
APPROACHING A PERFORMANCE PRACTICE OF TEMPO, RUBATO, AND SCORE INTERPRETATION IN MESSIAEN'S WARTIME PIANO SCORES

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Abstract: Olivier Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod publically encouraged an exact reading of the text of Messiaen's piano music. A consideration of the performance practice evident in their recordings, and also the advice given to their students, indicates that in terms of tempo choice, use of rubato, and the solving of technical problems, the intentions of the composer may not always be best served by such a literal reading of the score.

This paper is the written version of a Lecture Recital given at the APPC in Toowoomba on July 6th, 2013. Performances of Movements II, IV, V, and I of *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jesus* were included in the presentation.

There are several factors regarding the music of Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) that make him particularly interesting in terms of piano pedagogy. That he was a very capable pianist himself, that his second wife and muse Yvonne Loriod could reliably perform whatever piano writing he produced, and also that his music is so highly individualistic in terms of style, it really needs to be assessed independently of the music of his contemporaries.

While performance practice is often associated with repertoire from more distant times, it is also quite necessary to consider such aspects when studying Messiaen's music. As a study of the technical and stylistic aspects of music, performance practice is applicable to his piano music due to its often extreme technical demands and also the complexity of its unique musical language.

In his major piano scores of the 1940s, the three that emerged as his wartime pieces could easily be said to represent a triumph in both the emergence of his personal style, and the defiance of the environment in which he found himself. *Quatuor pour le fin du temps* (1941) remains a touchstone of twentieth century music, and has been discussed in the work of scholars including Rebecca Rischin (2003) and Anthony Pople (1998). The *Visions de l'Amen* (1943) which is somewhat under-researched in terms of its context and genesis, and the epic *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jesus*, together with the *Quatuor*, form a unique statement in terms of piano writing. These works also formed a perhaps daunting triumvirate for the composer himself, as he had a sense later in his career that anything he was attempting had "to be a masterpiece" (Williams, G 2013, pers. comm., 18 May).

Messiaen lived almost into the internet age, and the emerging research into the performance practice of his music may require a diversity of approaches. There exists an amount of published interview material, his own extensive analysis of his compositional techniques, and generations of his students continue to advocate and inform the

performance of his music. Although these sources can be accessed, approaching performance practice can be problematic given the inconsistencies that are sometimes present between Messiaen's (as well as Yvonne Loriod's) public comments on the playing of his music, their recorded performances, and the advice they gave during teaching. For example, both Loriod and Messiaen maintained that rubato was an undesirable factor in the performance of his music (Seifert, 1989), and yet this is clearly present in both commercial and live recordings of their own playing. In a letter to Dr Charles Seifert written in 1987, Loriod describes that there must be an exactness of rhythm and no rubato (Seifert, 1989).

A further example of inconsistency is present in the chosen tempos of recordings and performances by Messiaen and Loriod. Listening to a recording of them playing *Visions de l'Amen* in 1949, and comparing this to the standard commercial recording they made in 1962 reveals significant changes in tempo choice. While Messiaen had a habit of marking in the tempos after the premiere performances of his music (Hill, 1995), there is still a level of uncertainty, to the point where Loriod suggested to Peter Hill after Messiaen's death that new editions would be worthwhile and contain the metronome markings he intended (Hill, 1995).

In this presentation, I am going to briefly examine a few examples of performance practice in Messiaen's piano music, across an appropriate range of topics. Hopefully these will help to inform those interested in playing his music, and provide some future directions for ongoing research.

Tempo Selection

Tempo choice is a fine art when playing any style of music; perhaps more so with Messiaen as performers can easily have a sense of being pressured to strictly adhere to his printed indications. In these areas we could employ a more relaxed view. Andrew Shenton's article *Composer as performer, recording as text: notes towards a 'manner of realization' for Messiaen's music* (2007) introduces a number of valuable questions. How are we to consider different recordings which either included Messiaen as performer, or were supervised by him? Is there a "spectrum of authenticity" (Shenton, 2007) rather than a consistent standard? On what scale might we grade the authenticity of recordings in terms of composer involvement as opposed to recordings by musicians of his time and place?

In Messiaen's case these issues can be further informed by the presence of the brilliant and commanding Yvonne Loriod.

