

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) was a French composer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was well-known for his very own musical language, who wanted to express “the existence of the truths of the Catholic faith”<sup>1</sup>. In an interview with Claude Samuel, Messiaen stated that his faith was the first and the most important idea that he wanted to champion by writing music.<sup>2</sup> Messiaen also used Greek and Hindu rhythms, bird songs, and coloured modes to compose at the same time.<sup>3</sup> He had also been an active music critic during the years before World War II, publishing his opinions and concert reviews on a regular basis.<sup>4</sup> When World War II began, he joined military service and became one of the captives in the 1940 German invasion.<sup>5</sup> He was taken into prison and released on May 1941, continuing his career in music as a lecturer in the Paris Conservatoire while writing music regularly at the same time.<sup>6</sup> In 1949, Messiaen completed a composition that excited the next generation of musicians: *Mode de valeurs et d'intensites*, which

---

<sup>1</sup> Claude Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Colours*, translated by E. Thomas Glasow (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1986/94), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> This was summarized in a translation of Messiaen’s “Treatise on Rhythm, Color, and Ornithology” in Olivier Messiaen, *Traite De Rythme, De Couleur, et d’Ornithologie*, translated by Melody Baggech (Norman, Oklahoma:UMI Company, 1999), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Broad, *Olivier Messiaen: Journalism 1935-1939* (Burlington, USA: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012),1.

<sup>5</sup> Leslie A. Sprout, “Messiaen, Jolivet, and the Soldier-Composers of Wartime France,” *The Musical Quarterly* 87, no. 2 (2004): 260-261, 268.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel, 176.

became one of the composition that represented the early phase of total serialism, followed by Stockhausen's *Kreuzspiel* (1951) and Boulez's first book of *Structures* (1951-1952).<sup>7</sup>

As described by Olivier Messiaen himself, *Mode de valeurs et d'intensites* (modes of duration and intensity) was a composition where "pitches of the same name passed through different regions: changing octave, attack, intensity, and duration"<sup>8</sup>. It was part of *Quatre Etudes de Rythme* (Four Studies of Rhythm) which consisted of four different pieces, which were all made in different times and places; *Mode de valeurs et d'intensites* was the first to be completed in Darmstadt 1949, the second being *Neumes rythmiques* in Tanglewood 1950 and both *Ile de Feu I* and *II* composed last in Paris 1951.<sup>9</sup> Messiaen gathered all four as *Quatre Etudes de Rythme* and organized them in this order: *Ile de Feu I*, *Mode de valeurs et d'intensites*, *Neumes rythmiques*, and *Ile de Feu II*.<sup>10</sup> He recorded the whole set in 1951 and the recording was played by Antoine Golea, a fellow musician who happened to be giving a lecture in a Darmstadt summer course on 1951.<sup>11</sup> The recording, especially *Mode de valeurs*, was well-received by the participants:

---

<sup>7</sup> Richard Toop, 'Messiaen/ Goeyvaerts, Fano/ Stockhausen, Boulez', *Perspectives of New Music*, 13 No. 1 (1974), 141.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel, 80.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Francis McNulty, "Olivier Messiaen: The Reluctant Avant-gardist A Historical, Contextual and Analytical Study of the Quatre études de rythme and the Livre d'orgue" Ph. D. diss., Durham University (2014): 140-141.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

“It was at that stage that Antoine Golea appeared at Marienhohe with a newly released record: Messiaen’s *Quatre études de rythme*, played by the composer himself Karlheinz and myself listened to the record tucked away in some cubby-hole. Golea was with us. For both Karlheinz and myself it was our first acquaintance with Messiaen’s most recent work. I had left Paris twelve months before, and Messiaen had never spoken about this work in his lectures. What struck us particularly was the ‘punctual’ style of *Mode de valeurs et d’intensités*. There was an unmistakable similarity between that work and my *Sonata*. For Karlheinz this was yet another reason to go off to Messiaen. (Goeyvaerts 194, pp. 45-46)”<sup>12</sup>

“Last Sunday he played us the new work (most recent) for organ (*Messe de la Pentecôte*). It is extraordinarily good in parts, but again it has some of those stupid passages which he should have got over by now. (Birdsongs, purely programmatic details, added sixths, etc.) It is quite peculiar, considering he wrote the fourth study ‘mode d’intensités et valeurs’ [sic] in Darmstadt in 1949 and after that the *A ‘Ile de feu I and II’* (1950)!! In the organ piece the registration (*valeurs*) is integrated into the mode. The fourth study remains the best! Incidentally Boulez, who invited me round this week, thinks so too!!” (KS/KG, 3.3.52)<sup>13</sup>

