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by David Kettle

WHY STUDY MESSIAEN?

Olivier Messiaen was quite simply one of the most influential composers of the 20th century. As a teacher, he taught many of the figures who became giants in the post-war avant-garde – among them Boulez, Stockhausen and Xenakis. And as a composer, he sits on a line from Debussy to Boulez and beyond, creating music of such sensuality and religious devotion that we're still coming to terms with it today.

Perhaps that's why his music inspires fervid devotion in some – and downright incredulity in others. In any case, encountering the works of Messiaen as part of a school course can have a transformative effect on students' understanding of music's power, can capture their imagination, and can provide entirely new ways of looking at music in terms of symbolism, colour, time and spirituality.

Messiaen is included in three of the current KS5 specifications (detailed below), and his music can provide countless starting points for composing activities, a few ideas for which are also included in this resource. We'll look at four key works from across Messiaen's career – *Le banquet céleste*, the *Quartet for the End of Time*, the *Turangalila Symphony* and *Des canyons aux étoiles...* – and examine key elements of Messiaen's style that are apparent in each of them.

AQA

Messiaen is one of four named composers specified for study in AQA's **AoS7: Art music since 1910**. The board also details specific music elements relevant to Messiaen's music, which are covered throughout this resource:

- Melody: modes of limited transposition
- Harmony: chord extensions, eg added 6th
- Structure: cyclical structures
- Sonority (Timbre): organ stops
- Sonority (Timbre): unusual instruments, eg ondes Martenot
- Texture: layering
- Tempo, metre and rhythm: additive rhythms
- Tempo, metre and rhythm: palindromic rhythms

EDEXCEL

Messiaen is one of the composers mentioned in the wider listening examples for Edexcel's **AoS6: New Directions**, specifically movements 8 and 10 from his 1974 *Des canyons aux étoiles...*, which are covered in detail in the final section of this resource.

OCR

Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* is one of the specific works listed as suggested repertoire for OCR's **AoS6: Innovations in Music 1900 to the present day** (covered in two previous *Music Teacher* resources, December 2016 and January 2017). We'll look in detail at Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* in the second section of this resource.

BACKGROUND

Messiaen's life and times

Born in Avignon, France, in 1908, Messiaen entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of 11, and went on to study there with Paul Dukas, Charles-Marie Widor and Marcel Dupré, among others. In 1936 he formed the

group La Jeune France with fellow composers André Jolivet, Daniel-Lesur and Yves Baudrier, to turn away from the frivolity of Parisian music at the time. He was captured and imprisoned during World War Two, and upon his release he taught at the Conservatoire as professor of harmony from 1941, and professor of composition from 1966, until his retirement in 1978. He was married twice, first to violinist Claire Delbos in 1932, who lost her memory following an operation and spent the rest of her life in mental institutions, and secondly to his former pupil and pianist Yvonne Loriod, in 1961, who was a renowned interpreter of his music.

Messiaen's Catholic faith

Messiaen's profound Catholic beliefs shaped virtually all his music, either directly or indirectly. In music such as *La nativité du Seigneur*, an organ work from 1935, or the massive cantata *La Transfiguration de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ* of 1969, and many others, he explored theological subjects or brought religion into the concert hall. He saw the work of God in all of creation, from human love (which he celebrated in his *Turangalila Symphony*, discussed below, among other works) to the songs of birds and the wonders of nature (also examined below).

Messiaen's musical style

There are a handful of clearly identifiable, and often quite unusual, elements that go into making up Messiaen's distinctive musical style, among them harmony based on colour, birdsong, a radical approach to rhythm and time, and an equally radical conception of musical form and texture. Interestingly, however, even Messiaen's stylistic development defies convention. Although his music undeniably changed over time, it was more a case of adding new elements to an already existing style: elements of harmony and rhythm from his earliest pieces, to take two examples, can still be seen in works he composed at the end of his long career. Which means that stylistic elements we identify in his earliest pieces continue to be relevant to his music even in his final works.

LE BANQUET CÉLESTE

Background

We're going to start at the very beginning, with Messiaen's first published work. *Le banquet céleste* ('The Heavenly Feast') is a short piece for solo organ from 1928, but probably begun around 1926, on a deeply spiritual theme: the Holy Eucharist or Communion, in which the church congregation re-enacts the ceremony of the Last Supper, eating the bread and drinking the wine as Christ himself instructed – which, according to Catholic belief, transform literally into the flesh and blood of Christ.

Messiaen wrote *Le banquet céleste* while still a student in the class of Paul Dukas at the Paris Conservatoire, but even at this very early stage, it shows elements of the unmistakable musical style he would continue to use for the rest of his career – it's as if his music has sprung, already fully formed, from his creative mind.

The piece revolves around two themes: a slow, chordal theme representing the love that God shows us in sacrificing his only Son for us; and a 'water-drop' theme (which begins a little way into the piece) representing the blood of Christ dripping from his body, shed to relieve us of our sins.

You can hear a recording of *Le banquet céleste*, complete with synchronised score, [here](#).

Messiaen and the organ

Unusually for 20th-century composers, organ music was central to Messiaen's output throughout his long career