Sonic Environmentalism:

God, Nature, and Politics in Olivier Messiaen's *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*

A Thesis Presented for the

Master of Music

Degree

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For my cousin

Carolyn Kalil

Your love and support made my

stay in Tennessee possible.

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Abstract

Scholars often speak of Olivier Messiaen's (1908-1992) use of birdsong as inspiration in his compositions. The avian vocalizations he dictated and catalogued while traveling throughout France and the world make appearances throughout his oeuvre. Other well documented influences upon his music include landscape and religion. In order to better comprehend the ecological, religious, and political underpinnings of Olivier Messiaen's musical output, one must deduce how he drew upon nature and religion as inspiration. I propose that such an understanding can be reached through an in-depth examination of Messiaen's *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .* (1971-1974).

Through analysis of Messiaen's composition and cultural context, this study sheds light on the fundamental relationship between *Des canyons*, natural soundscape, and American environmentalism. It thus provides a culturally relevant, interpretive framework for understanding issues of soundscape, landscape, and place within his work. Messiaen's use of animal and geological inspiration demonstrates not only his interest in adapting the music of nature for artistic purposes, but also his advocacy for a sustainable relationship between humanity and the non-human world. In so doing, Messiaen utilized his subjective experiences in wild locations as a symbol for this peaceful human-nature relationship. *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .* contains a coded environmentalist political message informed by Messiaen's own experiences of nature and a spiritual imperative to glorify God's creation.

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Chapter 1: Sonic Environmentalism

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) is well-known for his use of birdsong as inspiration in his compositions. He travelled throughout France and the world collecting and cataloguing these avian vocalizations through much of his life, and the melodies make appearances throughout his oeuvre. Other well documented influences upon his music include landscape and religion. In order to better comprehend the cultural significance of Olivier Messiaen's musical output, and in particular its political underpinnings, one must consider how he drew upon nature and religion as inspiration. I propose that such an understanding can be reached through an in-depth examination of Messiaen's *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .* (1971-1974). This study sheds light on these fundamental relationships within Messiaen's music and thus provides a culturally relevant, interpretive framework for understanding issues of soundscape, landscape, and place within his work. Messiaen's use of animal and geological inspiration demonstrates not only his interest in adapting the music of nature for artistic purposes, but also his advocacy for a sustainable relationship between humanity and the non-human world. In so doing, Messiaen utilized his subjective experiences in wild locations as a symbol for this peaceful human-nature relationship. *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .* contains a coded environmentalist message informed by Messiaen's own experiences of nature and a spiritual imperative to glorify God's creation.

Many scholars have focused on the significance of Messiaen's musical language, leading to a highly developed theory of his music. Yet, there remains little study of the cultural implications of Messiaen's works, especially in regard to his use of non-human

sound. Notable exceptions include Siglind Bruhn's[1] and Sander van Maas's[2] investigations of how religion is depicted in his work and Robert Fallon's[3] studies on his bird mimesis and nuclear politics. Fallon points out, "until recently, most scholarship supported the idea that Messiaen was disengaged from the world," a position he refutes.[4] Via an in-depth study of Messiaen's biography and writings, I develop a view of his particular perspective. I then frame *Des canyons* as a soundscape-inspired composition, that is to say a composition inspired by the aural input from a particular location, in this case a landscape and its dynamic sounding dimensions.[5] By conducting an analysis of the work informed by Messiaen's subjective viewpoint on the sonic environment, I illustrate key elements of sound and nature as mediating between the human and divine paradigms in *Des canyons*. Further I illuminate sociopolitical contexts as integral to his compositional process.

To do so, I demonstrate how Messiaen drew upon natural soundscapes in conjunction with visual stimuli in order to create artistic interpretations of his personal and spiritual experiences in nature. Furthermore, by building upon Robert Fallon's argument that birdsong functions as a symbol of peace in Messiaen's music,[6] I show that these

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[1] Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation: Musical Symbols of Faith in the Two Great Piano Cycles of the 1940s* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2007); Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death: Musico-Poetic Signification in the Tristan Trilogy and Three Related Song Cycles* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2008); Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity: Echoes of Medieval Theology in the Oratorio, Organ Meditations, and Opera* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2008).

[2] Sander van Maas, *The Reinvention of Religious Music: Olivier Messiaen's Breakthrough Toward the Beyond* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).

[3] Robert Fallon, "Messiaen's Mimesis: The Language and Culture of the Bird Styles" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2005), ProQuest (AAT 3210577); Robert Fallon, "Birds, Beasts, and Bombs in Messiaen's Cold War Mass," *The Journal of Musicology* 26, no. 2 (2009): 175-204.

[4] Fallon, "Birds, Beasts, and Bombs," 175-76.

[5] R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994), 274.

[6] Fallon, "Birds, Beasts, and Bombs," 177.

soundscape-inspired works effectively promote a peaceful relationship between nature and humanity. In combination, these two factors make Messiaen a practitioner of sonic environmentalism, which I define as incorporating an environmentalist political message into a musical work. In the case of Messiaen, this practice presents itself at a surface level—through the incorporation of natural or naturally inspired sounds in the music—and on a deeper level through his incorporation of religious themes.

Terminology

My argument relies on some terminology that requires definition due to its often vague use in everyday speech. First, the term "nature" presents a particular challenge. Common usage varies from personality traits ("it's in your nature") to the non-human world. Unless otherwise indicated, I use this term to refer to the parts of the world not constructed by humanity. This does not preclude humanity itself as an agent in nature; rather, my concept of the term excludes parts of the world that humanity has designed and built, hereafter, known as the "built environment." Since Messiaen's music is often charged with religious connotations, I sometimes use the term "creation" to describe the divinely created world.

I use the similar term, "environment," to denote the surroundings of a subject, regardless of whether or not these surroundings qualify as natural.[7] In this study, "geography" refers to the object of study in human geography: the cultural links between people, space, and place. In the case of *Des canyons* this notion of cultural attachment to place comes to the fore with the naming of Mount Messiaen in Utah. Quite different from geography, the term

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[7] Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, trans. David Rothenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 7.

"geology" refers to the objective physical attributes of a particular landscape—that is to say, the measurable, finite properties of a landscape.

Before delving into an analysis of Messiaen's music that addresses notions of soundscape, several terms used in such an analysis must be defined. Four concepts established by R. Murray Schafer, founder of soundscape studies, are of particular importance: soundscape, sound signal, keynote sound, and archetypal sound. Schafer defines soundscape as "the sonic environment. Technically, any portion of the sonic environment regarded as a field for study. The term may refer to actual environments, or to abstract constructions such as musical compositions and tape montages, particularly when considered as an environment."[8] In my usage, the term appears in one of two contexts: the original sonic environment from which Messiaen drew his inspiration, and the resulting sonic environment that he imagined and created within his compositions. In the latter case, the composition evokes the original soundscape from a single human perspective—it does not duplicate or replace the original soundscape, but rather reinterprets it within Messiaen's human musical idiom. This firmly puts the listener in the position to determine whether or not a composition constitutes a soundscape.

Schafer defines sound signal as "any sound to which the attention is particularly directed. In soundscape studies, sound signals contrast with keynote sounds, in much the same way as figure and ground are contrasted in visual perception."[9] In my analysis of *Des canyons*, sound signals are primarily linked to the most prominent sounds—often birdsong used melodically—within a section of music. The term may also reference the direct object

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[8] Schafer, *Soundscape*, 274.

[9] Ibid., 275.

of Messiaen's study during his birding walks or other nature experiences. The terms "birding walks" and "birding hikes" refer to a nature outing during which one actively seeks out birdwatching or "bird-hearing" opportunities. These are similar to the "listening walks" described by R. Murray Schafer, but contain a specific ornithological purpose.[10]

Keynote sounds, as Schafer relates are, "those [sounds] which are heard by a particular society continuously or frequently enough to form a background against which other sounds are perceived. . . . Often keynote sounds are not consciously perceived, but they act as conditioning agents in the perception of other sound signals."[11] Keynote sounds correspond to sounds that are not immediately prominent—often representing the context of a sound signal within a section of music. The term may also refer to the contextual sounds surrounding the direct object of Messiaen's study during his birding walks. Though Schafer does not provide a definition per se, archetypal sounds refer to sounds that, through repeated use, become linked to a particular semantic meaning.[12] Such sounds gain meaning through centuries of use and become embedded in the cultural psyche. I speak primarily to one archetypal sound, that of birdsong, as it presents itself within Messiaen's music. Any given archetypal sound can be either a keynote sound *or* a sound signal, depending on the focus put upon it by the listener. Thus, the listener's subjectivity again plays a significant role in the evocation of a particular place.

With notions of both place and space implicated in *Des canyons*, the need for a clear definition of the relationship between these terms arises. "Space" refers to the perceived openness a subject experiences when exposed to an environment that allows a great freedom

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[10] Ibid., 212.

[11] Ibid., 272.

[12] Ibid., 45.

of movement. One experiences space where one can freely move. As Yi-Fu Tuan related, space constitutes an abstract amalgam of ideas that are culturally defined.[13] "Acoustic space,"[14] Brandon LaBelle argues, stems from the ability of sound to create the experience of space, regardless of "visual or material delineations of spatial arrangements."[15] Acoustic space, then, occurs when a listener perceives openness in a particular aural experience—music for example—regardless of physical surroundings.

"Place," by contrast, proves less abstract in its cognitive construction. Tuan described place as "whatever stable object catches our attention."[16] By pausing to admire a particular location or object, the observer endows that space with meaning, creating place. Despite a short definition that privileges the visual, Tuan considered literary (non-visual) art able to contribute to the creation of place. He wrote, "a function of literary art is to give visibility to intimate experiences, including those of place. . . . Literary art draws attention to areas of experience that we may otherwise fail to notice."[17] I expand Tuan's notion of art's role in the creation of place to include music, referring to the specifically musical instances of place as "sonic place." In the case of *Des canyons*, sonic place arises through the use of keynote sounds, sound signals, and a variety of other gestures that connect the music to a particular soundscape. The addition of religious symbolism results in deeper spiritual meaning. Messiaen employed these techniques together to create musical place.

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[13] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 34.

[14] Or, alternatively, "sonic space."

[15] Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (New York: Continuum, 2010), xxi-xxii.

[16] Tuan, *Space and Place*, 161.

[17] Ibid., 162.

Historical and Musical Background

The connection between Messiaen and nature traces back to his childhood—his mother, a poet, wrote a nature themed collection for Messiaen while he was in the womb and read those poems to him during his childhood.[18] Similarly, his first memories of dictating birdsong go back to the summers he spent on his aunt's farm in Aube during his teenage years.[19] The prominence of nature in his life from such an early age suggests not only its personal importance, but also its musical dimensions. During a 1984 speech, Messiaen confirmed his early musical interest while reminiscing about his time in Grenoble during World War One:

> I have never forgotten Grenoble with its marvellous mountain landscape, and every year, during the three months of the summer, I came to one of the loveliest places in the region [Petichet], simply to compose music. . . . It was in Grenoble that I realized I was a musician. I was seven-and-a-half and had just been bought, from Deshairs [Grenoble's largest music shop], Gluck's *Orphée*, and with my present under my arm, I went into the park.[20]

His religiosity also began in childhood and continued throughout his life.[21] Aside from his numerous references to God and Catholicism in his writings and musical works, his service as *organiste titulaire* of La Trinité Church in Paris from October 1931 to January 1992

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[18] Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 10-11.

[19] Ibid., 8.

[20] Quoted in ibid., 12.

[21] Ibid., 199-202.

(just four months before his death), attests to his lifelong devotion.[22] It is clear that both nature and religion figured largely in his experience of the world and music in particular.

Like his religiosity, Messiaen's fascination with birdsong makes frequent appearances in his output. In a 1961 interview with Bernard Gavoty, a French organist and writer on music, Messiaen spoke of ornithology:

> It is an instinctive passion. Birdsong is also my refuge. In dark hours, when my uselessness is brutally revealed to me . . . I go into the forest, into fields, into mountains, by the sea, among *birds* . . . It is there that music dwells for me; free, anonymous music, improvised for pleasure.[23]

Works as early as *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps* (1941) make use of birdsong and beginning with *Le merle noir* in 1951, his transcriptions of avian sounds became the primary melodic material for his music.[24] The birdsong works following 1951 indicate the high value Messiaen placed on nature. *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (1958) demonstrates this by providing a sonic parallel to *Portraits d'oiseaux*, a field guide to French regional birds written by Jacques Delemain, ornithologist and friend to Messiaen.[25] *Catalogue* gives individual sonic portraits of the species portrayed, including information on not only the birds and their behaviors, but also the birds' habitats, cohabitant species, and the time of day and year that one would most likely see or hear them.[26]

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[22] Ibid., 37 and 379.

[23] Olivier Messiaen and Bernard Gavoty, "Who Are You, Olivier Messiaen?" *Tempo*, New Series, no. 58 (1961): 35. My emphasis.

[24] Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 199-202.

[25] Rachel Mundy, "Nature's Music: Birds, Beasts, and Evolutionary Listening in the Twentieth Century" (PhD diss., New York University, 2010), ProQuest (AAT 3427957), 252.

[26] Ibid., 252.

Des canyons also links birds to particular landscapes, but not in the zoologically accurate manner employed in *Catalogue d'oiseaux*. The work contains an astonishing total of ninety-eight references to a total of eighty-six birds from around the world (though the majority are North American).[27] Because Messiaen views birds as able to bridge the gap between God and humanity, he also invests their music with spiritual meaning. For Messiaen, birds are not simply a part of the natural world, but a central musical figure in that world—they are God's musicians.[28] In this way, one can understand birds as either messianic or angelic figures, not only traversing the boundary between heaven and earth, but also carrying a message of peace and sustainability through their music.

Des canyons, scored for solo piano, solo horn, xylorimba, glockenspiel, a full wind section, and a small string section, consists of twelve movements in three parts running about about 100 minutes in total (see figure 1.1, p. 10).[29] The work, which focuses primarily on three Utah landscapes—Cedar Breaks, Bryce Canyon, and Zion Park—and their corresponding soundscapes, exemplifies Messiaen's practice of sonic environmentalism. The piece thus invites an examination of how Messiaen interpreted soundscape, birdsong, landscape, and color through his music. Birdsong is particularly important in this case because of its strong and clearly demonstrable influence on the majority of Messiaen's musical output after 1941.[30]

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[27] Robert Fallon, "A Catalogue of Messiaen's Birds," in *Messiaen Perspectives 2*, ed. Christopher Dingle and Robert Fallon (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013), 135-39.

[28] Allen Forte, "Messiaen's Mysterious Birds," in *Messiaen Studies*, ed. Robert Sholl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 101.

[29] Olivier Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1978).

[30] Robert Sherlaw Johnson, "Birdsong," in *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (London: Farber and Farber Limited, 1995), 249-50.

