



Messiaen's Birds

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Source: *Music & Letters*, Vol. 52, No. 2, (Apr., 1971), pp. 113-122

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/732949>

Accessed: 22/07/2008 05:48

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# Music and Letters

APRIL 1971

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VOLUME LII

No. 2

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BUSINESS ADDRESS: 44 Conduit Street, London, W.1.

EDITORIAL ADDRESS: 32 Holywell, Oxford.

ADVERTISING: C. Walshe, 15 Enmore Gardens, London, S.W.14.

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## MESSIAEN'S BIRDS

BY TREVOR HOLD

"They sing by themselves, they sing together,  
In colours of orange and blue and red,  
But you will never see them fly  
For Messiaen's birds live in Messiaen's head".

ANON.

ONE cannot discuss the music of Olivier Messiaen without mentioning bird-song. *Le style oiseau* has been increasingly evident in his music since the 'Quatuor pour la fin du temps' (1941) and is almost exclusively the basis of the series of works written in the 1950's: 'Réveil des oiseaux' (1953), 'Oiseaux exotiques' (1956) and 'Catalogues d'oiseaux' (1956-8).<sup>1</sup> What is more, the composer himself has drawn our attention to his use of bird-song in various ways, stressing in particular their 'authenticity'. As few musicians are expert in this field—certainly few are as knowledgeable about ornithology as the composer himself—Messiaen's comments have often been taken at their face value, misunderstood and misinterpreted. This has led to certain unsupported generalizations which have been quoted, re-quoted and paraphrased. Already a legendary accumulation is beginning to cover up the facts. These misunderstandings have often been the result of taking literally what was stated metaphorically. We are all now accustomed to the literary paraphernalia with which Messiaen prefaces his music. They are part of his art, a necessary pendant to the music. But we do not need to be aware of his analogies between colours and sounds or appreciate the 'catholicry' of his titles and commentaries to appreciate the music. These things can sometimes be helpful in 'placing' a work, but

<sup>1</sup> Henceforward referred to as 'Réveil', 'Exotiques' and 'Catalogues' respectively.

often, in my own experience, they are quite irrelevant. The music says what it has to say in its own terms. In a way these trappings are more important to the composer than they are to us, in the same way that serial permutations and manipulations are to other composers. Similarly the 'ornithography' of such works as 'Réveil' and 'Catalogues' has little bearing on the end product: this is Messiaen's pigeon, not ours.

Before discussing the question of Messiaen's use of bird-song in these works it would be helpful to consider, very briefly, the relation of bird-song to music, as it has bearings on subsequent comments. The subject is a complex one, involving biological as well as æsthetic considerations, but at the risk of putting things too simply it may be said that bird-song contains many elements akin to human music:<sup>2</sup>

'Pitched' and 'unpitched' sounds; the repetition of melodic phrases; the repetition of rhythmic units; the use of *crescendo* and *diminuendo*, *accelerando* and *ritardando*; and a balance between sound and silence (what Charles Hartshorne has described as the "monotony threshold").<sup>3</sup>

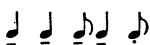
In addition there are intimations of a bird's ability to 'compose', i.e. make a 'deliberate' choice between acceptance and rejection of one idea or another.<sup>4</sup>

However bird-song differs from human music in many other respects:

(1) In general it is more highly pitched. The mean is around 4,000 cps., equivalent to the highest reaches of the piano, and many bird-songs employ notes beyond this.<sup>5</sup>

(2) Birds have a quicker auditory reaction than human beings, and equally they tend to sing faster.<sup>6</sup> This, coupled with the higher *tessitura*, means that we do not necessarily hear what a bird actually sings. Consequently anyone who tries to note down, for example, the song of a nightingale without recourse to the means of slowing it down, is not likely to notate the 'authentic' sound.

(3) Bird-song, though sometimes giving the impression of metrical regularity, e.g. the cough of the woodpigeon which corresponds to a syncopated 4/4 bar:



is rarely metronomically precise. There is no natural prompting to make such regularity necessary. Birds sing individually in answer to each other

<sup>2</sup> Those wishing to pursue the subject are referred to Edward Armstrong's 'A Study of Bird-Song' (London, 1963), the chapters by Armstrong and Joan Hall-Craggs in 'Bird Vocalizations', ed. by R. A. Hinde (London, 1969) and the article 'The Relation of Bird Song to Music' by Charles Hartshorne, *Ibis*, 100 (1958), pp. 421-45.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Monotony Threshold in Singing Birds', *Auk*, 73 (1956), pp. 176-92.

