpreting system of music.*

This truism is extremely important. In order to interpret music we use language, and for this study I use two specific methodologies not explicitly discussed by Agawu, namely exegesis and hermeneutics. 'Exegesis' (literally, 'to draw the meaning out of' a given text) involves an extensive and critical interpretation of a text, especially of holy scripture such as the Bible. Exegesis may be contrasted with 'eisegesis', which means to read one's own interpretation into a given text. In general, exegesis presumes an attempt to view the text objectively, while eisegesis implies more subjectivity. Traditional exegesis requires the following: analysis of significant words in the text in regard to translation, examination of the general historical and cultural context, confirmation of the limits of the passage and, lastly, examination of the context within the text.

Hermeneutics, on the other hand, may be described as the theory of interpretation and understanding of a text through empirical means. It should not be confused with the practice of exegesis, which extracts the meaning of a passage of text, enlarges upon it and explicates it with explanatory glosses. Hermeneutics addresses the ways in which a reader may come to the broadest understanding of the creator of a text and the relation of that creator to his or her audiences, both local and over time, within the constraints of culture and history. Thus it is a branch of philosophy concerned with human understanding and the interpretation of texts. Recently, the concept of

text has itself been extended beyond written documents to include, for example, speech, performances, works of art and even events.²²

In opposition to the notion that language is the interpreting system of music, I shall also fully explore the notion of ‘mentalese’, a term used by linguist Steven Pinker for the language of thought. In his book *The Language Instinct*, Pinker suggests that one cannot use language to think because it is ambiguous, it lacks logical explicitness, co-referencing issues muddle it, as do the use of deictic terms (that is, terms of or relating to a word, the determination of whose referent is dependent on the context in which it is said or written). These are explored in later chapters of this study as I discuss issues of meaning and interpretation.

Primary and Secondary Sources

Messiaen has performed exegesis and provided hermeneutical explanation of his music more than most composers have of their own work, and some of this material has been quoted frequently. In addition to the explanatory prose Messiaen wrote for many of his compositions, there are five important published collections of conversations with the composer.²³ These contain a wealth of information about Messiaen’s compositional processes and his motivation. Often the material he gives in different interviews is surprisingly consistent; at other times it offers only a tantalizing glimpse into areas that require more explanation. We also have two treatises by Messiaen: the *Technique de mon langage musical*,²⁴ a short introduction to his innovative musical language; and the enormous *Traité de couleur, de rythme et d’ornithologie*,²⁵ a summation of his teaching from the Paris Conservatoire, compiled by Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen to a plan dictated by Messiaen and published posthumously. We also have a record of Messiaen speaking briefly about his music and his ideas in three public conferences: in Brussels (1958), in Paris (1977), and in Kyoto (1985).²⁶ These talks do not announce any new ideas in the composer’s

22 Definitions of exegesis, eisegesis and hermeneutics are condensed from the *Encyclopædia Britannica* <<http://britannica.com>> (accessed August 2007).

23 Antoine Goléa, *Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1960); Claude Samuel, *Entretiens avec Olivier Messiaen* (Paris, 1967), trans. Felix Arahamian as *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen* (London, 1976); Claude Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: musique et couleur* (Paris, 1986), trans. Glasow as *Music and Color* (see n. 1 above); Almut Rößler, *Beiträge zur geistigen Welt Olivier Messiaens* (Duisburg, 1984), trans. Barbara Dagg and Nancy Poland as *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen, with Original Texts by the Composer* (Duisburg, 1986) (hereafter *Contributions*); Brigitte Massin, *Olivier Messiaen: une poétique du merveilleux* (Paris, 1989). In addition, Irene Feddern published a translation of texts from the composer’s organ works, *Messiaen on Messiaen: The Composer Writes about his Work* (Bloomington, 1986).

24 2 vols [vol. 1: Text; vol. 2: Music Examples] (Paris, 1944) (hereafter *Technique*); vol. 1 trans. John Satterfield as *The Technique of my Musical Language* (Paris: 1956) (hereafter *Technique* references are to the English translation.)

25 7 vols (Paris: 1994–2002) (hereafter *Traité*).

26 *Conférence de Bruxelles* (Paris, 1958); *Conférence de Notre-Dame* (Paris, 1978), Eng. trans. by Timothy Tikker in Rößler, *Contributions*, pp. 57–66; *Conférence de Kyoto*:

compositional technique, but, like the published conversations, they serve as useful additional material about Messiaen and his music.