Part One

I. Le désert [The desert]
II. Les Orioles [The Orioles]
III. Ce qui est écrit sur les étoiles . . . [That which is written on the stars]
IV. Le Cossyphe d'Heuglin [The White-Browed Robin]
V. Cedar Breaks et le Don de Crainte [Cedar Breaks and the Gift of Awe]

Part Two

VI. Appel interstellaire [Interstellar call]
VII. Bryce Canyon et les roches rouge-orange [Bryce Canyon and the red-orange rocks]

Part Three

VIII. Les ressuscités et le chant de l'étoile Aldébaran [The resurrected and the song of the star Aldébaran]
IX. Le Moquer polyglotte [The Mockingbird]
X. La Grive des bois [The Wood Thrush]
XI. Omao, Leiothrix, Elepaio, Shama [Hawaiian Thrush, Red-billed Mesia, Elepaio, White-rumped Shama]
XII. Zion Park et la Cité céleste [Zion Park and the Celestial City]

Figure 1.1 Formal structure of *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*

However, birdsong is not the only gesture toward nature in *Des canyons*. Steinitz argues that *Des canyons* "conveys through every gesture the unforgettable impact of seeing the Utah canyons."[31] To that end, Messiaen employed numerous musical devices to evoke the religious experiences of nature in the listener's imagination. The *éoliphone*, a wind machine, mimics the sound of unfettered gusts in a desolate, yet beautiful desert landscape in the first movement, and makes appearances in other movements. Similarly, use of a *géophone*, a flat drum filled with beads, occurs in several movements, imitating the sound of moving sand.[32] The variety of harmonic and rhythmic structures present both religious and geological symbolism.

Moreover, his compositional process was surely influenced by his bidirectional sound-color synesthesia, a sensory condition that caused him to associate sounds with colors

[31] Steinitz, "Des canyons aux étoiles . . .," 461.

[32] Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (London: Farber and Farber Limited, 1985), 227.

and vice versa. In a 1967 interview with Claude Samuel, Messiaen explained that his experience of synesthesia occurred exclusively in his mind, caused only by what he believed to be musical sound, and should not be confused with the more extreme version of synesthesia that causes the literal perception of color during auditory stimulation.[33] In terms of its musical application, this condition led Messiaen to challenge the clear delineation between sight and sound. For instance, Messiaen portrays the colors he associated with Bryce Canyon through musical symbolism; the consistent use of E major represents the red-orange of the canyon walls in the sunlight.[34] The variety of harmonic constructions built on E and used in the homophonic texture demonstrate the variety of shades and hues seen in the shadows. By making representational associations such as these, Messiaen contradicts the Western privileging of vision.[35] Instead of emphasizing vision over hearing, he attends to visual phenomena through auditory means.

During a 1970 visit to New York, part of a larger tour of the United States and Canada, Messiaen officially received Alice Tully's commission for *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*.[36] Commissioned for the American Bicentennial,[37] *Des canyons* gave Messiaen the opportunity to confirm his impression that Bryce Canyon was "the most beautiful thing in the United

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[33] Claude Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, trans. Felix Aprahamian (London: Stainer and Bell Limited, 1976), 15-17.

[34] Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*, 147.

[35] See Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 3-15.

[36] This paragraph draws from Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 286-92.

[37] Oliver Knussen's review contradicts all other sources, stating that the orchestra that premiered the work, Musica Aeterna, also commissioned the work. This is an error—the score clearly indicates the commission came from Alice Tully. See Oliver Knussen, "Messiaen's *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*" *Tempo* New Series, no. 116 (1976): 39; Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*, 13.

States."[38] One can only speculate why Tully chose a non-American composer for a uniquely American event, but a precedent exists: Richard Wagner's *Grosser Festmarsch* for the Opening of the Centennial Celebration of the Signing of the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, WWV110.[39] Furthermore, Messiaen had an international reputation for his birdsong works, complementing the burgeoning environmental movement that came to the forefront of United States politics at the time.

For inspiration, Messiaen specifically requested to use America's mountain landscapes, rather than a cityscape full of skyscrapers.[40] Accordingly, Messiaen's impressario, Herbert Breslin, handled the practical concerns of the commission for Tully, arranging his 1972 visit to Utah. There he visited the canyon desert locations of Bryce Canyon National Park, Zion National Park, and Cedar Breaks National Monument. These open landscapes triggered a strong spiritual reaction from Messiaen, as revealed through the religious musical devices employed throughout *Des canyons*.

These Utah locations had a distinct lineage as spiritually charged places. When the Mormons migrated West in 1847, they noted the striking visions of nature they found.[41] They eventually founded a town called Parowan in 1851. Tying their attempt at escape from religious persecution to its striking, awe-inspiring landscape, the Mormons renamed

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[38] Richard Steinitz, "Des canyons aux étoiles . . .," in *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (London: Farber and Farber Limited, 1995), 460-61.

[39] Lieselotte Z. Overvold, "Wagner's American Centennial March: Genesis and Reception," *Monatshefte* 68, no. 2 (1976), 179.

[40] Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 286.

[41] Jared Farmer, *On Zion's Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 19-20.

Mukuntuweap—at it was known by the Native Americans—Zion Canyon.[42] This name linked their notion of escape from persecution to the promised land of Zion. Another Mormon settler of the 1850s, Ebenezer Bryce, would be responsible for the name given to Bryce Canyon. Bryce eventually left the area, noting that its "a helluva place to lose a cow"[43] because of its vast size and large rock formations. Cedar Breaks was similarly used as grazing land for cattle and sheep by Mormon settlers.[44]

Less than one hundred years later, these locations became a part of the National Parks movement that began in 1872 when the U. S. Congress made Yellowstone the world's first national park.[45] Each of the three places became a national monument by executive order: Zion Canyon in 1909, Bryce Canyon in 1923, and Cedar Breaks in 1933.[46] Shortly after being designated National Monuments, Congress made two of the locations National Parks: Zion Canyon in 1919, and Bryce Canyon in 1928.[47] The striking geology of these places had garnered the religious respect of the Mormons as well as the respect of the nature loving activists behind the National Park movement.

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[42] Robert Fallon, "Placing Mount Messiaen," in *Messiaen Perspectives 2: Techniques, Influence, and Reception*, eds. Christopher Dingle and Robert Fallon (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013), 334; Zion National Park: People, National Park Service, http://www.nps.gov/zion/historyculture/people.htm, accessed 01 May 2014.

[43] Ibid., 335.

[44] Cedar Breaks National Monument: People, National Park Service, http://www.nps.gov/cebr/historyculture/people.htm, accessed 01 May 2014.

[45] Barry Mackintosh, "The National Park Service: A Brief History," National Park Service, 1999, http://www.nps.gov/history/history/hisnps/NPSHistory/npshisto.htm, accessed 01 May 2014.

[46] Zion National Park: People, National Park Service, http://www.nps.gov/zion/historyculture/people.htm, accessed 01 May 2014; Bryce Canyon National Park: Park History, National Park Service, http://www.nps.gov/brca/historyculture/park_history.htm, accessed 01 May 2014; Cedar Breaks National Monument: History and Culture, National Park Service, http://www.nps.gov/cebr/historyculture/index.htm, accessed 01 May 2014.

[47] Fallon, "Placing Mount Messiaen," 335.

These three parks share several characteristics that Messiaen noted and evoked in *Des canyons*.[48] First, all three of these parks are desert ecosystems made primarily of sedimentary limestone. Over vast amounts of time, great portions of this limestone washed away from repeated exposure to—ironically enough for a desert ecosystem—water. When thunderstorms hit Zion Park, even large boulders move due to the torrent of water. In Bryce Canyon, snow melts and seeps into the limestone, only to freeze again and widen the cracks. Over time, the result is the spires of stone known as hoodoos. The array of reddish hues originate with mineral deposits (primarily oxidized iron). A large number of animal species find solace in these protected landscapes, but Messiaen kept his focus specifically on the bird species, of which there are many.

Messiaen's trip allowed him a mere eight days to collect the material he would use in *Des canyons*. The following two journal entries from the visit show his attention to natural detail, particularly individual bird species, colors, and places within the parks. Moreover, they reveal a sense of spirituality and awe:

> 3 May: Robin. At Fairyland View (near the entrance to the [Bryce] canyon): Red-shafted Flicker, Steller's Jay. Rainbow Point, Penderosa Point. At Auga Canyon: Cooper's Hawk. At Bryce Canyon Bridge: Clark's Nutcracker and Grey-headed Junco. At Sunset Point—magnificent—great columns of bold red and orange, awe-inspiring entrances and mysterious chasms—an amphitheatre—7 km on foot in Canyons.

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[48] This paragraph draws upon Zion National Park: Natural Features & Ecosystems, National Park Service, http://www.nps.gov/zion/naturescience/naturalfeaturesandecosystems.htm, accessed 01 May 2014; Bryce Canyon National Park: Natural Features & Ecosystems, National Park Service, http://www.nps.gov/brca/naturescience/naturalfeaturesandecosystems.htm, accessed 01 May 2014; Cedar Breaks National Monument: Natural Features & Ecosystems, National Park Service, http://www.nps.gov/cebr/naturescience/naturalfeaturesandecosystems.htm, accessed 01 May 2014.

> 4 May: 6:20 a.m.: Robin. From 10 a.m. until 1 p.m. on foot to Sunset Point. See the view from above, then descend into the valley and climb up again on the sandstone paths—Sublime!!! Evening: Brown-headed Cowbird. Bought a rock of copper sulphate from Arizona.[49]

It is fortunate that Messiaen kept such detailed journals as they shed light on his thought process regarding soundscape. Here he notes locations, birds, sights, pathways, time of day, and his overall impressions. Each of these aspects can be found in the resulting music. His journals however, also indicate his decision to pause and observe. As Yi-Fu Tuan states, "place is a pause in movement. . . . The pause makes it possible for a locality to become a center of felt value."[50] By virtue of the pause to observe, as opposed to itinerant walking with observation, Messiaen created the conditions for the space of the canyons to become subjectively defined places. *Des canyons* then reflects that placeness.

Many prominent political developments of the 1970s framed the composition of *Des canyons*. This created favorable conditions for Messiaen to tie his interpretation of American soundscape and landscape to a political stance favoring environmentalist ideals. His musical endeavor creates place in an attempt to give value to wild landscapes that the listener may share. As Messiaen's interpretation of an American soundscape, *Des canyons* represents his contribution to a political dialogue surrounding the preservation of natural places.

Inspired by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, first published in 1962, the American environmental movement continued the ecologically conscious discourse of the National Parks movement and resulted in much political action by the United States Congress.[51] She

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[49] Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 291-92.

[50] Tuan, *Space and Place*, 138.

[51] Linda Lear, "Introduction," in Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Mariner Books, 2002), x.

railed against the use of DDT, detailing its detrimental effects on bird populations and its potential threat to humans through the food chain. After *Silent Spring* caught President John F. Kennedy's attention, investigations into the validity of Carson's conclusions began. These resulted in Congress passing the Clean Air Act (1970), and most notably the National Environmental Policy Act (1970), which established the Environmental Protection Agency.[52] Indeed, Joseph Petulla noted that by 1970 "environmentalism had become a live national issue."[53] Others took up Carson's message, leading to studies of the effect of DDT on penguins, pelicans and other species.[54] In 1972, ten years after Carson's book was first published, Congress passed the Federal Environmental Pesticide Control Act. This granted the EPA the power to ban any pesticide it deemed dangerous to the environment. DDT was banned the same year, shortly after Messiaen's visit to Utah.[55]

Another clear link between *Des canyons* and American environmentalism exists in the naming of Mount Messiaen.[56] This mountain, located just eight miles north of Cedar Breaks, was named for Messiaen in 1978 in response to his engagement with the Utah canyon landscape in *Des canyons*. The enthusiastic, though technically unofficial, naming of the mountain (it is not noted on any official maps) speaks volumes to the public awareness for the work. Because the USGS does not label the mountain on their topographical map of the area, only the dedicatory plaque provides direct reference to the location's historical relevance. Overall, I reveal Messiaen as a politically engaged figure. In particular, I show him

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[52] Ibid., xviii.

[53] Joseph M. Petulla, *American Environmentalism: Values, Tactics, Priorities* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1980), 55.

[54] Ibid., 67,

[55] Ibid., 67.

[56] This paragraph draws upon Fallon, "Placing Mount Messiaen," 323-39.

as a subtle proponent for a pacifist relationship between humanity and nature. Finally, I associate this sentiment of *Des canyons* with environmental sustainability.

Scope and Methodology

Given Messiaen's politically disengaged image, scholars have been hesitant to offer politicized readings of his music. Along similar lines, Phillip Bohlman argues that musicology has a "remarkable capacity to imagine music into an object that [has] nothing to do with political and moral crises"[57] thus essentializing the music itself. He continues: "this act of essentializing music, the very attempt to depoliticize it, has become the most hegemonic form of politicizing music."[58] Thus, to best avoid an inaccurate "hegemonic" interpretation of a piece of music, scholars must unveil a work's underlying political meaning. I engage with Messiaen's *Des canyons* from this standpoint, linking this environmentally-inspired work to notions of place, pacifism, and deep ecology.

To this end, I link the politics of *Des canyons* to Messiaen's subjective experiences of religion and nature. Furthermore, in linking politics to participatory music, ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino invokes anthropologist Gregory Bateson's idea that "artistic creativity flows from the subconscious . . . and that through the manipulation of artistic materials . . . inner life is rendered in consciously perceivable forms."[59] It is therefore apparent that as an artistic product, *Des canyons* transforms Messiaen's subjective experiences into the perceivable medium of music.

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[57] Phillip V. Bohlman, "Musicology as a Political Act," *Journal of Musicology*, no. 11 (1993): 414-15.

[58] Ibid., 419.

[59] Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 3.

To find the political subtext within a work influenced by extra-musical factors, such as *Des canyons*, requires multidisciplinary methodologies. Georgina Born argues that clear disciplinary boundaries, traditionally dividing the study of music from other approaches, hinder the development of an interdisciplinary relational musicology.[60] She instead advocates for the synthesis of many methods appropriate to constructing a strong argument about the topic at hand. My interdisciplinary approach incorporates philosophical, human geographical, and ecological concerns in order to strengthen my politicized reading of *Des canyons*. By tying musical devices to particular sentiments I show how *Des canyons* has a broader effect than only musical artistry. For instance, birdsong evokes notions of divine peace and the *éoliphone* creates a sense of geographical place. Thus my interpretation focuses upon the literal and symbolic reflections of soundscape and religion in the music and demonstrates how they create a sense of place and the divinity of that place.

Messiaen's creation of divine place subtly engaged with the political discourse surrounding environmentalism. The connection of place to politics is at once obvious and deceptively complex. For example, political power is generally linked to geographical boundaries. Thus, even at this fundamental level, place and politics are intimately entwined. More abstract are places beyond legal definition. Steven Feld posited that the notion of place, in essence, is a phenomenon intimately linked to and dependent upon the senses.[61] Thus, place arises from experience. Tuan proposed that a person or people's attachment to a place stems from a variety of phenomena—the more means of connection the stronger the

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[60] Georgina Born, "For a Relational Musicology: Music and Interdisciplinarity, Beyond the Practice Turn." *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 135, no. 2 (2010): 205-10.

[61] Steven Feld, "Places Sensed, Senses Placed: Toward a Sensuous Epistemology of Environments," in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (New York: Berg, 2005), 179.

attachment.[62] He provides the example of Reani, a peak on Tikopia in the South Pacific. Here, the landmark serves many functions. First, it is a sacred place of the gods. Second, it enables seafarers to estimate distance and course while also acting as a locus of emotional sentiment (e.g. the elation caused by its appearance after a long journey).[63] Thus, place serves both practical purposes and deeper cultural ones.