<sup>4</sup> See Joan Hall-Craggs's remarkable findings in 'The Development of Song in the Blackbird', *Ibis*, 104 (1961), pp. 277-300.

<sup>5</sup> Albert R. Brand, 'Vibration Frequencies of Passerine Bird Song', *Auk*, 55 (1938), p. 264.

<sup>6</sup> See R. J. Pumphrey, 'Sensory Organs: hearing' in 'Biology and Comparative Physiology of Birds', ed. A. J. Marshall (New York, 1961).

and, except for a few birds that 'duet' (e.g. certain species of shrike),<sup>7</sup> never in ensemble. The dawn chorus can only be compared poetically with a human choir or orchestra because it is the haphazard result of an accumulation of individual singers rather than a homogeneous ensemble.

(4) Bird-song does not conform to our human scales, Western or Eastern, nor do bird-notes remain on the same pitch-level from one instance to another: the notes "almost invariably slur either upward or downward, and often in both directions",<sup>8</sup>

(5) There is a continual changing of timbre in a bird's song. The nightingale, for instance, is a little orchestra of its own in this respect. This, coupled with the irregularities of pitch and rhythm, present almost insoluble problems when it comes to making accurate transcriptions into our orthochronic staff-notation.<sup>9</sup>

(6) When it comes to musical representation, no orchestral instrument can 'authentically' imitate the song of a bird in every respect. The nearest this could be achieved, with the comparatively limited sound resources of a symphony orchestra, would be to write for an ensemble consisting almost entirely of flutes and piccolos.

With these points borne in mind, one becomes very sceptical of the frequent descriptions of Messiaen going to "les forêts" and taking down by ear the songs of birds and subsequently using them "authentically" in his music. It would not matter if only Messiaen himself had made these statements—as I have said, they should not be taken too literally—but credulous commentators and critics have repeated them as true facts.<sup>10</sup> Here is a sample of such comments, culled from various writers:

The three latest works of Messiaen ['Réveil', 'Exotiques' and 'Catalogues'] are again of a rather special nature, and are based entirely on bird-song taken down from nature and noted with the most meticulous rhythmic and melodic exactitude.<sup>11</sup>

Primary sources of Messiaenic inspiration are bird calls—he is an expert musical ornithologist and his bird songs are authentic.<sup>12</sup>

In all weathers and in all regions of France he has been seen at daybreak, notebook and pencil in hand . . . Messiaen has now completed what is virtually a collection of every kind of music. This he has accomplished without the mechanical aid of tape recorders. He has issued his collection in terms of region—again, like collections of folk-songs—and it is now possible to note which birds inhabit this region and not that.<sup>13</sup>

As a result of his concentration and research, Messiaen has composed his own version of the dawn chorus, not actually as he heard one,

<sup>7</sup> There is a study of these remarkable birds in the article by W. H. Thorpe and the late Myles North, 'Origin and Significance of the Power of Vocal Imitation', *Nature*, 208 (1965), pp. 219–22.

<sup>8</sup> Brand, *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> These problems are discussed in my article 'The Notation of Bird-Song', *Ibis*, April 1970.

<sup>10</sup> One of the most perceptive of Messiaen's commentators, David Drew, has avoided this. His comments on Messiaen's *style oiseau* are both enlightened and sensible. See 'Messiaen—a Provisional Study', *The Score*, 10, 13 & 14 (1954–5).

<sup>11</sup> 'Trends and Tendencies in Contemporary French Music', by Claude Rostand, in 'Twentieth Century Music—a Symposium', ed. Rollo Myers (rev. ed. 1968).

<sup>12</sup> 'Twentieth Century Music: an Introduction', by Eric Salzman (1967).