Archive material relating to Messiaen is now becoming increasingly available to scholars. The collection on deposit at the Bibliothèque nationale de France includes portions of Messiaen's correspondence, lecture notes, press cuttings, concert programmes, photographs, and also his library of musical scores and books, his musical sketchbooks, engagement diaries and the notebooks in which he transcribed birdsong. There is also an increasing amount of information from his students, and significant internet resources such as <www.oliviermessiaen.net>, a new paradigm in online information exchange.

It is comparatively rare to have so much primary source material from a composer explaining his or her own work (although notable twentieth-century exceptions include Stravinsky, Boulez and Stockhausen). Consequently, people have either been satisfied with Messiaen's explication of his music, or they have been intimidated by his writing and paralysed into inaction. Unfortunately, it is not possible to avoid the composer's own descriptions, because they constitute in some way part of what we may refer to as the 'text' of the work – the programme notes for the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, for example, are inseparable from the music (indeed they appear in the score).²⁷ It is important to note, however, that Messiaen's comments do not always clarify his intentions and often require hermeneutical analysis. I have therefore drawn selectively from Messiaen's own comments, especially those made in conversation with Claude Samuel, a journalist who asked intelligent and perceptive questions and often elicited interesting responses from Messiaen. I have provided clarification where needed, but I have not been restricted by these comments and have offered a range of interpretations where possible.

Case Study: *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité*

Even without an additional sign system Messiaen's musical language is often extremely complicated, and given the extent of his output, it would be impossible for me to treat all his work in depth. I therefore chose the *Méditations* for my case study because the work represents a summation of Messiaen's compositional technique up to this point. The complete suite of nine movements lasts about 80 minutes and is one of the most technically challenging pieces Messiaen wrote for the organ. Each movement reflects on an attribute of the Trinity and, though untitled, is prefaced by musical and theological explanatory notes written by the composer.

The *Méditations* contain a sophisticated semiotic system that includes birdsong, modes of limited transposition, Hindu rhythms called *deçî-tâlas*, plainsong, quotations from Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* and text superscriptions, taken from various sources, written in the score. They reach a new height in Messiaen's idiomatic use of the timbral resources of the organ, and they incorporate

November 12, 1985 (Paris, 1988).

²⁷ Messiaen, *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (Paris, 1942).

the composer's innovative *langage communicable*.²⁸ This novel musical technique, which he explains in the preface to the score and in conversations with Claude Samuel and others, is comprised of three elements: a musical alphabet in which a rhythmicized pitch is assigned to each letter of the roman alphabet; a simple grammar using a Latin-based case system plus three verbs; and a series of leitmotifs. Messiaen also used this *langage* in two works composed after the *Méditations*: it occurs in two movements of the large orchestral piece *Des canyons aux étoiles...* ('From the Canyons to the Stars...'),²⁹ written between 1971 and 1974, and in three movements of his last organ work, the *Livre du Saint Sacrement* ('Book of the Blessed Sacrament'), composed in 1984.

To speak is by definition an action associated with the mouth. Although the verb 'to speak' is sometimes used to indicate communication in a manner other than the oral utterance of words (for example, in the phrase 'actions speak louder than words'), in the case of Messiaen's *langage* we are dealing with non-oral (yet still aural) verbal communication. Messiaen could have set the texts in the *Méditations*, *Des canyons...* and the *Livre du Saint Sacrement* for voices, or he could have indicated that they were the inspiration for the pieces by means of programme notes, as he had often done before. Instead, he chose to convey them in a special way, unspoken but yet communicated in a direct and explicit manner. The communicable language is worth studying in depth because of its intrinsic interest as a musical technique, its role as part of a larger sign system and because it has not been discussed as much as Messiaen's other techniques.

Messiaen himself gave the premiere of the *Méditations*, at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington, DC, on 20 March 1972. The first European performance took place in Düsseldorf on 10 June 1972, played by Almut Rößler, who also gave the French premiere, at Messiaen's own church of La Trinité in Paris, during the 1973 Festival du printemps. Many of Messiaen's organ works received their first performance at La Trinité, so it may seem surprising that Messiaen chose to premiere the work on one of the largest organs in the United States, especially since the score of the *Méditations* contains six pages of details concerning the specification and layout of that instrument. The Great Organ and the Chancel Organ of the National Shrine were built by the Möller Organ Company of Hagerstown, Maryland, in 1964. The Great Organ and its four-manual console are situated in the rear gallery; it has the largest exposed divisions of any organ in America and includes a set of horizontal 'Pontifical Trumpets'. Messiaen liked this instrument and made special note of the reception given to his choice of stops.