In spite of the popularity given towards this composition, we could see from the quotation that Messiaen was taken aback; retreating towards his usual elements (birdsongs, purely programmatic details, added sixths, etc.) that “he should have got over by now”.<sup>14</sup> Messiaen was also annoyed, because of the “absolutely excessive importance given to *Mode de valeurs* because it supposedly gave rise to the serial explosion in the area of attacks, durations, intensities, timbres—in short, of all its musical parameters.”<sup>15</sup> and that it’s “musically next to nothing”<sup>16</sup>. Last but not least, he wrote negatively towards current music during his time as a writer, calling it names like “doleful, dull, and lazy”:

---

<sup>12</sup> KS/KG: seventy-nine letters from Karlheinz Stockhausen to Karel Goeyvaerts (3 March 1952) in Karel Goeyvaerts, “Paris-Darmstadt 1947-1956. Excerpt from the Autobiographical Portrait” *Revue Belge de Musicologie* 48 (1994): 35-54, quoted in Mark Delaere and Richard Evans, “Olivier Messiaen's Analysis Seminar and the Development of Post-War Serial Music,” *Music Analysis* 21, no. 1 (2002): 47.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel, 47.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

“Doleful, dull music, a great deal of fake classicism and dissonanced Scarlatti, a general lack of rhythm and a total absence of melodic emotion: these are the characteristics of the majority of works heard in the most recent Parisian concerts.”<sup>17</sup>

“Lazy: those artisans of sub-Fauré and sub-Ravel. Lazy: the fake Couperin maniacs, writers of rigadoons and pavans. Lazy: the odious contrapuntalists of the “return of Bach” who offer us, without remorse, dry and doleful lines by a semblance of atonality.”<sup>18</sup>

With all these collected evidences, and the fact that he himself stated clearly that he was not a fan of Schoenberg (a popular serial composer)<sup>19</sup>, it made me wondered why he had published something that could give way to the development of serialism. *Mode de valeurs et d'intensites* is not only worth examining because it paved the way for total serialism, but also because it goes against Messiaen's own statements. That is why, this research intended to find out if this particular composition was an act of Messiaen negotiating his own musical language, the public misunderstanding Messiaen's compositional language and interpreting it as serialism, or both. This research will be conducted both by doing literature review and musical analysis of *Mode de valeurs et d'intensites*.

---

<sup>17</sup> Messiaen, “Parisian Chronicle [March 1937]” in *La Syrinxe*, quoted in Broad, 89.

<sup>18</sup> Messiaen, “Against Laziness,” in *La page musicale* (17 March 1939): 1, quoted in Broad, 129-130.

<sup>19</sup> Samuel, 192.

## 1.2 Research Questions

The research question of this study is:

- What did Messiaen want to express in his composition, *Mode de valeurs et d'intensites*?

## 1.3 Research Objectives

This research aims to discover what Messiaen wanted to express in *Mode de valeurs et d'intensites* with the hope to inform the general public on whether this was an act of negotiation on behalf of Messiaen's own musical language.

## 1.4 Scope of Limitation

The limitations of this research are as the following:

1. Music sheet and recording of *Mode de valeurs et d'intensites*, Durand edition (1949), and recording from Youtube performed by Yvonne Loriod (<https://youtu.be/aSISzURLwcc>). This recording is chosen due to Loriod's role both as Messiaen's second wife and as a pianist with the "ability to perform precisely the most sophisticated rhythms...extraordinary attack...and extreme wealth of dynamic level grades."<sup>20</sup>
2. Literature will heavily prioritized books and excerpts of Messiaen's own writings/ recorded interviews, such as: *Technique de mon*

---

<sup>20</sup> Tatiana Tsaregradskaya, "Sound Attacks in the Works of Olivier Messiaen: Total Serialism Revisited", *Lietuvos muzikologija*, No. 4 (2013), 155.

*langage musical* (1944), *Traite de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie Vol. I* (1949-1992), *Oliver Messiaen: Music and Color*, *Conversations with Claude Samuel* by Claude Samuel, and a compilation of Messiaen's journalism period in *Olivier Messiaen: Journalism 1935-1939* by Stephen Broad. All four sources are available in English translation.