The place constructed within *Des canyons* has practical value (as musical entertainment), sentimental value (by preserving a soundscape through art, a mirror to political action), and even sacred value (as a glorification of God). By creating sonic place within *Des canyons* and tying it to the Utah locations he visited, Messiaen constructed a means to share these connections with listeners and to tie them to these locations through music. Most importantly, it expresses a desire to preserve the physical places used in creating this sonic place.

The sonic places in *Des canyons* directly link to physical places in Utah and this requires contextualization in regard to landscape. Daniel Grimley wrote that musical representations of landscape can make use of a number of devices ranging from "pictorial devices such as wedding marches to provide conventionalised local colour, to the exploration of more abstract 'environmental elements,' such as bell sounds and mountain echoes, which serve to create a sense of musical depth and distance" and thus evoke space.[64] Tony Mitchell reiterates this notion, stating "music can evoke or recreate places, spaces, localities and occasions, as well as providing biographical cartographies and metaphorical

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[62] Tuan, *Space and Place*, 158.

[63] Ibid., 158-59.

[64] Daniel Grimley, *Grieg: Music, Landscape and Norwegian Identity* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2006), 55-56.

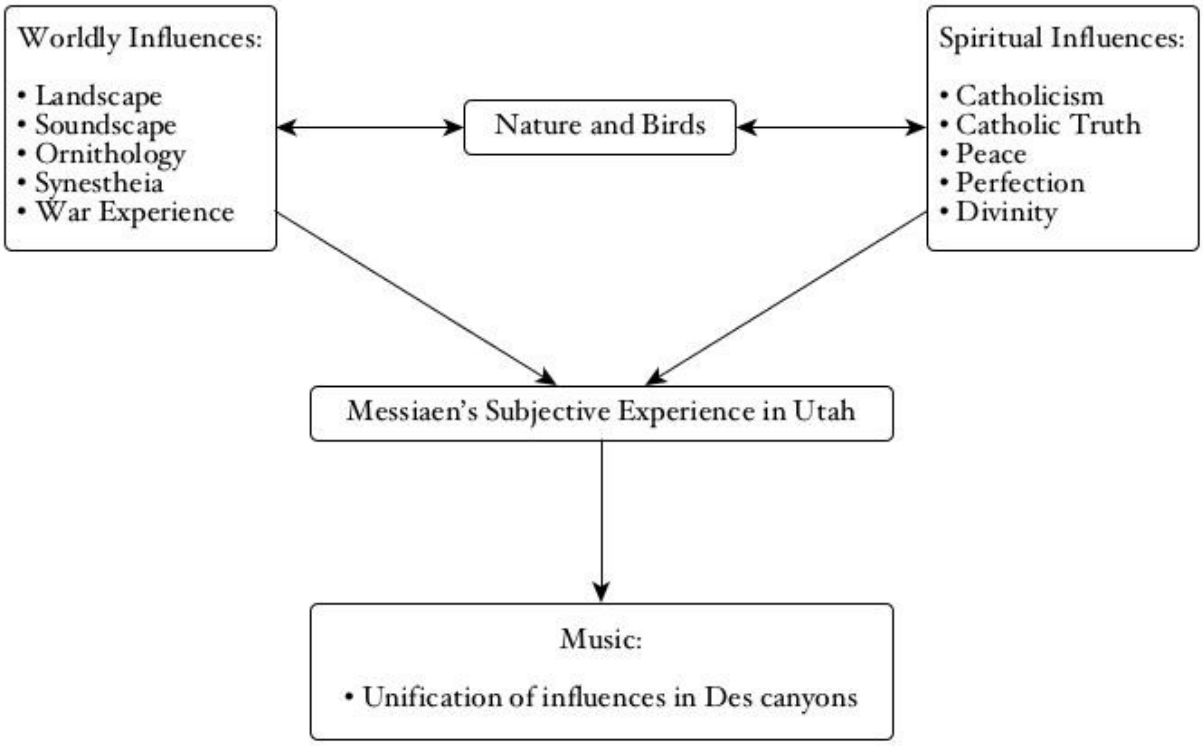


Figure 1.2 Messiaen's influences in *Des canyons aux étoiles* . . .

orientation guides, along with affective embodiments of identity, home and belonging."[65] Thus, music can relate to its listeners a type of sonic landscape that embeds the music in a particular locale. For instance, the closing movement of each of *Des canyons*'s three parts specifically names and represents one of Messiaen's inspirational locations in Utah.

For the sake of my investigation of these themes, I categorize Messiaen's influences in *Des canyons* into two parts: the worldly and the spiritual. I am not the first to categorize Messiaen's extra-musical influences in this way. Gareth Healey divides these influences into

[65] Tony Mitchell, "Sigur Ros's *Heima*: An Icelandic Psychogeography," *Transforming Cultures eJournal* 4, no. 1 (2009), http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/TfC, 173.

two categories: "birdsong" on the one hand, and "philosophy and literature" on the other.[66] I group them in a similar manner, placing Messaien's philosophical and religious ideals in the spiritual category and his nature influences in the worldly category. It is important to note that birds take on both spiritual and worldly meaning depending upon the context. I propose a mapping of these relations in Figure 1.2 (p. 20). This figure categorizes many of Messiaen's influences at the time of *Des canyons*'s composition, but should not be considered a comprehensive list. The spiritual side serves as the basis for Chapter 2 while the worldly side serves as the basis for Chapter 3.

With the above model in mind, this study develops a sense of Messiaen's worldview in regard to ecological concerns. Arne Naess calls this ecologically concerned worldview and code of values an ecosophy.[67] Subjectively defined values, Naess reveals, are a key component of a personal ecosophy. He first establishes that the "spontaneous and emotional realm of experience [is] as genuine a source of knowledge of reality as mathematical physics."[68] He further elaborates that "phenomenological viewpoints are valuable" for developing knowledge of the intrinsic value of experience in nature.[69] The inevitable conclusion is that only through subjectivity can one find intrinsic value in nature. It is important to note that Naess's conception of ecosophy includes all aspects of a philosophical system, not only politics. Therefore, my reconstruction of Messiaen's

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[66] Gareth Healey, *Messiaen's Musical Techniques: The Composer's View and Beyond* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013), 27-44.

[67] This term should not be confused with ecophilosophy, a field of study dealing with ecological approaches to knowledge rather than our relationship with nature, which is the focus of ecosophy. See Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 36.

[68] Ibid., 32.

[69] Ibid., 51

ecosophy draws upon the interconnected components of the composer's philosophies, including those pertaining to religion and nature. Thus, I develop a larger framework with which to analyze the musical symbolism and political subtext of *Des canyons*.

Messiaen claimed the divinity of nature, yet exploited natural sound to create human music. This is not necessarily contradictory. Naess makes a clear and important distinction between "deep ecology" and "shallow ecology" that parallels the divide in influences shown in Figure 1.2. Shallow ecology concerns itself with activities such as fighting pollution and resource depletion, thus making the improvement of human life its central objective. Though the term shallow often carries negative connotations, shallow ecological interests remain both valid and important. However, this approach is effectively anthropocentric, posing problems for conservationists and environmental philosophers concerned with more profound questions about the relationship between humanity and the environment. Deep ecology addresses these issues by rejecting "the man-in-environment image in favour of *the relational, total-field image*." It invests all of nature with "*the equal right to live and blossom*" in an attempt to forgo anthropocentrism.[70] Deep ecological interests are therefore holistic, viewing humankind as a component of overall ecology. Deep and shallow ecology must work in tandem to address environmental issues; deep ecology helps to establish prescriptive norms by which shallow solutions can be measured.

In this study, I liken Messiaen's spiritual imperative to glorify God's creation to Naess's conception of deep ecology and, as stated above, his melodic usage of nature sounds for human musical consumption to shallow-level ecological engagement. His Franciscan attitude toward nature, viewing it as God's own artwork, links Messiaen's use of nature to

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[70] Ibid., 28. Emphasis original.

deeper philosophical concerns, provoking a reevaluation of the human-nature relationship. His use of birdsong, along with other environmentally-inspired sounds, demonstrates a concern for shallow ecological issues: he preserved numerous birdsongs by dictating them and subsequently used them to produce human entertainment and make a shallow-level political statement. *Des canyons* then makes clear Messiaen's engagement with both deep and shallow concepts of ecology, placing both an intrinsic divine value and a practical worldly value on nature.

In reaching this conclusion, I draw upon Messiaen's writings and interviews. I position the sentiments expressed therein in the broader context of his biography and the political and cultural atmosphere at the time of *Des canyons*'s composition. I further link Messiaen's belief system to prominent Catholic theologians he often cited as important to the understanding of his work. I then turn my focus to the musical fabric of *Des canyons*, citing specific examples to support my findings.

Literature Review

Olivier Messiaen's incorporation of environmental sounds in his music clearly demonstrates his consciousness of his sonic surroundings. Schafer demonstrates how a soundscape can affect one's experience of the world. He states that humanity—poets and musicians, in particular—echo their particular soundscapes.[71] Applying Schafer's soundscape concepts in an analysis of *Des canyons* greatly illuminates Messiaen's environmental sensitivity. This view positions Messiaen as an acoustic designer[72] whose practice of sonic

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[71] Schafer, *Soundscape*, 40.

[72] Ibid., 206.

environmentalism plays out through the dialogue of sound signals and keynote sounds[73] that appear within his compositions.[74] Not all these sounds need be inspired by nature; gestures toward the divine also contribute to the construction of a sonic representation of place. Birdsong, which according to Schafer has symbolized gentleness throughout history,[75] emerges from Messiaen's work as an archetypal sound due to its ubiquity in his music.[76] Birdsong's role as an archetype allows it to retain its meaning while readily shifting between the roles of sound signal and keynote sound. This birdsong archetype figures as a symbol of peace and acts as a mediator between humanity and the divine. (This role of mediator is not limited to birds, as I discuss in Chapter 3.) As such, its omnipresence in *Des canyons* suggests that Messiaen's message of peace, love of nature, and love of God saturates the work.

The practice of sonic environmentalism, by definition, includes a political sentiment. In refuting the misconception that Messiaen was "disengaged from the world,"[77] Fallon showed through an illuminating analysis that Messiaen's post-war organ works *Messe de la Pentacôte* (1949-1950) and *Livre d'orgue* (1951) engage with politics, focusing on the *Messe*'s portrayal of an atomic explosion. Fallon links the religious themes and use of birdsong in these works with Messiaen's own political stance against nuclear aggression. Fallon concludes, "despite focusing on religion and nature, Messiaen's music frequently carries subtexts of political and social circumstances." Using Messiaen's statements that "symbolically speaking, birds mean freedom to me" and "nature is indeed marvelously

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[73] Ibid., 9-10.

[74] Ibid., 152.

[75] Ibid., 29-30, 106.

[76] Ibid., 47.

[77] This paragraph draws upon Fallon, "Birds, Beasts, and Bombs," 175-89.

beautiful and pacifying" as a point of departure, Fallon argues that birds also symbolize political peace.

Like the post-war organ works, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .* contains political connotations. I extend Fallon's principle to understand Messiaen's bird symbolism as supporting a sustainable relationship between nature and humanity in addition to a pacifist stance on national conflict, as Fallon suggests. Therefore, as an archetypal sound, birdsong symbolizes free, peaceful, and sustainable living. *Des canyons*'s extensive inclusion of birdsong supports my framing of the work as sonic environmentalism, but further unfolding of Messiaen's religious influences is necessary to reach a more complete understanding of the work.

Only religion figures as strongly as nature in Messiaen's music, but unraveling Messiaen's musical religiosity presents a unique challenge to the musicologist. Messiaen's own writings on the topic are sometimes contradictory, further problematizing any scholarly attempt to decode these influences. To reach a fuller understanding of Messiaen's political sentiments, I consider the role that religion, particularly his devout Catholicism, played in the formulation of his politics.

Sander van Maas suggests that religion figures in Messiaen's music not as an attempt to communicate musico-religious content, but instead to provide a musico-religious *experience*.[78] Messiaen shared in a conversation with a student that "I compose for the pleasure of inner listening at the moment itself of composing."[79] In this way Messiaen seeks to convey his own subjective experience to the listener by means of the compositional

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[78] van Maas, *Reinvention of Religious Music*, 6-7.

[79] Quoted in ibid., 14.

process. *Des canyons*, in conveying subjective experience, also reflects Messiaen's reactions to the American geographical locations that inspired the piece. Likewise, it must also reflect aspects of Messiaen's worldview. As Steinitz stated of *Des canyons*, "since Messiaen sees creation as a manifestation of God, it is a deeply religious work."[80]

While Siglind Bruhn does a thorough job of analyzing the religious connotations in Messiaen's work, she only tangentially addresses the importance of nature. Because birds fulfill the role of mediator between the physical and spiritual, as well as being symbols of peace and sustainability, Messiaen's political message must be related to his religious ideals. Bruhn states that for Messiaen, birdsong "serves as the authentic voice of divinely created nature, a gate to nature's spiritual dimension."[81] She also addresses *Des canyons* directly, asserting its focus on "birdsong, majestic nature, and cosmic grace."[82] Her extensive analysis of *Saint François d'Assise* (1975-1983) further enlightens the links between religion and nature as expressed in Messiaen's work. Particularly important is the notion that the opera constitutes a "marriage of the celestial and terrestrial realms" and that birds occupy the intermediate position.[83] The title "*Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*" [From the Canyons to the Stars] and several musical attributes within *Des canyons* gesture toward this same duality. Paul Griffiths points toward shifts from dark to light timbres, bass to treble voicings, and chromatic to diatonic harmonies as signifiers of the shift from earthly canyons to heavenly stars.[84] It is clear then that *Des canyons* straddles the divide of Messiaen's dual influences.

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[80] Steinitz, "Des canyons aux étoiles . . .," 462.

[81] Bruhn, *Messiaen's Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity*, 37.

[82] Ibid., 38 and 10.

[83] Ibid., 174-75.

[84] Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 231.

Messiaen's compositions express his sociocultural beliefs, as informed by his Catholic faith and experiences with nature, while also directly addressing the places he visited for inspiration. An examination of these intricate linkages, as demonstrated in *Des canyons*, reveals that the use of natural sounds not only expresses deep-level religious meaning and shallow-level use of soundscape, but also defines notions of place. By investing religious value in nature, Messiaen provided an alternative to the clear human-nature dichotomy. He breaks down this barrier, proposing through music a more holistic philosophy, one in line with Naess's deep ecology.

Chapter Overview

This study addresses these spiritual, worldly, and political themes in four chapters. Chapter two examines the religious influences in Messiaen's life and music. Drawing upon Messiaen's writings and the work of Siglind Bruhn, Sander van Maas, Andrew Shenton, and Gareth Healey, I outline Messiaen's religious philosophy, tracing some of these beliefs to the theologians Thomas Aquinas, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Saint Francis of Assisi. With a clear understanding of his religious beliefs in regard to his biography and cultural context, this chapter describes how these views affected his subjective conception of nature, and consequently his political thinking toward nature. In so doing, I reveal the deep level of his engagement with God's creation. To put these influences into context, I examine some of his other religious works, such as *La Nativité du Seigneur* (1935) and *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps* (1941), and their musical signifiers. I define the most prominent of his religious musical devices and conclude by elucidating the use of these musical techniques in *Des canyons*.