I arrived ten days ahead of time to study the organ's layout and to find my timbres and note them in the score. At the end of the concert [...] some people told me they had never heard those timbres and had been surprised by the previously unused possibilities of the instrument. It was simply the result of a lot of work.³⁰

28 Messiaen's own term, hereafter shortened to *langage* to clarify that it is just one element in the composer's semiotic system and to distinguish it from the English term 'language'.

29 Hereafter *Des canyons...*

30 Samuel, *Music and Color*, p. 24.

Although his composition sounded new and surprising to the American audience, use of the organ as a symphonic instrument was, even in 1972, still part of the French tradition. In an analysis of 21 works by Franck, Widor, Vierne, Dupré and Tournemire, Celia Jones concluded that the use of Cavaillé-Coll's symphonic organs was the unifying element in organ symphonies by these composers, rather than formal, thematic or harmonic elements.³¹ Messiaen's teacher Marcel Dupré was one of the most important advocates of the symphonic organ, and his *Symphonie-Passion* Op. 23 represents the epitome of the orchestral use of the instrument.³² Messiaen himself made significant advances in exploration of the timbral resources of the organ. The *Méditations* uses many new and unusual combinations of stops, which are closely linked with the symphonic organ in La Trinité. It is possible that the innovative registrations are largely the result of the increased flexibility of the Trinité organ following its enlargement and refurbishment during the early 1960s, but the connection with the La Trinité instrument goes beyond this. At the back of the score of the *Méditations* are an unprecedented six pages of notes about the piece's registration and the instrument's specification. The first three pages give detailed information about the choice of stops, beginning with a list of how the six general combination pistons should be set up. This is followed by systematic instructions for the choice of stops for the individual movements, including details of what has to be set up by hand and where the pistons are to be used. The fourth page has a diagrammatic scheme showing the disposition of stops on the left and right side of the keyboard, and page five has a plan of the console showing where the couplers and pistons are located in relation to the manuals and pedals. The final page has a list of 13 comments about the instrument, which range from the practical ('the instrument has electric action'), to the subjective ('the Quintaton 16 on the Choir possesses a wonderfully poetic timbre'). This degree of detail about the specification is not only unusual for Messiaen, it is uncommon for the organ repertoire in France or elsewhere.

The perennial problem with organ music is the question of the appropriate instrument on which to perform certain repertoires, and Messiaen as an organist was certainly aware of it. Although his registration indications for the *Méditations* and his other works are quite specific, he has condoned performances on instruments very different from that of La Trinité,³³ so what does the inclusion of these instructions and plans suggest about the *Méditations*? It could be that Messiaen was especially concerned about balance and blend because of the *langage*. It could be that the 'orchestration' for the whole piece is more important than in his previous works and that he wished performers to follow his instructions exactly. Or it could simply be that he wanted to inform people of the additions to the instrument in La Trinité. Whatever

31 See Celia Grasty Jones, 'The French Organ Symphony from Franck to Langlais', DMA diss., Eastman School of Music, 1979.

32 See Andrew Shenton, 'An Approach to Orchestration and Performance of Marcel Dupré's "Symphonie-Passion Op. 23"', *The Organ*, 76/299 (1997): 9–14.

33 See, for example, Rößler's comments concerning the instruments used for the European premiere of the *Méditations*; in Rößler, *Contributions*, pp. 145–69.

the reason, the extra information in the score does provide performers with a more exact pattern to follow than usual, and this gives less freedom for interpretation.

Messiaen was born in Avignon on 10 December 1908 and died, aged 83, in Paris on 28 April 1992, leaving a legacy of more than 70 published works including an opera, several large symphonic works, songs, chamber music and a distinguished contribution to the solo piano and organ repertoires. Because of the quantity and diversity of Messiaen's output, its musical complexity, singular language and overtly religious subject matter, it is hardly surprising that an examination of his compositional techniques requires an interdisciplinary approach utilizing key concepts from philosophy, aesthetics, linguistics, semiotics, cognition studies and hermeneutics, as well as a detailed knowledge of Catholic theology. Traditional analysis of whatever type, while valuable in explaining the technical and musical features of a work, is not holistic in its methodology; when applied to a Messiaen 'composition', therefore, essential features may well be ignored because of a failure to address the complexity of the extra-musical sign systems. Messiaen is not primarily a composer of absolute music, and only by adopting a holistic approach to his sign system can we come close to understanding the composer's true meaning and find an appropriate personal response to music whose underlying theology and spirituality may or may not be our own. This study is by no means the last word on the subject, but my intention is to begin to provide a cultural and linguistic anthropology of the complex ideas invested in Messiaen's music.