

OLIVIER MESSIAEN (born Dec. 10, 1908, Avignon, France. death April 27, 1992, Clichy, Paris), **Olivier Messiaen** was the son of Pierre Messiaen, a scholar of English literature, and of the poet Cecile Sauvage. Soon after his birth the family moved to Ambert (the birthplace of Chabrier) where his brother, Alain was born in 1913. Around the time of the outbreak of World War 1, Cecile Sauvage took her two sons to live with her brother in Grenoble where **Olivier Messiaen** spent his early childhood, began composing at the age of seven, and taught himself to play the piano. On his return from the war, Pierre Messiaen took the family to Nantes and in 1919 they all moved to **Paris** where **Olivier** entered the **Conservatoire of Music**.

From very early on it was clear that **Messiaen** would be a composer who would stand alone in the history of music. Coming not from any particular 'school' or style but forming and creating his own totally individual musical voice. He achieved this by creating his own '**modes of limited transposition**', taking **rhythmic ideas from India (*deci tala*)**, ancient Greece and the orient and most importantly adapting the songs of birds from around the world. He was a man of many interests including painting, literature, and the orient where he took in not only the musical culture but theatre, literature and even the cuisine of foreign countries! The single most important driving force in his musical creations was his devout Catholic faith.

Early influences on **Messiaen** were **Debussy** and **Gluck**. In particular Debussys' "**Pelleas et Mellasande**" and "**Prelude á l'apres-Midi d'un Faune**" the score of which was given to him by his first harmony teacher Jean Gallon. It was the timeless, floating quality that **Messiaen** admired in this music and it was while a small boy in Grenoble, **Messiaen** was 'reading' the score of **Glucks' Orfeo** (the Air in F major) when he discovered he was actually 'hearing' these wonderful melodies in his head. This had such an emotional impact on him that from then on as a child he would ask not for toys as Christmas presents but musical scores! On a non musical level **Messiaen** has said the one real influence on his life, even before he was born, was his mother the poetess **Cecile Sauvage** whose book of verse "**L'ame en Bourgeon**" (The Soul in Bud) was for him. She spoke when expecting him, of a boy who would be an artist - she said 'the anguish of arts' mysteries will be dispersed and here is the Orion who sings in my being - with his blue birds and his golden butterflies - I suffer from an unknown distant music'. **Messiaen** believed this shaped his entire destiny.

When he was **eleven years old** he visited the **Saint Chapelle in Paris** and remembers being 'overwhelmed by the colours of the stained glass windows', understanding then that music is coloured explaining that 'you don't see all the colours and pictures at once - you're dazzled. When you hear chords they are complexes of sounds'. **Messiaen**, it turned out, is one of those people who had the ability to transcribe sounds into colours in their inner imagination and goes to great length describing these colours in his scores where appropriate.

He entered the **Paris Conservatoire at the age of eleven** and stayed until his early twenties learning his 'craft' from eminent teachers including Georges

Falkenberg, piano, Jean Gallon, harmony, Noël Gallon, counterpoint and fugue, professor Baggers, timpani & percussion, **Paul Dukas** composition & orchestration, Maurice Emmanuel, history of music and **Marcel Dupré**, organ and improvisation, of which **Messiaen** excelled, becoming organist of the church "**La Sainte Trinité**" in **Paris** when **he was 22** and remained there until his death. It's sometimes easy to forget that **Messiaens'** contribution to the organ repertoire is probably the greatest since **Bach**. The term 'craft' is purposeful here as Messiaen developed into a true craftsman in every respect with immensely detailed scores including string bowing, woodwind articulations, fingerings for keyboards and even sticking for percussion."

Since the age of eighteen **Messiaen** had been collecting the songs of thousands of birds throughout France and the world. Early works showed an inkling of birdsong influence but after the war in the late 40s and 50s he began notating their songs in great detail and this became a vital musical source for him.

He would begin by selecting a bird, say a warbler where he would notate hundreds of different warblers and then creates a composite of the best elements of all the warblers notated thus ending up with an 'ideal' warbler. The song is usually combined with the birds habitat, surroundings and time of day. 'It's the process of transformation' that **Messiaen** enjoys and relates this to the paintings of **Monet** who is not interested in putting say a water lily directly on the water of a picture but representing one variation of the light on the water lilies. His researches were so intense that he became an authoritative ornithologist able to recognize almost any bird that he heard. Several works have been devoted entirely to birdsong namely "**Catalogue d'Oiseaux**", "**Réveil des Oiseaux**", "**Oiseaux Exotique**", "**Le Merle Noir**", "**Petites Esquisses d'Oiseaux**" and almost all other works include substantial references to the songs of birds.

At the age of 19 the young **Messiaen** witnessed the death from consumption of his beloved mother. He moved to his paternal aunts in the countryside of the Aube region of France where, in **Yvonne Loriod's** words, 'the aunts took their nephew in to revive his taste for life and restore his health with good country air whilst he continued to compose'.