<sup>13</sup> 'Messiaen's Early Birds', by Norman Demuth, *Musical Times*, 101 (1960), pp. 627–9.

but in a style of what might be called 'impressionistic verism', every theme being authentic . . . Messiaen uses them [bird-songs] exclusively. It could almost be described as a transcription for orchestra of a natural phenomenon.<sup>14</sup>

"Do we not, in truth, ask the impossible of music when we expect it to express feelings, to translate dramatic situations, even to imitate nature?" Stravinsky has remarked.<sup>15</sup> In fairness to Messiaen it must be stated that he himself has said that "it is futile to copy nature slavishly".<sup>16</sup> But he builds up, in all his bird-pieces, this mystique of authenticity. As we shall see, what he says and what he does do not necessarily tally. Austin, in the brief comments on the composer in 'Music in the 20th Century', has said, in reference to Messiaen's formal structures, that they "seem mechanically connected with titles, texts and supplementary program notes, in which love, angels, and birds make a disconcerting 'jumble of rainbows'".<sup>17</sup> This dichotomy between programme and musical result is apparent in the bird-pieces. Messiaen's nightingale gives the impression of being not a living, flesh-and-blood bird, but a mechanical toy, like the Emperor's nightingale in Stravinsky's opera. Did he intend this? The preface to 'Réveil' would suggest not.

'Réveil des oiseaux'<sup>18</sup> has a three-fold dedication: to the French ornithologist, Jacques Delamain, to Yvonne Loriod, and "to the blackbirds, thrushes, nightingales, robins, chiffchaffs, blackcaps and all the birds of our woods". The instrumentation makes allowance for the preponderantly high *tessitura* of bird-song with three flutes and a piccolo, E♭ clarinet as well as celesta, xylophone and glockenspiel. At the same time the lower regions are not neglected: three bassoons, bass clarinet and six double basses. But the chief instrumentalist is the solo pianist, who plays a *concertante* role in the work. If the composer intended to be true to his avian models he could have chosen no instrument less appropriate than the piano, which cannot crescendo through a sustained note, or play intervals smaller than a semitone, or make a true *glissando* between notes—all of which birds do. Yet to Messiaen the piano is apparently ideal: witness its important role in both 'Réveil' and 'Exotiques' and the fact that it is called upon to produce the complete collection of bird-songs in 'Catalogues'. Some of the piano cadenzas in 'Réveil' are indeed beautiful from a purely musical point of view, but in only a few passages am I conscious of the original inspiration. Yet the composer's first statement in his prefatory note is:

There is nothing but bird-songs in this work. All were heard in the

<sup>14</sup> Demuth, *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> 'Poetics', p. 79.

<sup>16</sup> He has even admitted that he makes considerable alterations to his bird-songs: "I transpose them, for these songs are often too shrill for our instruments. I slow them down because their rhythm is too fast". See 'Messiaen: Poet of Nature', by Tanneguy de Quénétain, *Music and Musicians*, xi/9 (May 1963).

<sup>17</sup> Dent (1966).

<sup>18</sup> Durand (1955).

forests and are perfectly authentic.<sup>19</sup>

He then goes on to give advice to the performers:

The instruments are required to reproduce, as accurately as possible, the mode of attack and timbre of the birds. The name of each bird is noted, at its first appearance, in the score below the instrument which represents it.

To the solo pianist he gives this advice:

As the pianist is required, in his cadenzas, to imitate the mode of singing of a large number of birds, I recommend several early morning walks in the woods, in spring, to get to know the original models.

To the non-ornithologist this could appear daunting, just as the check-list which follows would appear most impressive. Set out like a table in a scientific text-book, this lists the names of the 38 birds heard in the work in five different languages. In the later 'Catalogues' Messiaen goes even further by adding the scientific Latin name to his list.

The form of the work "follows the animated march of the hours of the night, then the hours of the day, from midnight to noon . . ." This wide arc-shape is well-captured in formal terms, the opening nightingale's song gradually giving way to the songs of other birds which rise to a climactic tutti with the full dawn chorus, then fade into the relative silence of midday, "broken only by two chaffinches on two violins, the drumming of the pied woodpecker on the wood-block. At last, there remains only the cuckoo, very distant, quietly on the chinese blocks." The work falls into ten sections:

PI /  $\widehat{E}_1$  / PII /  $\widehat{E}_2$  / PIII /  $\widehat{E}_3$  / PIV /  $\widehat{E}_4$  / PV /  $\widehat{Coda}$