Chapter three focuses on the worldly influences of nature upon Messiaen. Drawing upon Messiaen's writings in addition to secondary scholarship by Robert Fallon, Claude Samuel, Peter Hill, and Nigel Simeone, this chapter describes Messiaen's ornithological friends and practices, his personal variety of synesthesia, and the political context surrounding the composition of *Des canyons*. Examining Messiaen's earlier birdsong works and his musical signifiers of nature, the chapter places these themes within the context of his life. It also demonstrates his worldly engagement, and describes the early development of American environmentalism, linking Messiaen's politics of nuclear non-proliferation, as elucidated by Fallon, to the environmentalist movement. The chapter concludes with an extensive analysis of Messiaen's musical symbolism for nature in *Des canyons*. Here, I reveal the influence of natural soundscapes and landscapes at the shallow (surface) level. I particularly emphasize the concluding movements of each formal section of *Des canyons* due to their correlation to the three specific Utah sites.

Ultimately, chapter four concludes that these diverse domains combine in *Des canyons* to reflect Messiaen's worldview and promote a environmentalist agenda akin to Naess's concept of deep ecology. I trace the reception of recent performances of *Des canyons* as evidence of the work's continued importance. Furthermore, I suggest the application of similar methodologies to several composers and popular artists that address comparable themes.

This thesis establishes a framework through which to construct ecocritical interpretations of Messiaen's musical oeuvre. By writing music that includes interpretations of sounds heard in the natural world and by seeking to reveal fundamental religious truths as

he conceives of them, Messiaen expresses environmentalist political sentiments about nature.

Chapter 2: The Divinity of Nature

"Messiaen attempts to make the mystery of God, which is beyond all words, audible in a language that is itself beyond all words: music."
—Pascale Ide[85]

Religion played a formative role in the development of Messiaen's personal philosophy. The writings of Catholic philosophers and theologians such as Thomas of Aquinas, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and the iconic Saint Francis of Assisi were pivotal factors in Messiaen's spiritual development. Experiences during childhood and later during his time as a prisoner of war in World War II led to lifelong influences that shaped his religious and musical outlook. His numerous explicitly religious musical works, ranging from his earliest to his latest compositions, demonstrate Catholicism's foundational position in his life. Further, Messiaen's self-proclaimed goal of revealing Catholic truths through his music,[86] clearly indicates that religion pervades his entire compositional output. As such, my politicized reading of *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .* relies in part on an examination of the composer's spiritual outlook.

Theology and life experiences each contribute to a comprehensive picture of Messiaen's religious standpoint during the composition of *Des canyons*. This chapter examines each of these factors in turn, giving particular attention to both the impact of Messiaen's own war experience and the effect of the works of Aquinas. Here I draw especially upon the scholarship of Siglind Bruhn, Sander van Maas, and Andrew Shenton. Through consideration of Messiaen's philosophical, spiritual, and biographical influences,

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[85] Pascale Ide, "Olivier Messiaen, un musicien ébloui par l'infinité de Dieu," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 121 (1999), 453.

[86] Sander van Maas, *The Reinvention of Religious Music: Olivier Messiaen's Breakthrough Toward the Beyond* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 76-78.

this chapter confirms his intention to bring to light and champion Catholic truths. Further, I link the concept of divinely created nature to that of environmental conservation. I then turn to an analysis of the musical work, to elucidate the musical signifiers of these sentiments. For Messiaen, the Catholic truth revealed in *Des canyons* is twofold, representing the glory of God's creation and, as we will see in Chapter 3, the composer's desire to ensure its continued existence.

The Development of a Catholic Composer

Messiaen often stated that he "was born a believer"[87] and his biography clearly shows a lifetime of religious devotion. It is easy to trace the composer's Catholic leanings to his childhood. Messiaen's family moved often while he was young, but the city of Nantes appears to have had a particularly strong effect on the early stages of his religious development. The direct exposure to church life through proximity to the local Cathedral and the involvement of local Catholics in his life ensured the special role Nantes played for Messiaen's religious development.

The Messiaen family relocated from Grenoble to Nantes following the end of World War I and the return of Olivier's father Pierre from the front. This short-term home (1918-1919) was located on a square shared with the church of Saint-Donatien, where the young Olivier attended church services on a regular basis. Further, he made the decision to pursue music professionally while in Nantes, prompted by a gift from his harmony teacher Jean de Gibon.[88] Of the event, Messiaen stated in an obituary notice for de Gibon, "He gave

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[87] Claude Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, trans. Felix Aprahamian (London: Stainer and Bell Limited, 1976), 2.

[88] Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 14.

[a student] *Pelléas et Mélisandre* by Debussy! This present served to confirm the young pupil's vocation . . . The pupil was me; the master was Jean de Gibon."[89] Despite the short stay in Nantes, it remains a place of great import in Messiaen religious and musical development. However, Messiaen would find a more permanent home in Paris. Here he began his studies in organ and composition at the Paris Conservatoire (1919) and became further entrenched in his Catholic faith.

Less clear is the role his parents played in the development of his religious beliefs. Messiaen himself either downplays or downright denies that his parents had any religious affiliation.[90] This may have in fact been the case with his mother Cécile Sauvage (1883-1927), but in the case of his father Pierre Messiaen (1883-1957), the literature provides conflicting views. Most sources draw upon Messiaen's own writings for this information, leading to the widespread belief that Olivier's faith developed in an atheistic home.[91] However, I'm more convinced by the findings of Siglind Bruhn, who has offered extensive evidence of Pierre Messiaen's devout Catholicism.[92] She especially emphasizes Pierre's association with Catholic intellectuals and Desclée de Brouwer, a publisher of religious literature. What Pierre's beliefs spelled out for Olivier was a religiously grounded education. Thus it appears that both his father and music teachers served as early role models for Olivier.

Paul Dukas is perhaps the best known of Messiaen's composition teachers. However, another professor at the Paris Conservatoire had a profound impact on his spiritual

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[89] Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 15.

[90] Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation: Musical Symbols of Faith in the Two Great Piano Cycles of the 1940s* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2007), 27-30.

[91] Ibid., 27.

[92] Ibid., 27-30.

development. Messiaen never enrolled in a formal class with Charles Tournemire (1870-1939), yet the fellow Catholic organist and composer shared some obvious interests with the young Olivier. Indeed both Tournemire and Messiaen treated the subject of Francis of Assisi in large-scale works toward the end of their compositional output. Both Tournemire's oratorio, *Saint François d'Assise* (1923), and Messiaen's identically titled opera, *Saint François d'Assise* (1975-1983), demonstrate a fascination with the saint. Profoundly, Tournemire also shared Messiaen's commitment to writing religiously inspired music.[93] Much like Messiaen held the revelation of Catholic truths to be the foundation of his music, Tournemire stated, "any music that does not have the glorification of God at its base is futile."[94] In light of these facts, one could make the case that Messiaen succeeded Tournemire as France's foremost composer of Catholic spiritual music. More important here though, is that Tournemire served as a compositional role model for Messiaen. Further, Tournemire's work acted as a precedent for spirituality through composition rather than a purely compositional model, as in the case of Dukas.

While attending the Paris Conservatoire and studying composition with Paul Dukas and organ with Marcel Dupré, Messiaen wrote works with spiritual leanings such as *Le Banquet eucharistique* (1929) and the organ work derived from it, *Le Banquet céleste* (1929).[95] After graduating from the Conservatoire in 1930, Messiaen quickly developed a reputation for passionate and pious music and in 1931, following the death of organist Charles Quef, made a bid for the job of *organiste titulaire* at the Trinité in Paris. So secure was his reputation by this time that several well respected musicians supported his application.

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[93] Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 31-32.

[94] Ibid., 34.

[95] This paragraph draws from Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 34-38.

Tournemire, for example, wrote to Curé Hemmer, the Trinité's parish priest, with such strong statements as "the musical value and the future of this Christian organist are of the highest order: a transcendant improviser, and astonishing performer, and a *biblical* composer . . . with Messiaen all is prayer."[96] Similarly, composer Maurice Emmanuel said of the young Messiaen, "his considerable academic success has been confirmed by compositions which are very remarkable and very daring musically speaking, almost all of them inspired by deep religious feelings."[97] Messiaen would later show immense gratitude for Tournemire's letters in particular, having come to believe that his colleague's recommendations won him the position.[98]

Shortly after France declared war on Germany in September of 1939, Messiaen was called up to serve in the army, an experience that would serve to solidify his pacifism. After a short service as a manual laborer, and an even shorter service as a nurse, Messiaen was captured with thousands of other French soldiers in June of 1940 when the German army took Verdun. During his time as a prisoner in Görlitz, Messiaen wrote his most famous composition, *Quatour pour la Fin du Temps* (1941).

Written in eight movements for violin, clarinet, cello, and piano—the only instruments available to the imprisoned composer—*Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps* sonifies Messiaen's fear that war would consume the entire world and bring about the Apocalypse—an end to time itself. He would again render the Apocalypse in musical terms in the *Messe de la Pentacôte* (discussed below). Premiering in Stalag VIIIA with Étienne Pasquier playing cello, Henri Akoka on clarinet, Jean Le Boulaire playing violin, and Messiaen on the piano,

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[96] Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 35. Emphasis original.

[97] Ibid., 35.

[98] Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 35.

Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps protested the totalitarian and hierarchical WWII regimes of Nazi Germany and Vichy France. Now his most famous work, it provoked a variety of reactions from the audience at the time of its premiere. V. M. related in his review of the performance for the camp newspaper *Lumington: Bimensuel du Stalag VIIIA*[99] that "the applause itself did not burst out immediately. The last note was followed by a moment of silence which established the sovereign mastery of the work."[100] The concept of mastery aside, I find it more likely that the moment of silence indicated a moment of spiritual catharsis, what Étienne Pasquier called "a miracle" in a note on Messiaen's program. He continued "the *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps* transports us into a marvellous Paradise, and takes us away from this terrible place."[101] Pasquier thus indicated that *Quatuor*, like *Des canyons* straddled the divide between heaven and earth, allowing listeners a glimpse into the beyond.

However this work's warning against war and its plea for peace were not the only confirmation of Messaien's religious predilections at this time. While a prisoner, Messiaen met and befriended Guy Bernard-Delapierre. In a letter to Messiaen, Delapierre clearly shows that Messiaen conflated heavenly and terrestrial concerns:

> "Religious matters," he [Messiaen] has written, "include everything: they are God and his entire creation." I underline these last words because it is precisely Messiaen's love for nature, both for what is most obvious in it and for what is most hidden, that

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[99] Reprinted in translation in Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 101-02.

[100] Ibid., 101.

[101] Ibid., 101.

gives listeners to his music that hallucinatory impression of making contact with the heart, with the essence of things.[102]

In this way, a plea for peace, a plea for faith, and a plea for nature can be combined into the same singular idea—the concept at the heart of *Des canyons*.

Further, Messiaen's experience in WWII left him with a strong stance on nuclear weaponry. His opposition was again steeped in religious metaphor. In light of the popular anxiety brought about by the destruction of Hisoshima and Nagasaki, historian Gabrielle Hecht noted that among the French, and especially French Catholics, the atomic bomb took on apocalyptic and thus religious connotations, stating "nuclear explosions were said to signal the return of . . . 'the old thunder of the Bible.'"[103] She further argues that "Catholic

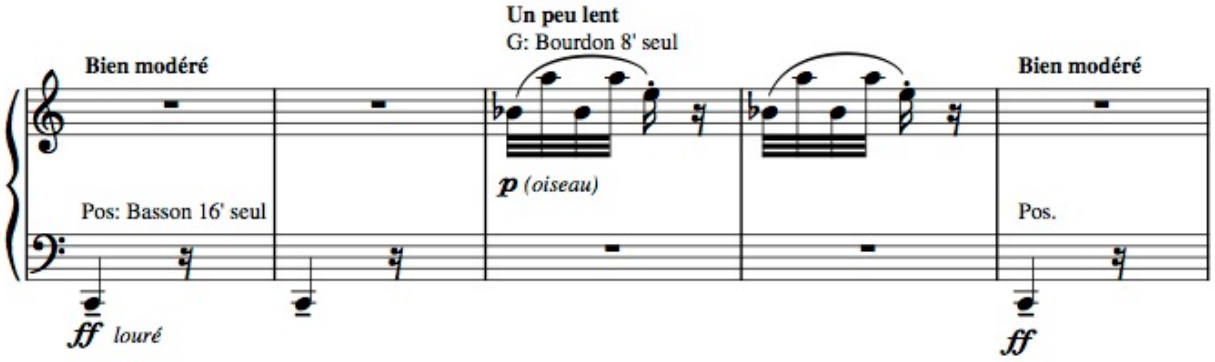


Figure 2.1 Dialogue between peaceful bird and the Beast of the Apocalypse[104]

[102] Ibid., 95.

[103] Quoted in Robert Fallon, "Birds, Beasts, and Bombs in Messiaen's Cold War Mass," *The Journal of Musicology* 26, no. 2 (2009): 182.

[104] Olivier Messiaen, "Offertoire" from *Messe de la Pentecôte* [final measures], reprinted in Fallon, "Birds, Beasts, and Bombs," 197.

conservatives placed the destructive potential of science and technology in an apocalyptic framework. . . . Nuclear technology was the focus of real and widespread existential anxiety about humanity's future."[105] Fallon asserts that Messiaen dealt with this anxiety through faith, much like other Catholic conservatives—he came to equate possible atomic warfare with Judgement Day itself.[106]

This combination of anxiety and faith helped to shape the religious scope of Messiaen's music. In *Messe de la Pentacôte* (1949-1950), an organ mass, Messiaen puts peace and war at odds with one another, the former represented by birdsong and the latter portrayed as the Beast of the Apocalypse.[107] Musically, Messiaen depicted these two forces respectively as high melodies labeled "oiseau," and a repeated low C for the Beast (see Figure 2.1, p. 36). Despite the work's seeming preoccupation with religious prophecy and environmental sound, its subtext addresses both political and social issues at the fore of the public mind at the time of composition.

In this way the *Messe* sets two important precedents for *Des canyons*. First, like the *Messe*, *Des canyons* carries an explicitly political message—indeed Fallon took note of its politically charged commission as a bicentennial celebration. Second, this natural environmental sound, specifically birds, can carry religious symbolism, particularly as metaphors for peace. Moreover, Bruhn indicated that "Messiaen interprets the music of songbirds as a sign for God's presence in nature."[108] *Des canyons* expands this premise to

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[105] Ibid., 182.

[106] Ibid., 203-04.

[107] Ibid., 177.

[108] Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 42.

other parts of nature—an attempt by Messiaen to address religious, political, and environmental (soundscape) concerns in a holistic manner.