Undoubtedly it has been **Messiaens'** devout Christian faith and Catholicism that has driven his compositional output through the years and there was no greater test of his faith than in **June 1940** when he was captured by the Nazis and interned in prisoner of war camp Stalag 8A, Görlitz, Poland. He recalls that at the time he and everybody in the camp were freezing, starving and miserable. The starvation was such that it heightened his 'coloured' dreams and this coupled with the experience of seeing the '*aurora borealis*', coloured waves of clouds, led him to compose what is probably his most performed work: "**Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps**" (**Quartet for the End of Time**). He befriended a German officer who smuggled him manuscript paper, pencil and eraser which enabled him to retreat to the priests block after morning duties and compose. The instrumentation was governed by the musician friends that were with Messiaen

in the camp. These were; violinist Jean Le Boulaire, cellist Etienne Pasquier, clarinetist Henri Akoka and with himself on a rather dilapidated piano premiered the work on **January 15th 1941** in front of fellow prisoners who although maybe never understood the new harmonies etc. it took them away from the routine mundane life in the camp. He says that his music 'is not "nice" - it is certain. I am convinced that joy exists, convinced that the invisible exists more than the visible, joy is beyond sorrow, beauty is beyond horror'.

He returned from captivity in **March 1941** and became a teacher and lecturer at the **Paris Conservatoire** giving his first class on 7th May the same year. He held classes in **analysis, theory, aesthetics and rhythm** but it wasn't until **1966** that he was officially appointed **Professor of Composition** (although he had in effect been teaching composition for years). Many famous 'names' passed through these classes including **Iannis Xenakis, Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen**. **At the age of 18, Igor Wakhevitch** was admitted in **Olivier Messiaen's** famous composition and analysis class in the **National Superior Paris Conservatory of Music and Dance** and was awarded of the First Prize in **1967**. **Igor Wakhevitch** also travelled in Europe with the great master, genius of music, playing some of his piano music (« **Catalogue of Birds Songs** », « **Le Merle Noir** », **Beethoven** « **Waldstein** » **sonata** and **Pierre Boulez second sonata** as well) to illustrate **Olivier Messiaen's** master classes in Germany - Munich, Karlsruhe - and in England, in the cities of London, Edimburgh and Glasgow.

This period produced a great outpouring of music including the "**Trois Petites Liturgies de la Presence Divine**", the song cycle "**Harawi**", "**Chant des Déportés**" for choir and orchestra, "**Turangalila Symphonie**", the mammoth piano cycles "**Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus**" and "**Visions de l'Amen**" for two pianos. These last two works and many more to follow were dedicated to a young and highly gifted pupil - **Yvonne Loriod** - who turned up in **Messiaen's** first class held at the Conservatoire in **1941**. She says of that first encounter that 'all the students waited eagerly for this new teacher to arrive and finally he appeared with music case and badly swollen fingers, a result of his stay in the prisoner of war camp. He proceeded to the piano and produced the full score of **Debussys' "Prelude à l'après-Midi d'un Faune"** and began to play all the parts. The whole class was captivated and stunned and everyone immediately fell in love with him'. **Messiaen** never imparted his own compositional techniques in his classes but rather steered students along their own paths.

In **1975, Messiaen** embarked on his most ambitious project of his life, the opera "**Saint Francois d'Assise**", a work that would occupy him for the following eight years. **Saint Francois** represents his life work combining all his compositional techniques gathered over fifty or so years. Scored for 22 woodwinds. 16 brass, 68 strings, 3 ondes Martenot and 5 keyboard percussions playing xylophone, xylorimba, marimba, glockenspiel & vibraphone. There are **6 percussionists** playing tubular bells, claves, wind machine, snare drum, triangles, temple blocks, wood blocks, cymbals of various kinds, whip, maracas, reco-reco, glass chimes, shell chimes, wood chimes, tambourine, tôle (thunder sheet), gongs, tam tam, crotales tom-toms and geophone (sand machine) together with 7 main solo

characters and a choir of 150 it is certainly the largest forces **Olivier Messiaen** considered.

OLIVIER MESSIAEN received many honours and prizes globally including:

1959 Nomination as an Officier of the « Légion d'Honneur ».

1967 Member of the Institut de France

1969 Calouste Gulbenkian Prize

1971 Erasmus Award

1975 Ernest von Siemens Award

**1975 Associate Member of the Royal Academy of Science,
Litterature and Art of Belgium**

1975 Gold Medal of the Royal Philharmonic Society

1978 The White Cliffs in Utah were renamed Mount Messiaen

**1980 Presentation of the Croix de Commander of the Belgian
Order of the Crown**

1983 Wolf Foundation of the Arts Prize (Jerusalem)

1985 Inamori Foundation Prize (Kyoto)

**1987 He was promoted to the highest rank, Grand-Croix of the « Légion
d'Honneur ».**

1989 Primio Internazionale Paolo VI 1988