



Olivier Messiaen's System of Signs

Notes Towards Understanding His Music

Andrew Shenton, Boston University, USA



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Andrew Shenton's groundbreaking cross-disciplinary approach to Messiaen's music presents a systematic and detailed examination of the compositional techniques of one of the most significant musicians of the twentieth century as they relate to his desire to express profound truths about Catholicism.

It is widely accepted that music can have mystical and transformative powers, but because 'pure' music has no programme, Messiaen sought to refine his compositions to speak more clearly about the truths of the Catholic faith by developing a sophisticated semiotic system in which aspects of music become direct signs for words and concepts. Using interdisciplinary methodologies drawing on linguistics, cognition studies, theological studies and semiotics, Shenton traces the development of Messiaen's sign system using examples from many of Messiaen's works and concentrating in particular on the *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* for organ, a suite which contains the most sophisticated and developed use of a sign system and represents a profound exegesis of Messiaen's understanding of the Catholic triune God.

By working on issues of interpretation, Shenton endeavours to bridge the traditional gap between scholars and performers and to help people listen to Messiaen's music with spirit and understanding.

Contents

Introduction; Messiaen's theology; Communicating through music; Adding a communicable language; Linguistic analysis of the 'langage communicable'; Issues of cognition of Messiaen's 'langage' and signs; The semiotic system in context; Meaning and mentalese; Select discography; Glossary; Bibliography; Index.

About the Author

Andrew Shenton holds bachelor, masters and doctoral degrees from London University, Yale and Harvard respectively. A noted scholar and performer, Dr Shenton currently serves on the faculty of Boston University where he directs the Master of Sacred Music program and the Boston University Messiaen Project (BUMP).

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