P = piano cadenza                      E = orchestral episode (including solo piano)

$\widehat{\quad}$  = 'grand silence'

Because of the importance of the solo piano the work has the appearance of a concerto, but unlike the conventional concerto there is no question of conflict between soloist and tutti. The pianist has bird-songs and so has the orchestra and they frequently interchange birds. The piano writing in 'Réveil' is simple and rather limited in its textures. Most of the time it is a single melodic strand doubled in octaves between the hands. Less frequently there is two-part counterpointing between right- and left-hand as in the duet between two nightingales which forms the mid-section of the opening cadenza. In only two sections of the work (at 31 and in the final cadenza) does the pianist flower into chords. These breaks

<sup>19</sup> When Messiaen states that only bird-songs are used, he seems to have overlooked one curious little phrase, at the bar before 16 and repeated again exactly at the bar before 39. It is played by piccolo and cor anglais three octaves apart—an unusual texture in this particular work. It sounds rather out of place, as though it had wandered out of 'The Rite of Spring'.

in the texture are exceptional and much welcomed. Certainly there is less variety of piano-texture here and in 'Exotiques' than in the later, solo-piano 'Catalogues'.

The piano's pre-eminence is shown in the fact that it imitates a large number of birds. In the long, final cadenza it is called upon to represent 16 different species in succession. The orchestral instruments as a rule are limited to one or two birds each. In some cases they have only part of a bird: for instance, the wood-block is permanently associated with the pied woodpecker, the Chinese blocks with the cuckoo, the E $\flat$  clarinet with Cetti's warbler. The celesta, however, is sometimes a blackbird (at 5), sometimes a robin (at 19) and sometimes a whitethroat (at 29). The double bass on the other hand has a very limited role: part (the hind-legs as it were) of a hoopoe. The only brass instruments in the score—two horns and two trumpets—are linked with other instruments to create the "dominating calls" of the song-thrush and golden oriole. Violins and violas act as "halos" (*la résonance*) round the main notes of the brass. This careful musical calculation ensures that these birds are heard at all times, even at the height of the dawn chorus (27–28), when a full ensemble of 20 different songs is heard at once.

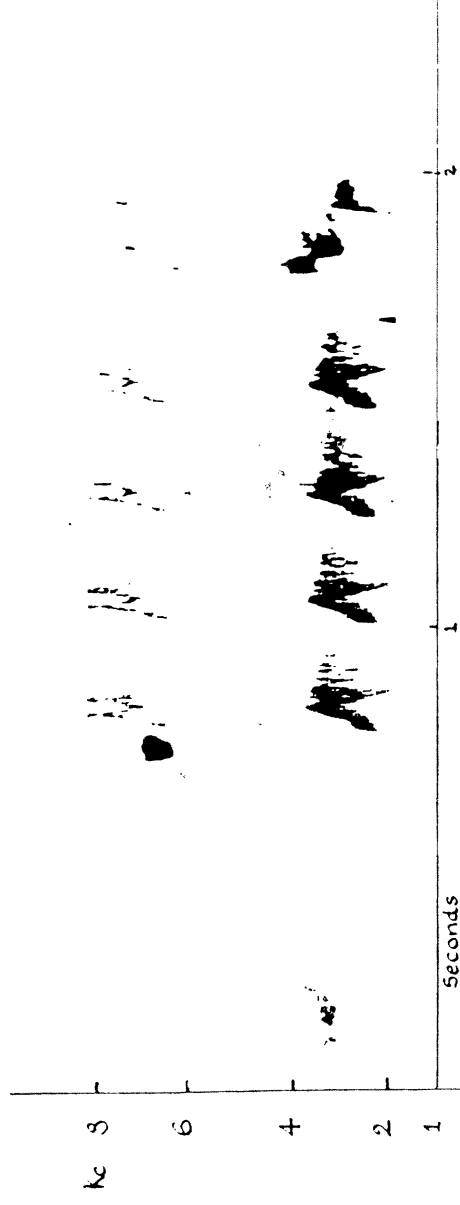
From a musical point of view this giant tutti is a remarkable moment, made even more pointed by its abrupt termination in silence (bar before 28). But it is nothing like a dawn chorus. Nor does the piano sound like a nightingale, or the E $\flat$  clarinet like Cetti's warbler, or the glockenspiel like a whitethroat. They sound like piano, E $\flat$  clarinet and glockenspiel. The overall impression created by 'Réveil' is not of a dawn chorus but of a cageful of mechanical birds. And why not? The music is enjoyable as music. Then why all the claims to "authenticity", the exhortations to walk in the woods to study the avian models, the scientific check-list, etc.?