As the political atmosphere had an effect on Messiaen, so too did the burgeoning rebirth movements within the French Catholic Church.[109] In particular, two initiatives stand out as critical to Messiaen's religious development: *Le renouveau littéraire Catholique* [the renewal of Catholic literature] and *Le renouveau spirituel* [the spiritual renewal]. The first of these campaigns, *Le renouveau littéraire catholique*, saw itself as a renewal of the Catholic spirit within the literary arts.[110] The primary goal of this faction was the reintegration of religion into artistic expression, an ideal that Messiaen readily embraced and maintained throughout his life. Messiaen derived inspiration from this movement through the writings of Paul Claudel (1868-1955), a French poet and dramatist. Writers such as Claudel sought to revitalize faith by bringing it to the center of cultural activity. Messiaen said of him "Paul Claudel impresses me, I admire the breadth of his ideas, the flow of his works, and his amazing feeling for words."[111] Thus, for Messiaen, the sentiment of the *Le renouveau littéraire catholique* came to mean translating religious metaphor into musical sound.

Le renouveau spirituel occupied itself with the rediscovery of medieval Flemish mystics, promoting a down-to-earth lifestyle centered around devotion to a loving God.[112] Importantly, *Le renouveau spirituel* placed great weight on mysticism. Though there are few explicit links between Messiaen and this movement, one clear connection exists and is particularly important in the case of *Des canyons*: the fourteenth-century mystic John of

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[109] Ibid., 19-27.

[110] Ibid., 21.

[111] Quoted in ibid., 22.

[112] Ibid., 23.

Ruusbroec, one of many theologians revived by *Le renouveau spirituel*.[113] Messiaen admired Ruusbroec, going so far as to quote him in the commentary for the tenth movement of *Des canyons*, "*La Grive des bois*" [The Wood Thrush].[114] Moreover, Messiaen shares certain sentiments that are foundational to the movement, namely, complete submission to God and great humility.[115] *Le renouveau spirituel* taught Messiaen to place value in that which is simple, for instance, nature.

Messiaen's Religious Thinking

Messiaen's religious views regarding nature play an integral role in the compositional process and underlying message of *Des canyons*. Here I examine his beliefs that nature is the divine artwork of God himself, that it mediates between the heavenly and earthly worlds, and that music provides an avenue to God. Several Catholic theologians and philosophers, such as Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988), and Saint Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), played a significant role in the development of these views. Indeed Bruhn points to their foundational role stating "scripture and religious texts in general are unrivaled in their influence on Messiaen's compositions."[116] These texts had great effect on his music by shaping his individual brand of Catholicism and consequently the subjective standpoint that informs his musical works. Together, the above-mentioned theologians provide a groundwork sufficient for understanding how Messiaen's Catholic thought processes inform his interactions with the natural world.

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[113] Ibid., 23-24.

[114] Olivier Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1978), 17.

[115] Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 24.

[116] Ibid., 20.

First among the beliefs that led Messiaen to this intrinsic valuation of nature is the view that all of nature is a divine artwork. This belief stems, in part, from the Aquinian idea that creation itself exists through God. In his *In Symbolum Apostolorum*, Aquinas wrote, "for us it is beyond doubt that all that is in the world is through God."[117] Following this line of thought, Messiaen saw creation as a manifestation of God on Earth. He stated "certainly, like Saint Paul, I see nature as a manifestation of one of the aspects of divinity."[118] In this way, he placed great religious value upon the natural environment. He put this belief on display in his opera about Saint Francis.

Messiaen also stated his intent to champion the "theological truths of the Catholic faith."[119] Moreover, his Franciscan attitude toward nature enlightens the theological truth that informs *Des canyons*: "Look at the stars, the landscape on our little planet, our mountains and oceans: their beauty is the work of God. This was Saint Francis's opinion, and in this sense, I'm very Franciscan."[120] Indeed, Oliver Knussen points out, "in a note issued before the first performance Messiaen stated that *Canyons* was 'written to Glorify God in the Beauties of His Creations: from the colours of the earth and the songs of the birds to the colours of the stars and the Resurrected Ones in Heaven.'"[121] In view of these sentiments, it follows that Messiaen's use of nature sounds responds to a spiritual goal to reveal theological truth within the beauty of God's creation.

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[117] Quoted in Jan Aertsen, *Nature and Creature: Thomas Aquinas's Way of Thought*, trans. Herbert Donald Morton (New York, NY: E. J. Brill, 1988), 202.

[118] Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, 11.

[119] van Maas, *Reinvention of Religious Music*, 14.

[120] Ibid., 27.

[121] Oliver Knussen, "Messiaen's *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*," 39.

Messiaen's handling of Saint Francis of Assisi in *Saint François d'Assise* makes his divine conception of creation clear. His 1976 journal entry for the day he visited Carceri, just outside of Assisi, emphasizes natural sights and the sound signals of this particular place. In the opera, this location serves as the site of Saint Francis's Sermon to the Birds. Note his emphasis on color and sound quality in the following journal entry:

> 4 June. Climb from Assisi to the Carceri. Magnificent countryside. On the left are olive trees with bright silvery leaves! . . . Large tree where Francis preached to the birds: it's an evergreen oak. . . . On the road near the Carceri, a robin; in the courtyard of the Carceri, a blackcap. The blackcap has a very bright timbre, powerful, quite flowing, legato and joyful.[122]

Likewise, in Scene 2 of the opera, Francis sings praises to God utilizing quotes from Saint Francis's own *Canticle of Brother Sun*. In Messiaen's version of this prayer, dotted with quotes from *Canticle*, Francis gives thanks to "Brother Wind," "Sister Water," "Brother Fire," and "Mother Earth."[123] *Saint François d'Assise* also emphasizes animal companionship, such as with the wolf of Gubbio and the congregation of birds mentioned earlier.[124] In conjunction with the highlighting of praises for God's creation quoted from *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, the likening of animals to brothers of humankind takes on an environmentalist overtone.[125]

Even more, the opera demonstrates Messiaen's belief in the ability of nature to mediate between humanity and God. Messiaen's handling of the Sermon to the Birds crystalizes his belief that birds play a privileged role in creation, serving in this mediating

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[122] Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 311.

[123] Ibid., 313.

[124] Bruhn, *Messiaen's Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity*, 157.

[125] Ibid., 194 & 200.

role.[126] Bruhn echoes this sentiment when she states, "In their [birds'] role as Messiaen's superlative musicians they occupy a place halfway between Francis's songs . . . and the Angel's music . . . Through the world of birds . . . music is revealed as the medium that ideally weds the celestial to the terrestrial realm."[127] Reflecting back on the Aquinian notion that creation exists through God, I consider not only birds as mediators between earthly and divine; rather, I view his use of all natural sound as capable of taking on this role. In *Des canyons*, Messiaen used religious symbolism in conjunction with both non-avian natural sounds and birdsong. In this way the music of creation, in all its natural manifestations, serves as a portal to the divine.

Proving the consistency of his ideals over time, this philosophy of the divine goes as far back as his 1931 *Diptyque* for organ. In an interview, Messiaen referred to the work saying, "since my second work, *Diptyque*, I have wanted to contrast the earthly life and the life beyond."[128] The career-long desire to bridge the spiritual gap between heaven an earth thus began in 1931 with *Diptyque* and continued until at least 1983 with *Saint François d'Assise*. This offers a strong foundation for understanding Messiaen's efforts to mediate between earth and heaven during the composition of *Des canyons* in 1972-1974.

For Messiaen, music also took on a special mediating role, as his comments on *Diptyque* attest. In particular, the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar contributed to this belief. In contrast with the other theologians examined here, Messiaen discovered von Balthasar late in life. In fact, it wasn't until the early 1970s, around the time he composed *Des canyons,* that Messiaen began to study von Balthasar's writings, which propose a

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[126] Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 315.

[127] Bruhn, *Messiaen's Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity*, 175.

[128] Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 39.

theologically-based theory of aesthetics.[129] Messiaen considered von Balthasar, as van Mass revealed, "of particular importance in understanding his work."[130] Indeed Messiaen called von Balthasar "the greatest [theologian] of them all."[131] The privileging of melody stands out among the parallels between Messiaen's compositional style and von Balthasar's musical theology. Van Maas points out that both von Balthasar and Messiaen assign a spiritual connotation to melody.[132]

Importantly, von Balthasar found music to be capable of opening the soul to religious experience, a sentiment Messiaen had already expressed much earlier in life. In this way music serves a divine purpose from both the composer's and theologian's viewpoints—to bring one closer to God.[133] To achieve this goal, Messiaen chose to reveal Catholic truths through music. In *Des canyons* this truth favors environmentally inspired themes. In addition, as Bruhn established, Messiaen's beliefs remain incredibly consistent over his lifetime.[134] Therefore, any revelations found through study of von Balthasar have the potential to shed light on all his works.

Messiaen's religious musical aesthetic draws especially upon the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Indeed, Aquinas stands out among other theologians from whom Messiaen drew inspiration due to the frequency with which his music references the saint. Works such as *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* (1964), *Méditations sur le mystére de la Sainte*

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[129] van Maas, *Reinvention of Religious Music*, 61.

[130] Ibid., 9.

[131] Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 27.

[132] van Maas, *Reinvention of Religious Music*, 68-69.

[133] Ibid., 69 & 73.

[134] Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 13.

Trinité (1969), and *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (1965-1969) contain either references to Aquinas in their introductory texts or a Thomistic quotation within the work.[135] Messiaen's first exposure to Aquinian theology came through Aquinas's *Summa theologica* around the age of sixteen.[136] Though the *Summa theologica* does not expressly address music, Bruhn argues that a clear view of Aquinian thought on music is possible by pulling from several other extant sources. In summary, she determined that a musical aesthetic based upon Aquinian theory associates beauty with goodness. Aquinas wrote "beauty and goodness in a thing are identical fundamentally; . . . goodness in art is praised as beauty."[137] According to Aquinas, artistic beauty requires integrity, proportion, and clarity, along with spiritual intent. Drawing from Aquinian sources, Bruhn provides musical definitions for these characteristics, associating integrity with completeness, proportion with both balance and symmetry, and clarity with the metaphysical attribute of intellectual accessibility.[138]

In my reading of Messiaen's compositional practice, these Aquinian musical values present in several ways. Integrity implies a completeness that shows in the overarching forms Messiaen utilized. For instance, the three large groupings of movements in *Des canyons* mimic the Trinity, bringing this Aquinian value to the large scale of the work. Proportion appears in his extreme use of musical symmetry, including vertical, horizontal, and modal symmetries. Again on the large scale, *Des canyons* contains symmetry within its three parts—

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[135] Bruhn, *Messiaen's Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity*, 13.

[136] Ibid., 15.

[137] Quoted in ibid., 18.

[138] Ibid., 18.

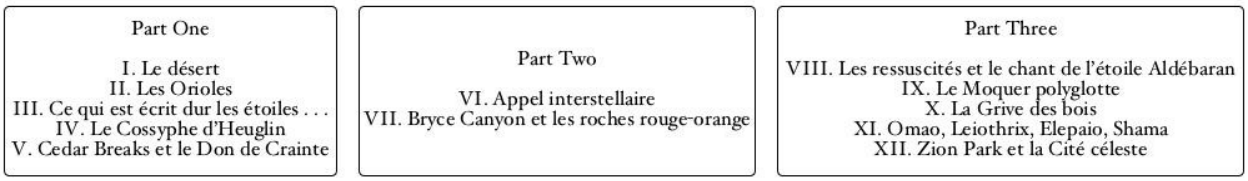


Figure 2.2 Symmetry of parts in *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*

they contain 5 movements, 2 movements, and 5 movements, respectively (see Figure 2.2, above). Moreover, the culmination of each formal section in a movement linked directly to a Utah park creates further symmetry. Messiaen strove for clarity through his extensive use of commentary in the score. *Des canyons*, for instance, contains introductory notes on each of the twelve movements totaling roughly seven pages.

In summary, Messiaen's theological standpoint with regard to music and nature parallels philosophical beliefs of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Saint Francis of Assisi. The cumulative result of their influences led Messiaen to value symmetry, a sense of perfection, clarity of spiritual purpose, and naturally inspired melody. Furthermore, the philosophical standpoint portrayed by Saint Francis in *Saint François d'Assise* clearly emphasizes a brotherly relationship between a saintly human and his surrounding environment. In this way, religious truth and environmentalist goals align. These beliefs remained remarkably consistent throughout Messiaen's life, and shed light on my musical interpretation of *Des canyons*.

The Sound of Faith[139]

Messiaen's numerous religiously motivated pieces raise the questions: how is religion depicted in these compositions and what purpose does this religious sentiment serve? Shenton noted that Messiaen purposefully incorporated extra-musical meaning into his music, especially meaning founded upon religious ideals.[140] Fallon's study of the *Messe de la Pentacôte* demonstrates the inclusion of extra-musical religious meaning, but more importantly illustrates how these religious ideals may be entangled with political sentiment. In *Des canyons*, musical techniques depicting religion reinforce Messiaen's view that nature constitutes a manifestation of divinity.

The musical gestures Messiaen used to incorporate religious meaning into his works are many. Bruhn points out that these encompass pitch-based concerns such as growing intervals, vertical symmetries, emphasis of dominant function, and his signature melodic usage of the modes of limited transposition.[141] She also shows how Messiaen imbued rhythmic aspects of the music with religious meaning, using augmentation and horizontal symmetries, more commonly known as non-retrogradable rhythms.[142] Each of these techniques is explained below.

Messiaen provided confirmation of these musical techniques' religious symbolism early in his career. He distributed the following poetic, even surrealist, program notes to the

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[139] This section frequently draws upon Olivier Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, trans. John Satterfield (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1956) in order to explain the technical aspects of the musical characteristics described. It is only cited where quoted directly.

[140] Shenton, *Olivier Messiaen's System of Signs*, 35.

[141] Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 41-68.

[142] Ibid., 41-68.

audience at each performance of the organ work *La Nativité du Seigneur* (1935), starting with the premiere in 1936:

> The emotion, the sincerity of the musical work.
>
> Which will be at the service of the dogmas of Catholic theology.
>
> Which will be expressed by melodic and harmonic means: the progressive growth of intervals, the chord on the dominant, ostinatos, grace notes, and extended appogiaturas.
>
> Still more by rhythmic means: rhythms immediately preceded or followed by their augmentation and sometimes lengthened by an added value, . . .
>
> and above all through the modes of limited transposition: harmonically employed chromatic modes whose strange color is owed to the limited number of their transpositions.[143]

Thus, Messiaen's utilization of melodic and harmonic material consistently contains religious overtones throughout his output.

The modes of limited transposition express both Messiaen's spiritual and synesthetic experiences. Effectively an exercise in interval patterns, each of the seven modes that Messiaen defines spans an octave and contains from six to ten notes per mode.[144] Moreover, each has at minimum one transposition and at most six transpositions after which the pitch set is duplicated. Unlike the major and minor scales within Western art music, Messiaen's modes cannot be transposed to each of the twelve chromatic pitches without creating enharmonic respellings of the same pitch content. For instance, the whole tone scale can be

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[143] Ibid., 41.