Starting with the setting of tempo, using the *Amen de la creation* from the *Visions de l'Amen* as an example, we can consider three specific recordings. A recording by Messiaen and Loriod from 1949 that has been remastered from 78rpm discs, their 1962 LP recording, which remains the one in the marketplace on CD and digital download, and the 1969 recording by the Labèque sisters that included Messiaen as Artistic Director. A further landmark recording to which Messiaen initially appears to have a connection was made by Benjamin Frith and Peter Hill, however Hill didn't specifically study the *Visions de l'Amen* with Messiaen, and the composer wasn't involved in the recording process (Hill, P 2013, pers. comm., 22 March).

Despite the comparative modernity of these recordings, we are confronted with an issue of period instruments in the first recording. Loriod mentions in interview that it was not until the late 1950s that the now standard Hamburg Steinway pianos were reliably available in France (Hill, 1995), and in listening to the 1949 recording it seems likely that the pianos were French, most likely Erard or Pleyel instruments (Williams, G 2013, pers. comm., 18 May). This could effect sound quality, volume, perhaps reliability of tuning to the listener of today, and might have a discreet effect on the technique required to play them.

The opening tempo in *Amen de la creation* becomes slower through each of these recordings. In the 1949 recording it is surprisingly fast, although this could even possibly be linked to the time restrictions of a 78rpm disc. In the 1962 recording the tempo commences at the marked 50 beats per minute (bpm), but through the gradual crescendo and intensification of the music, it ends up peaking somewhere near 90 bpm. In the 1969 Labèque sisters' recording, the same phenomenon is apparent. There is an opening tempo appropriate to the score, but a touch slower than the Messiaen and Loriod recording, and a steady acceleration to a less dramatic 78 bpm.

This could lead us to approach tempo as a guide, and to accept that in this movement at least, we can allow a gradual increase in tempo as an expressive feature of the music, especially as Messiaen has been involved in the 1962 and 1969 recordings that provide this indication. Certainly, there could be a misunderstanding of Messiaen's intentions if the score is taken literally (Ngim, 1997).

Rubato

Of significant value to this research is the possibility of a longitudinal study of the solo recordings left as a legacy by Yvonne Loriod. During the 1940s she recorded two movements of the *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jesus* for 78rpm discs: *Regard de l'esprit de joie*, and *La baiser de l'enfant-Jesus*. This was followed by a complete recording of the

work in 1956 as an LP set for the Vega company, a further complete recording in 1975 for Erato which remains the standard commercial recording, and finally a live LP release of the complete work in 1987. This relatively unknown live recording was made for Radio Bremen in 1985 in the Bremen Kunsthalle auditorium extension by Duttman, which has since been demolished in favour of more gallery space.

Renate Wolter-Seevers, Tonmeister with Radio Bremen, worked on this project and has provided detailed information of the recording, confirming that the recording is live, with only the editing of silences and breaks to make the recording more suitable for broadcast (Wolter-Seevers, R 2012, pers. comm., 14 November). As a live performance, made reasonably late in Loriod's career, this would have to be in consideration as a definitive recording.

Within Loriod's three complete recordings of *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jesus*, the opening movement *Regard du Père*, becomes slower in tempo. Despite this apparent slowing over time, the tempo is never as slow as the 60 bpm marked on the score. Of note in the live recording of 1985 is a high level of rubato in this movement (Williams, G 2013, pers. comm., 18 May), which significantly effects the rhythm as well as the overall track timing. A simple chart of the track timings and opening tempo of this movement reveals the issue:

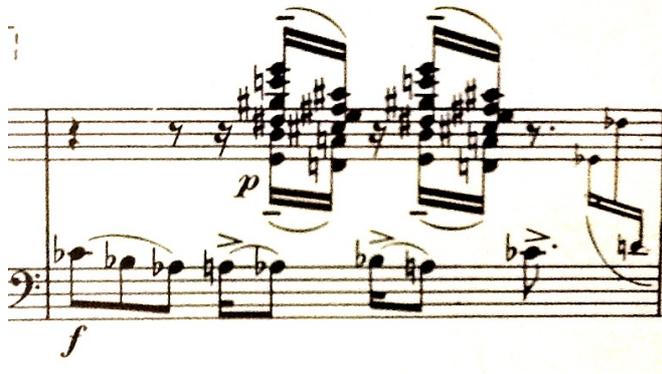
Opening Tempo	Recording	Track Timing
MM=100	Vega, 1956	4'49"
MM=84	Erato, 1975	5'27"
MM=66	Schwann 1987	5'27"

The timings of the latter two recordings are ultimately the same, even though the opening tempos are different. This indicates the scope of flexibility in the later recording, representing a significant departure from the non-rubato orthodoxy in the playing of Messiaen's piano music. We can follow the example of Loriod herself in this departure.