If we examine a sample of the bird-songs in 'Réveil' it will be seen that they conform more closely to certain aspects of Messiaen's musical techniques than they do to the models. In the following examples I have included underneath the passage from 'Réveil' a corresponding phrase from the song of an actual bird noted down in staff-notation. The latter was done by slowing-down the song X2 and X4 and, in the case of the nightingale, by comparison with a sound-spectrograph. My comments on the efficiency of staff-notation (see p. 115) must be borne in mind. Many species of bird have a wide range of phrases in their repertory and each bird has its own vocabulary. Therefore, without having records of the exact birds that Messiaen used, I obviously cannot give exact examples. However, the 'jizz' of each bird's song is identifiably the same and I have attempted to find phrases as closely corresponding to Messiaen's as possible. In the case of the nightingale I have included the sound-spectrographs (facing pp. 118 and 119) for comparison.



(1)





(ii)

(a) Nightingale (*Rossignol*) from 'Réveil': opening cadenza:

Un peu vif (♩ = 116)  
Solo de Rossignol

(b) Staff-notations of the two song-phrases on the spectrographs (from gramophone record HMV 7FX II):

(i) ♩ = 120  
['puwee-puwee']  
*p cresc.* *f*

(ii) ♩ = 120  
'flute-like' *mf* *mp* *f* *mf* 'flute-like'

*Commentary*

(1) Though he manages to capture the characteristic 'puwee-puwee' of the nightingale, it will be seen that Messiaen's bird sings much too slowly. (This slowness of utterance is also applicable to his wren and hoopoe.)

(2) Messiaen's nightingale sings almost continuously with only very short breaks. In actual fact the nightingale's 'song' consists of a number of short song-phrases, averaging three seconds duration, separated from each other by rests of a greater length.

(3) From a metrical point of view Messiaen's song is far too square. There is not a single triplet or quintuplet to break the regularity of the semiquaver unit, nor is there any use of *accelerando* or *ritardando*.

(4) It will be noticed that Messiaen's bird restricts itself to what is uncommonly like the 2nd mode of limited transposition—a phenomenon of which the nightingale is hardly likely to be aware.

(5) The piano is a most inappropriate choice of instrument, in that its timbre in no way resembles that of the bird in question. It has not the variety of timbre nor is it capable, as I have already pointed out, of producing a 'true' *glissando*. This prevents it from imitating the slurring between notes which is so characteristic.

(a) Hoopoe (*Huppe*) from 'Réveil' (two bars after 21):

Un peu vif (♩ = 116)

Huppe

3 bassoons and double-bass (pizz.)

*pp*

(b) Staff-notation of call of the hoopoe (transcribed from Witherby's 'Sound Guide to British Birds', record 14):

♩ = 132  
[flute like]

*mp*

### Commentary

(1) Messiaen's is quite unrecognizable, both in *tessitura* and timbre, as a hoopoe. At times (see 26 onwards) it sounds as if it is going to break out into a violent dance.

(2) From the point of view of pitch the *tessitura* is too low. The hoopoe's call is a delicate repetition of a note at *c.* 587 cps., of flute-like quality, tone and pitch very similar to the final 'oo' of the cuckoo.

(a) Nightjar (*Engoulevent*) from 'Réveil' (at 5):

5 Un peu vif (♩ = 116)

Solo violins II  
violas  
cellos

suspended cymbal  
tam-tam

*ppp*

(b) Staff-notation of song (reel) of nightjar (transcribed from Victor Lewis's 'A Tapestry of British Bird Song', CLP 1723):

♩ = c. 100

[xylophone-like]

[drum-like]

*mp*

### Commentary

(1) Messiaen's is an extraordinary bird in every way. Though he realizes that there is more than one pitch to the nightjar's reel, his low, opaque, trilling chord is nothing like the original. It would be more appropriate as a representation of distant factory machinery.