[144] Messiaen, *Technique of My Musical Language*, 58-63.

transposed by a half step only one time. Transposing the set up by another half step produces the same set of notes as the original (assuming enharmonic equivalence).[145] More specifically, a whole tone scale built on C gives the notes C, D, E, F-sharp, G-sharp, A-sharp, while one beginning on D gives D, E, F-sharp, G-sharp, A-sharp, C—identical in pitch content to the one built on C. For reference, Messiaen's complete set of modes of limited transposition is illustrated in Figure 2.3 (see p. 49). The brackets in this figure indicate repeating patterns. For example, mode two is built from four identically structured trichords.

Since these modes maintain their essential identity across chromatic pitch space, they represent a kind of mathematical exhaustion that gestures toward the oneness of all of creation. They provide Messiaen with a continuous source for melodic and harmonic material, and as Bruhn argues, represent a "sublimely ordered sonic universe,"[146] itself presumably a reflection of utopian Catholic ideals. Furthermore, their symmetrical construction parallels other religiously charged musical devices, such as vertical and horizontal symmetries. Additionally, these modes have certain associations within Messiaen's sound-color synesthetic system. For example, Messiaen variously explains mode two as blue-violet rocks, gold spirals on a brown background, and as foliage-green with bits of blue.[147] Within *Des canyons*, both the modes and their color associations are of prime importance. They may represent actual colors or more figuratively signal the divine state of the observed natural environment.

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[145] Ibid., 58.

[146] Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 46-47.

[147] Shenton, *Olivier Messiaen's System of Signs*, 50.

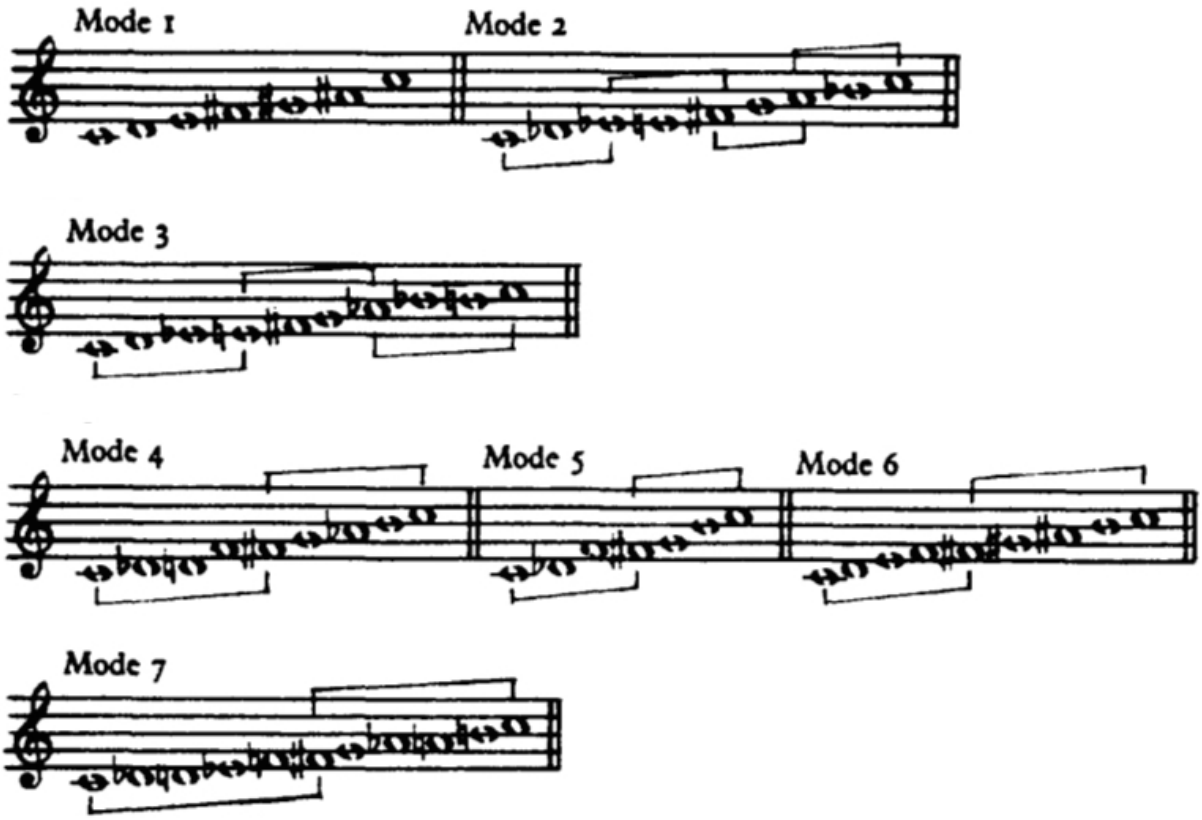


Figure 2.3 The modes of limited transposition[148]

The fourth movement of *Des canyons*, "*Le Cossyphe d'Heuglin*" [The White-Browed Robin] contains the particular modes that evoke the colors of the robin, as Messiaen indicates in the introductory text for this movement.[149] In figure 2.4 (see p. 50), the upper voice clearly demonstrates the pattern of mode six beginning on A. Messiaen states that this mode corresponds to the colors of brown, red, orange, and violet[150]—the coloration of both the male and female white-browed robin. Other modes present in the movement include

[148] Donald Street, "The Modes of Limited Transposition," *The Musical Times* 117, no. 1604 (1976): 819.

[149] Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*, 14.

[150] Ibid., 14.

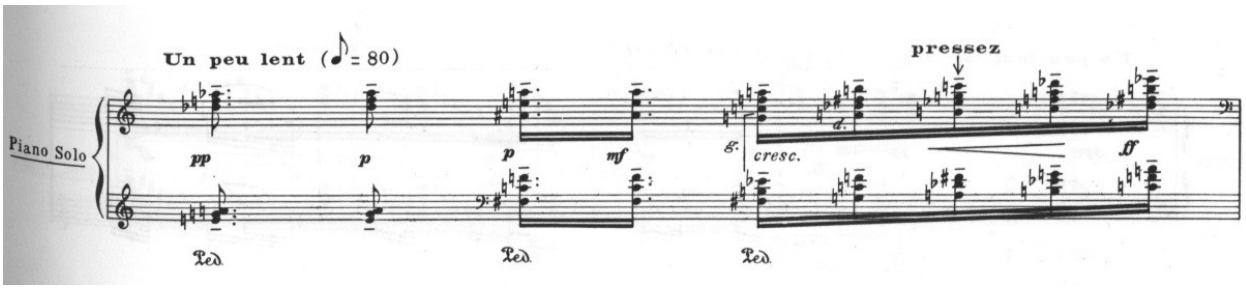


Figure 2.4 One example of the modes of limited transposition in *Des canyons*[151]

modes two (in this case green) and mode four (yellow and violet).[152] More than indicating Messiaen's sound-color synaesthesia, the modes of limited transposition indicate religious connotations. Messiaen repeatedly evokes God after each iteration of the white-browed robin's song by utilizing melodic gestures based upon these modes. Thus, he constructs a "sublimely ordered sonic universe," as Bruhn suggests.

Vertical symmetries, Bruhn argues, suggest a terrestrial world that can and should mirror the heavenly world.[153] They consist of vertically arranged chords that mirror themselves around a central pivot point. For example, if one were to play a chord of C, F-sharp, and C, he or she would construct a vertical symmetry by dividing the octave precisely in half; F-sharp functions as a pivot while the Cs are a tritone away in either direction. A fully-diminished seventh chord (for example, B, D, F, and A-flat) also exhibits vertical symmetry. A pivot point here is implied halfway between the D and F within the chord. Since these vertical symmetries point toward the spiritual realm of heaven, Messiaen's use of

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[151] Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*, 99.

[152] Ibid., 14.

[153] Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation,* 47-50.

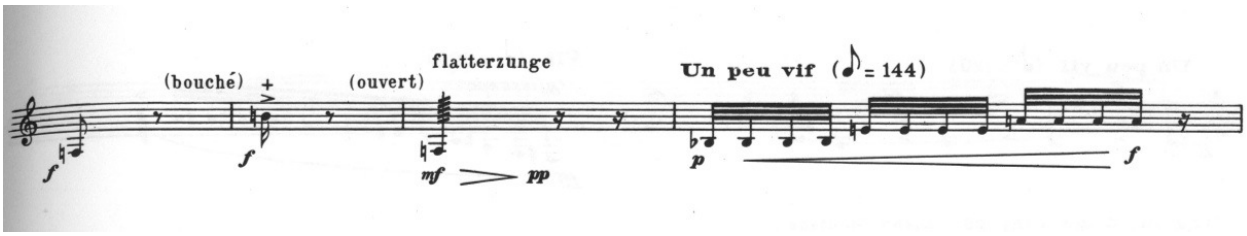


Figure 2.5 Vertical symmetry in "*Appel interstellaire*"[154]

them in depicting worldly places suggests a terrestrial realm in music that mirrors the spiritual realm.

One could speculate that due to his Catholic sensibilities, Messiaen saw Christ as akin to a pivot point, mediating between heaven and earth through his dual human-divine nature. Messiaen's view that birds and nature can resolve worldly and heavenly influences also works as a pivot of sorts that lends symbolic weight to this musical gesture. These vertically symmetrical pitch collections can be drawn out melodically over the course of a measure or presented homophonically. For example, in the sixth movement of *Des canyons*, "*Appel interstellaire*" [Interstellar call], one such vertical symmetry occurs. Here the symmetry occurs over the course of a measure and consists of two fourths: B-flat to E and E to A (see figure 2.5, above). By incorporating this gesture into a movement meant to symbolize a call to the beyond, Messiaen suggests the heaven-earth mirroring described above.

Growth of intervals serves a similar purpose. Messiaen made a note of their significance in the aforementioned notes to *La Nativité* (see p. 47-48). Melodically, such growth consists of intervalic gestures that widen over time (i.e. a static bass note from which a higher note continually drifts away). Alternatively, this growth may occur between

[154] Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*, 305.

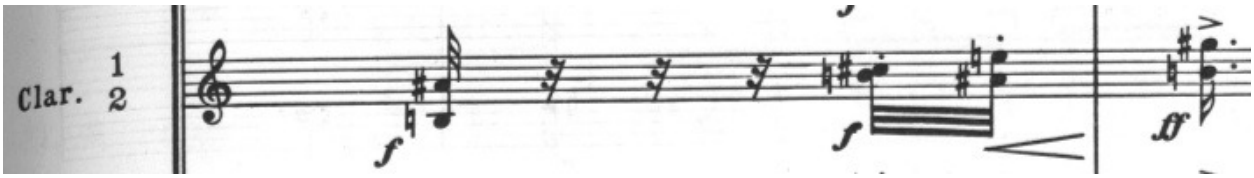


Figure 2.6 Growth in "*Omao, Leiothrix, Elepaio, Shama*"[155]

independently moving voices. For example, in the eleventh movement of *Des canyons*, "*Omao, Leiothrix, Elepaio, Shama*" [Hawaiian Thrush, Red-billed Mesia, Elepaio, White-rumped Shama], titled for the four birds depicted in it, the trumpets, oboes, and clarinets show intervallic growth. The clarinets provide an especially clear example (see figure 2.6, above), moving from a second, to a fifth, to a sixth. Bruhn states, "growth processes are found above all when music depicts God's Creation through the power of His Word"[156] Ultimately, she argues that growing intervals signify the "transformation of the God-seeking soul."[157] They reach upward, stretching toward heaven in an attempt at spiritual fulfillment. Further, I implicate the related technique of sweeping upward gestures as religious in character, mirroring the soul's rise into heaven. These are much like growing intervals, but lack the static bass note (see figure 3.8, p. 86). Vertical symmetries, growing intervals, and sweeping upward gestures thus carry religious meaning in *Des canyons*, suggesting that the natural environments represented in the music reflect the Aquinian "nature as embodiment of God" concept.

Rhythmically, Messiaen integrates religious symbolism through non-retrogradable rhythms and augmentation of existing rhythms. I also read the juxtaposition of three against

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[155] Ibid., 371.

[156] Ibid., 54.

[157] Ibid., 61.

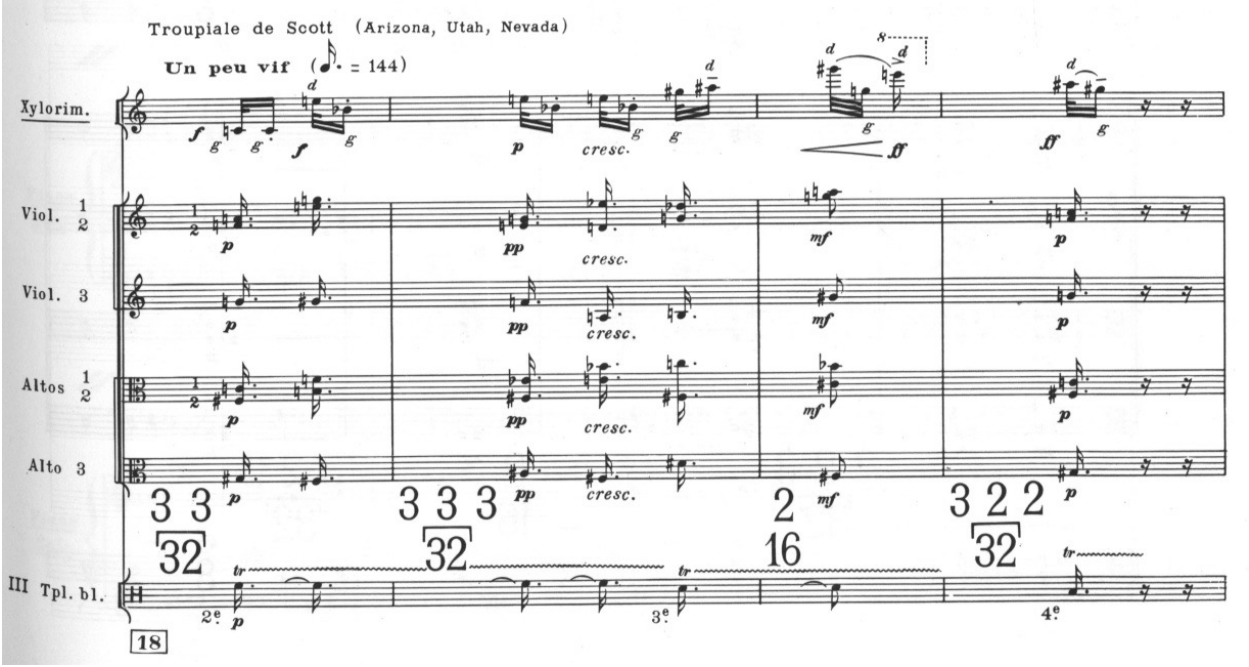


Figure 2.7 Alternation between divisions of two and three[158]

two (or rapid transition between triple and duple divisions of the beat) as a merging of the divine (three) with the terrestrial (two). This stems in part from the idea of the Trinity. Bruhn stated "the number two often stands for Jesus's human-divine nature, while the number three is an obvious symbol of the Trinity, the triune God, and (by extrapolation) of the divine in general."[159] In *Des canyons* this three against two appears with relative frequency. One example occurs in the second movement, "*Les Orioles*" [The Orioles] (see figure 2.7, above). The metrical shifts make it difficult to locate the downbeat and symbolically negotiate the perfection of three and imperfection of two. The addition of a peaceful bird (the *Troupiale de Scott*) that traditionally negotiates heaven and earth in Messiaen's music, strengthens such an interpretation of this musical gesture. Thus, religious symbolism

[158] Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*, 51.