Changes to the Score

In the second movement of *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jesus*, *Regard de l'étoile*, there is an example of how valuable informed listening to recordings can be, in terms of appropriately performing the music. While Loriod's performance of this short movement changes over the decades in both articulation and tempo, there is a constant notational departure from the printed music. In bar 29, the score shows to play the first four bass

clef notes on their own, then the fifth note coincides with a six note chord that is shared between the hands.



Example 1: Messiaen, *Regard de l'étoile*. b. 29.

In her 1956, 1975, and 1985 recordings Loriod plays the left hand note (a flat) and then the chord. Even though a similar figure follows immediately in the same bar, this is played as printed in the score. This is significant as it indicates that it is unlikely Loriod has changed this notation due to the hand span required to play the notes simultaneously. Perhaps we can conclude that Messiaen intended it to be played this way, adding a semiquaver pulse to the bar. Notably, in the acclaimed recordings of John Ogdon (1971) and Peter Serkin (1976), *Regard de l'étoile* is played as written. This could indicate a school of interpretation from within the Messiaen circle, which necessarily differs from the work of artists working directly from the score.

Problem Solving

A further example of a consideration of performance practice occurs in the sixth movement of *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus: Par Lui tout a été fait*. This includes a technically unrealistic moment: in bar 29 (including the anacrusis in the count) while the notes are distributed across three staves, there is a d sharp notated to be played with a c above it and an e flat and b flat below, on the last semiquaver pulse of the bar.



Example 2: Messiaen, *Par Lui tout a été fait*. b. 29/30.

This would involve reaching either a diminished 14th with the right hand, or a compound augmented 10th in the left hand with the inclusion of the e flat. This is an unusual oversight for a composer with such a highly advanced level of piano technique.

The structural feature of the opening of this movement is the extended palindrome which covers roughly the first third of the piece. With a brief passage in the centre, there is a reversal through the opening material, regarded as an "exact retrograde" (Williams, 1972). Looking through the piece to consider how these same notes and intervals interact in the reverse section, we find that they do not occur together, or even in the same order, and these extreme intervals aren't called for. While the example above was solved for performance and for her students by Loriod simply shifting the d sharp to the previous semiquaver pulse (Williams, G 2013, pers. comm., 18 May), the abstract nature of the notation is interesting.

In consideration, the palindrome of *Par Lui tout a été fait* is not a palindrome of note occurrence or attack, which would be suitable for the sound profile of the piano. It is a palindrome of note duration, which would be more appropriate for an instrument with more sustain in the character of its sound; the organ being the most obvious. It is possible that this unusual notation was a result of adherence to an abstract compositional structure. The reverse of the palindrome sees the sounds occurring only within a few semiquavers of accuracy from a listener's point of view.

Conclusion

It appears that there is good reason for us to consider the performance practice of Messiaen's piano music. Strict adherence to the score, avoidance of rubato, and a wholly literal consideration of technical issues could at times leave us at odds with both Messiaen's real intentions, and the benchmark performances of Yvonne Loriod.

In terms of the issues discussed, there are indications that tempo could be considered as a guide rather than a directive, that opportunities for expression that effect timing can still be stylistically appropriate, and that where technical problems arise practical and even notational solutions can be sought.

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Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jesus 1956, LP, Vega, Paris, France. Performed by Yvonne Loriod.

Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jesus 1971, LP, Decca, London, United Kingdom. Performed by John Ogdon.

Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jesus 1975, LP, Erato, Paris, France. Performed by Yvonne Loriod.

Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jesus 1976, LP, RCA, New York, U.S.A. Performed by Peter Serkin.

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Visions de l'Amen 1962, LP, Vega, Paris, France. Performed by Yvonne Loriod and Olivier Messiaen.

Visions de l'Amen 1969, LP, Erato, Paris, France. Performed by Katia and Marielle Labèque.

About the Author:

Colin Noble is a pianist, teacher, and researcher. His recent recordings include Bach's *Goldberg Variations* and the *Images, Estampe, and Arabesques* of Debussy (both available on itunes). He has been performing Messiaen's *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jesus* since 1996, and has played the *Visions de l'Amen* with Peter Hill, and as a staple of the duo repertoire he shares with his brother Alistair Noble. Colin is currently a PhD student at the Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University, where his supervisors are Dr Stephen Emmerson and Prof. Peter Roennfeldt.