(2) The nightjar's reel, though continuous, is not limited to one note. There are two distinct pitches which alternate, usually a minor third

apart. Also it will be seen that the reel is not a semitonal trill but a rapid repetition of the pitch concerned.

(3) The timbre of a nightjar's reel is closer to a xylophone—though a soft-toned one—than the composite tones of strings/cymbal/tam-tam.

(a) Wren (*Troglodyte*) from 'Réveil' (at 35):

35 Un peu vif (♩ = 116)  
Troglodyte

xylophone

*pp* sons réels *p*

(sans couper) *pp*

(b) Staff-notation of the song of the wren (transcribed from my own tape):

♩ = c. 150  
[clear, sharp whistle]

*f* *pp*

over

slightly slower

[a tempo]

### Commentary

(1) Messiaen's transcript is too simple, much too slow and far too quiet. The wren, in spite of its size, possesses one of the most penetrating voices of all birds.

(2) The authentic wren has a far more sophisticated song than Messiaen would suggest, both from a melodic and rhythmic point of view. It is furthermore extremely rapid in delivery: the extract I have transcribed lasts little more than six seconds.

Of course these comparisons are, or should be, irrelevant. It is no task of the artist to copy nature slavishly. The unaided human ear is unable to appreciate the niceties of bird-song because of its rapidity. Nor can orchestral instruments perform exact transcripts of bird-sounds even if someone were silly enough to ask them to do so. Messiaen often does manage to capture the 'jizz' of a bird's song in a remarkable way, e.g. the cadential flourish of the chaffinch (first violins before 6) and the song-thrush's habit of singing "each song twice over" (bars before 5). But certain other birds—

e.g. the robin (the second piano cadenza at 16)—are quite unrecognizable. Yet in either case the verism is irrelevant. It is the music, the human music, that counts, and from a purely musical point of view some passages—particularly the piano cadenzas—are often little more than a tedious spinning of notes.

It would appear, then, that the claims of authenticity of both composer and commentators have no basis, and all the scientific mumbo-jumbo is quite unnecessary. What then is the importance of bird-song to Messiaen? I suspect that it is a means of freeing himself from self-imposed restrictions. He has said:

It is in a spirit of no confidence in myself, or I mean in the human race, that I have taken bird-songs as model. If you want symbols, let us go on to say that the bird is the symbol of freedom. We walk, he flies. We make war, he sings. Among birds most fights are settled by tournaments of song. Finally, despite my deep admiration for the folklore of the world, I doubt that one can find in any human music, however inspired, melodies and rhythms that have the sovereign freedom of bird-song.<sup>20</sup>

In his bird-song pieces he has found a freedom from the rigidity of previous works such as 'Quatre Études rythmiques' (1948) and 'Cantéyodjayâ' (1948). In 'Oiseaux exotiques' and more so in the later 'Chronochromie' (1960) he has successfully fused rhythmic and modal devices with the *style oiseau*. Another attraction of bird-song is its arabesque qualities. As David Drew has said, "the style oiseau . . . satisfies Messiaen's desire for the ornamental and at the same time allows him to avoid any harmonic implications, if he so wishes".<sup>21</sup> I myself feel that the ornamental aspect is more to the point than the freedom. For despite his verbal praise of the liberating qualities of bird-song, he does not take full advantage of its implications. In none of his bird-song pieces is there the spontaneity of the singing bird. His use of common, strict metres, strictness of tempo and precision of ensemble have the effect of destroying rather than evoking this spontaneity. He has succeeded in caging his birds rather than letting them sing freely. The salient features which he has borrowed, the 'authentic' elements, amount to these: patterns of short *ostinato* phrases, the superimposition of contrasting strata of sound—both of which were evident in earlier works—and, in certain cases, the basic shape of a bird's song. His bird-songs, as one would expect, are "imaginative transmutation" rather than authentic transcription and as such contain many beautiful and imaginative moments. I personally would not have missed the final 'Coucou au loin' on the Chinese blocks for anything.

<sup>20</sup> In Antoine Goléa, 'Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen' (Paris, 1961), p. 19, quoted by Austin, *op. cit.*, p. 395.

<sup>21</sup> *Op. cit.* (*The Score*, No. 10, p. 44).