[159] Bruhn, *Messsiaen's Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity*, 42.

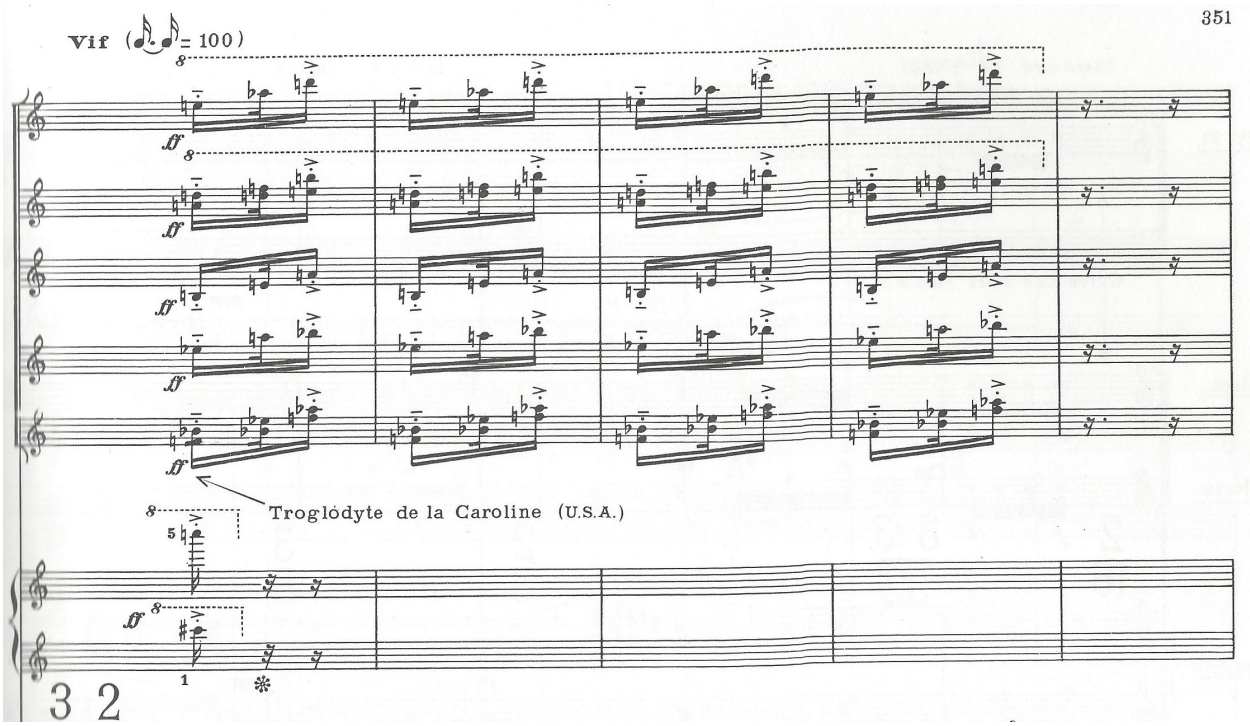


Figure 2.8 Non-retrogradable rhythms in "*La Grive des bois*"[160]

coincides with a birdsong, suggesting the section has a deep spirituality connected to both nature and pacifism. The resulting political undertones gesture toward Messiaen's desire for peace between humanity and the environment, achieved through religious ideals.

Non-retrogradable rhythms simply show symmetry; they are, in essence, rhythmic palindromes that express the same principles as the modes of limited transposition. If one were to play them in retrograde, the resulting rhythm would be identical to the original. In this manner, these rhythms relate to the modes of limited transposition. Messiaen states in his *Technique of My Musical Language* that "the modes of limited transposition realize in the vertical direction (transposition) what non-retrogradable rhythms realize in the horizontal direction (retrogradation)," each creating within music a sort of "*theological rainbow*" that

[160] Ibid., 351.

leads to God.[161] In *Des canyons*, the tenth movement, "*La Grive des bois*" [The Wood Thrush], provides an example (see figure 2.8, p. 54). At rehearsal figure eighteen, the cellos, violas, and winds repeat the non-retrogradable rhythm of sixteenth, thirty-second, sixteenth, four times. These gestures confirm through musical symbolism Messiaen's association between the song of the Carolina Wren (labeled *Troglodyte de la Caroline* in the score)—coincident with this example—and God. Messiaen stated in the notes for this movement, "It [the Carolina Wren's song] is a secret love between the soul and God."[162] He thus grants a certain divinity not only to the bird itself, but also to its sounding call.

The augmentation of rhythms also provides religious symbolism. Shenton explains that augmentation can occur in two ways: (1) through the addition of some value such as an extra dot, note, or rest to an existing rhythm or (2) through augmentation in the traditional sense.[163] Bruhn argues that the former of these signifies God's divine love for all creatures both big and small because it transcendes the regularity of beats.[164] Since the addition of something as small as a dot causes drastic change to the rhythmic makeup of a musical work, it mirrors the immense changes that can occur when a single creature becomes absent from an ecosystem. This final sentiment has great implications for constructing an environmentalist reading of *Des canyons*. One example of augmented rhythm occurs in the second movement, *"Les Orioles*." The rhythmic gesture (see figure 2.9, p. 56) first appears at rehearsal figure eight. Until rehearsal figure sixteen, each return of this thematic material has an identical rhythmic makeup. However, at one bar after rehearsal sixteen, Messiaen

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[161] Messiaen, *Technique of My Musical Language*, 21 & 62-63.

[162] Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*, 18.

[163] Shenton, *Olivier Messiaen's System of Signs*, 36.

[164] Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 56-61.

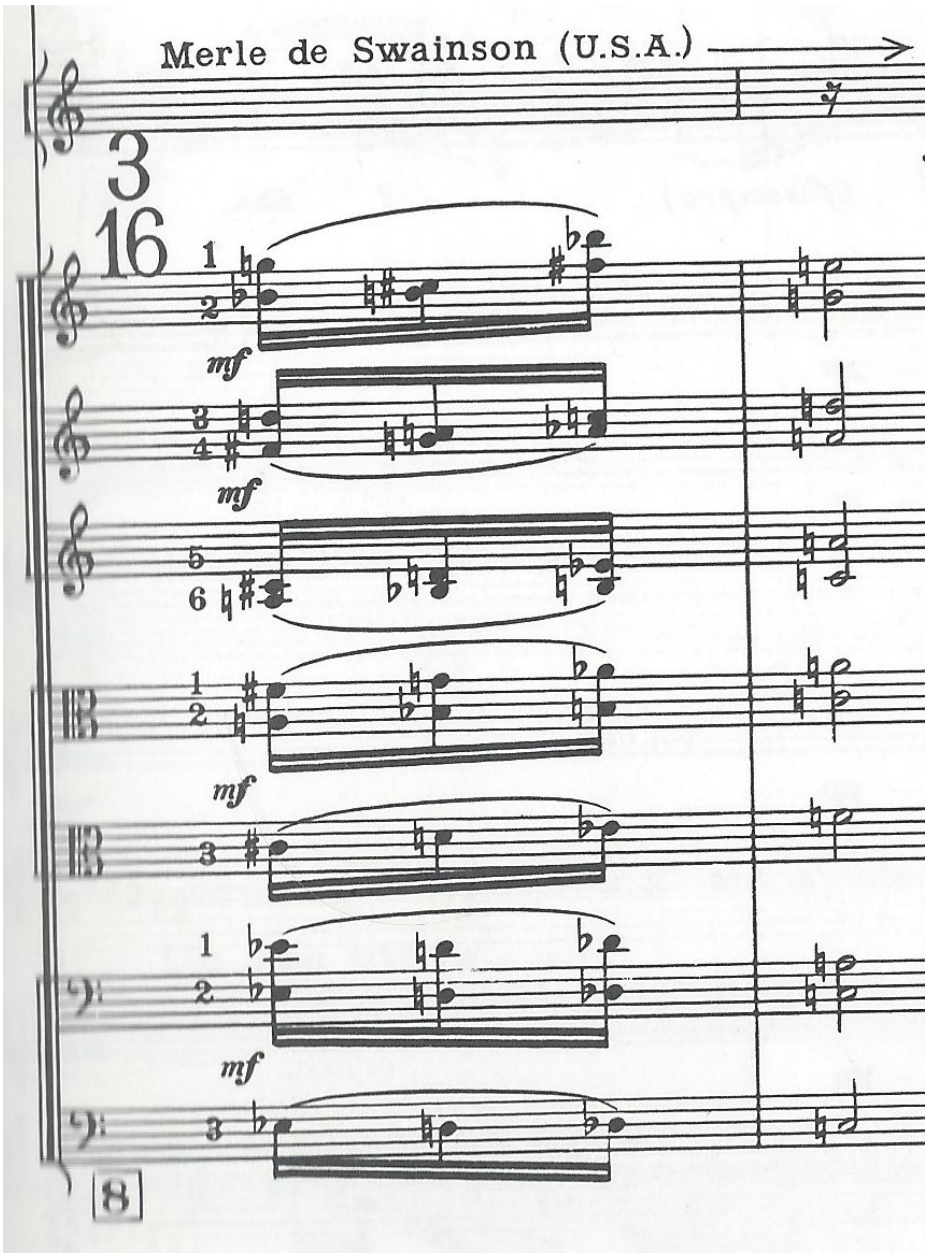


Figure 2.9 First instance of "*Les Orioles*" rhythm later augmented[165]

[165] Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*, 47.

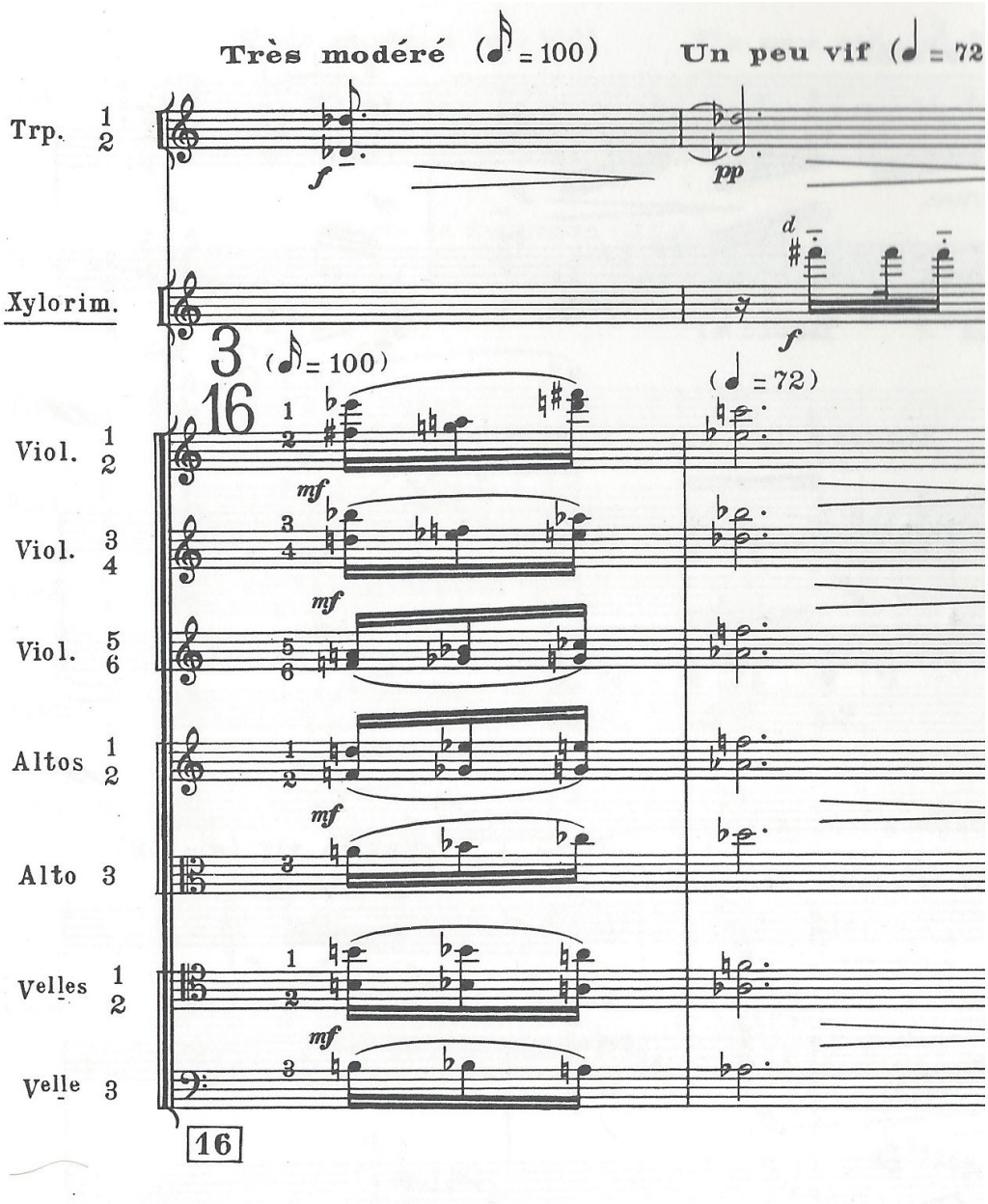


Figure 2.10 Augmentation of the rhythm in figure 2.9[166]

[166] Ibid., 50.

extends the final note value from a half note to a dotted half note (see figure 2.10, p. 57). He thus gestures toward the value of all creatures, including the many orioles in the movement.

Two more religious gestures, explicated by van Maas, are evident through close score analysis and further inform an understanding of Messiaen's theology. First, van Maas shows that Messiaen emphasizes the notion of *éblouissement* [dazzlement]. This dazzlement concept consists of an overwhelming of the senses brought about by music.[167] The result is an extra-musical religious experience for the listener. Further, the idea implicates Messiaen's synesthesia—*éblouissement* inundates the senses, compelling the listener to a religious experience.

Van Maas mentions that dazzlement relates to the idea of saturation, common to Messiaen's music. However, he notes that in the sensory saturation of *éblouissement*, more than the mere chromatic saturation (all 12 tones within a given chord or rhythm) is required. He suggests that dazzlement cannot be defined in musicotheoreical terms alone, but rather is based upon a sensation and experience, or "a phenomenon saturated with intuition" in the words of philosopher Luc Marion.[168] This spiritual excess then, depends on context and subjective perception in addition to compositional technique. One such example occurs in the seventh movement, "*Bryce Canyon et les rochers rouge-orange*" [Bryce Canyons and the red-orange rocks]. At rehearsal figure seven, Messiaen saturates the music with all twelve chromatic tones over the course of the passage (some spelled in several ways), suggesting spiritual transcendence (see figure 2.11, p. 59). By incorporating an instance of *éblouissement* in

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[167] van Mass, *Reinvention of Religious Music*, 32.

[168] Ibid., 89-90.

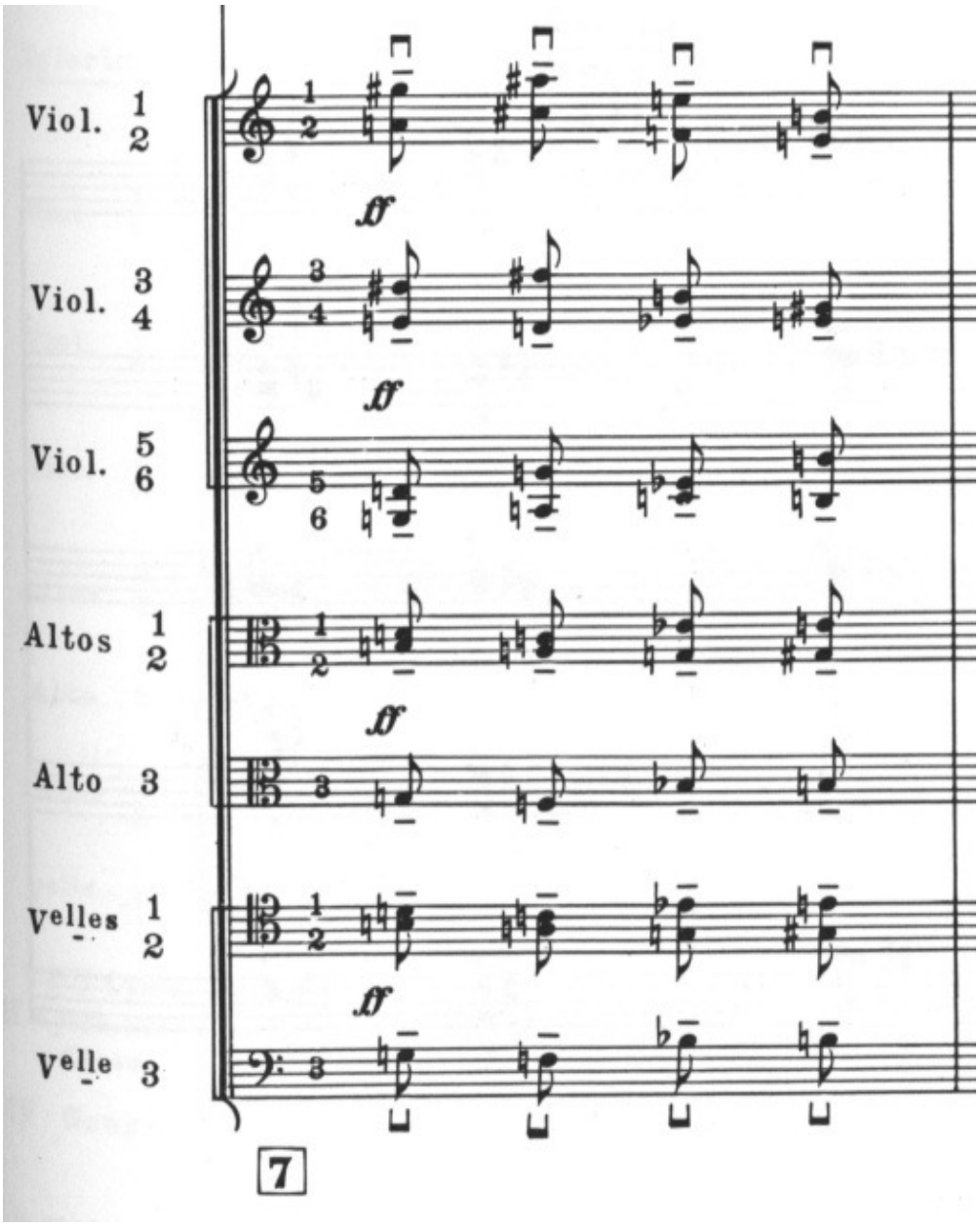


Figure 2.11 *Éboulissement* in *Bryce Canyon et les rochers rouge-orange*[169]

[169] Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*, 169.

his musical representation of Bryce Canyon, Messiaen mirrored the spiritual reaction of Mormon homesteader Ebenezer Bryce, for whom the park is named (see Chapter 1).[170]

Conclusion

This consideration of the historical and biographical context for Messiaen's faith illuminates his theological attitudes toward nature. Messiaen saw the whole of creation as the personal artwork of God. Beauty, thus, is more than merely earthly and physical—it is divine and heavenly. Messiaen drew inspiration from Aquinas, von Balthasar, and Saint Francis, confirming his belief in the intrinsic divine value of creation itself. Ultimately, this relationship boils down to a view that holds all non-human creation as divine. Further, it prompted him to utilize nature in his music in order to negotiate the gap between humanity and heaven. For Messiaen, music had the mysterious quality of pacifying the human soul and glorifying the divine God. Furthermore, the score analysis presented herein makes clear his musical renditions of this divine conception of nature. His use of vertical symmetry, non-retrogradable rhythm, the modes of limited transposition, and other techniques all create an otherworldly effect in *Des canyons* that generate a spiritual experience in the listener. Above all, Messiaen's religious attitude has been revealed as all-encompassing—for Olivier Messiaen "all is prayer."[171] Indeed, Messiaen himself put it best in an interview with Claude Samuel. In reference to a discussion about both Catholicism and nature Messiaen said, "they are resolved finally in one and the same idea: Divine Love!"[172]

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[170] "The Empire of Grandeur," episode 3 from *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*, directed by Ken Burns (2009), Netflix, accessed 25 April 2014.

[171] Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 35.

[172] Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, 14.

Chapter 3: Creating a Divine Sense of Place

"For Nature beats in perfect tune,
And rounds with rhyme her every rune,
Whether she work in land or sea,
Or hide underground her alchemy."
—Ralph Waldo Emerson[173]

Much like religion, the experience of nature greatly affected Messiaen's worldview. Together, his early life experiences in Grenoble and Aube, his preoccupation with birds, and his friendships with ornithologists led to a number of musical works inspired by the natural environment. The prominent musical expressions of nature in his output, mingled with his well-established religious musical goals, suggest that nature and religion exerted similar levels of influence upon the composer. Furthermore, as a musician, Messiaen countered the extreme visualism of Western culture, attempting to attend to auditory as well as visual stimuli from the natural environment in his compositions. Landscape plays a particular role in this process as it encompasses both visual and more holistic aspects of experience. Daniel Grimley related that "landscape and nature can also be understood in more abstract ways, as particular means of organizing musical time and space."[174] These influences of faith, nature, and music each affected Messiaen's worldview and consequently, his music.

In *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*, Messiaen engages with both religion and the natural world, creating an atmosphere that expresses a politically environmentalist sentiment. Ultimately, this stems both from his religious beliefs and his musical values. In this chapter I focus on Messiaen's engagement with both deep and shallow ecological thought as defined

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[173] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Woodnotes II," in *Collected Poems and Translations* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1994), 45.

[174] Daniel Grimley, *Grieg: Music, Landscape, and Norwegian Identity* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2006), 56.

by Arne Naess. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, nature has deep-level intrinsic value to Messiaen by right of being a divine creation; its divinity gives it value in its own right. He also held the shallow-level belief that the natural environment has practical value; he utilized his impressions of natural sounds and sights to create human music.

As I have demonstrated, Messiaen composed *Des canyons* from a subjective rather than objective standpoint. My premise has relied on the ideas of Yi-Fu Tuan who argued for subjective experience as the primary way in which "place" is created from "space." These closely related terms illustrate a key political aspect of Messiaen's composition. According to Yi-Fu Tuan, "if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place."[175] Also considering Tuan's argument that space becomes place through the acquisition of "definition and meaning,"[176] I treat *Des canyons* as a soundscape—which consists of sound, setting, and significance. Since Messiaen added meaning to this virtual space, translated through his subjective experience, I suggest the following: Messiaen took the *sonic space* of the Utah canyons and transformed it into a *sonic place* through *Des canyons*.

Messiaen's depiction of nature and divinity in *Des canyons* makes use of several sensory inputs he experienced while in Utah. Don Ihde demonstrated the tendency in Western culture toward reducing a thing to its visual attributes, arguing that humanity must also attend to the auditory. Tracing visualism back to its roots in Greek philosophy, he implicates the Western philosophical tradition for failing to address the other senses more

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[175] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6.

[176] Ibid., 136.

fully; accordingly, he calls for the development of a phenomenology of sound.[177] He stated that "*it is to the invisible that listening may attend*."[178] Messiaen certainly attends to the invisible in *Des canyons* in dealing with spiritual matters and auditory markers, but visual impressions of the specific Utah landscapes also play a part.

Taking this idea a step further, Feld concludes that the notion of place, in essence, is a phenomenon intimately linked to and dependent upon the senses. He sums up this argument by stating, "places make sense, senses make place."[179] Indeed, the common idiom "sense of place" points to the truth of Feld's conclusion. Messiaen's creation of sonic place within *Des canyons* utilizes sound, and thus the sense of hearing, to convey both auditory and visual attributes of Utah.

In order to reveal these themes, this chapter addresses the biographical events that led Messiaen to develop such a strong connection to nature, with special emphasis placed on the events surrounding the composition of *Des canyons*. I then interpret these events and the music within the politically charged deep-shallow scheme suggested by Arne Naess and explained in Chapter 1. To review, shallow-level ecological engagement focuses on human gains and losses, making it an anthropocentric approach. Deep-level ecology takes the human as a part in an overall ecosystem, eschewing anthropocentrism in favor of a more holistic approach.[180] I address these political and philosophical notions in relation to

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[177] Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 15.

[178] Ibid., 14. Emphasis original.

[179] Steven Feld, "Places Sensed, Senses Placed: Toward a Sensuous Epistemology of Environments," in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (New York: Berg, 2005), 179.

[180] Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, trans. David Rothenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 28.

landscape, soundscape, music, and place. I also provide an overview of the musical techniques that Messiaen utilized to represent natural phenomena in *Des canyons*. Following this, I give a politicized reading of the work, focusing especially on the fifth, seventh, and twelfth movements as they correspond most directly to the Utah locations Messiaen visited.

As an external statement by Messiaen's addressing ecological concerns, *Des canyons* is meant for the "glorification of God in all his creation" including earth, sky, and heaven.[181] In this manner, Messiaen implied a political sentiment favoring a peaceful and sustainable relationship between humanity and nature. I propose that Messiaen's engagement with place on both deep and shallow levels within the music of *Des canyons* demonstrates this subtle interaction with the environmental issues at the fore of the American public consciousness during the 1970s. To this end, I share the events surrounding the naming of Mount Messiaen as evidence of the political power of the piece.

Influence of Nature

Similar to his claim to have been "born a [religious] believer," Messiaen's connection to nature traces back to his infancy. Even while pregnant, his mother Cécile Sauvage (1883-1927) began writing a volume of poetry for him. This collection, entitled *L'âme en bourgeon* [The Soul in Bud][182] and completed shortly after Olivier's birth, frequently evokes both nature and music, much like Cécile's other poetry and Olivier's future compositions. She once wrote to her husband Pierre Messiaen about time spent reading *L'âme en bourgeon* to Olivier: "It's for you, I said to him [Olivier], with its bees and grasshoppers. Mummy, he

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[181] Olivier Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1978), 13. My translation.

[182] Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 10.

said, you're a poet just like Shakespeare. Like him, you have suns, planets, ants, frightening skeletons. I prefer things which are frightening."[183] Olivier's preference for the frightening things foreshadows his musical portrayal of fearful forces in his compositions (see *Le merle de roche* below or *Messe de la Pentacôte* in Chapter 2). It appears that Messiaen's parents each instilled a particular passion within the young composer—his father, Catholicism, and his mother, love of nature.

Prior to his family's move to Nantes, Messiaen, along with his mother and grandmother, lived in Grenoble in his uncle André Sauvage's apartment during the five years of World War I. The time spent in this place proved an important developmental period for him. He said of those years, "Here I spent the formative years of my life, those when the personality forms: I was five when I arrived in Grenoble and ten when I left. . . . But I have never forgotten Grenoble with its marvellous mountain landscape . . . It was in Grenoble that I realized I was a musician."[184] Apparently, even early in his life Messiaen associated both visual and aural perception with artistic expression. Further, time spent on his aunts' farm in Aube served to solidify this sentiment; it even prefigured his compositional obsession with birdsong. He later reported to Claude Samuel, "My memories [of nature] go back to the age of fourteen or fifteen . . . The Aube countryside is very beautiful and very simple: the plain, its big fields surrounded by trees, magnificent dawns and sunsets, and a great many birds. It was there that I first began noting down birdsong."[185] In combination, Messiaen's experiences in Grenoble and Aube, and his mother's artistic use of nature seem to have inspired his interest in the musical usage of natural influences.

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[183] Ibid., 10.

[184] Ibid., 12.

[185] Ibid., 8.

It wasn't until after he explored musical representations of religion that Messiaen fully developed his compositional approach to nature, though he did clearly make use of birdsong in *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps* in 1941. Fallon argues that he included birdsong tropes in compositions as early as 1929, calling this initial unlabeled use of birdsong-like figures before the 1950s his "early bird style."[186] However, it is what Fallon calls Messiaen's "late bird style" that concerns us here since *Des canyons* was composed during this period.

This "late bird style" began with *Réveil des oiseaux* in 1953.[187] In this work, and the vast majority of his subsequent musical output, Messiaen drew upon his birdsong transcriptions for melodic and harmonic material.[188] Furthermore, throughout the rest of the 1950s, Messiaen met and befriended many well-known ornithologists. First among these bird watching gurus was Jacques Delamain (1874-1953), whom he met in 1952,[189] author of a well-known field guide to France's birds, *Portraits d'oiseaux*.[190] As shown in Chapter 1, Delemain had a strong influence on Messiaen's work *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (1956-1958) in particular. The music of *Catalogue* evokes not only the birds and their behaviors, but also the birds' habitat, cohabitant species, and the time of day and year one would most likely see or hear them.[191] Thus, Messiaen's ornithological interests include more than just aspects of biology and

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[186] Robert Fallon, "Messiaen's Mimesis: The Language and Culture of the Bird Styles" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2005), ProQuest (AAT 3210577) , 87-88.

[187] Ibid., 198.

[188] Ibid., 87.

[189] Ibid., 94.

[190] Rachel Mundy, "Nature's Music: Birds, Beasts, and Evolutionary Listening in the Twentieth Century" (PhD diss., New York University, 2010), ProQuest (AAT 3427957), 193.

[191] Ibid., 252.

visual stimuli, the traditional foci of ornithological study. He also gave attention to the sonic markers of the birds and their natural environments.

Messiaen attempted to synthesize an accurate, albeit subjective, portrayal of natural soundscapes through musical expression. He transcribed birdsongs and then put them through a conversion process enabling their use in music, as I explain further below. Even when looking back to his early birdsong works, one finds extreme attention to detail. Indeed, in reference to one of Messiaen's earliest birdsong works, *Réveil des oiseaux* (1953), Norman Demuth concluded that "it could almost be described as a transcription for orchestra of a natural phenomenon."[192] Moreover, Messiaen explicitly expressed this goal. In a 1959 seminar on "*Le merle de roche*" [The Rock Thrush] from *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, Messiaen detailed the appearance of the bird, speaking of its beautiful plumage and coloring and explicating the differences between the male and female of the species.[193] He then described the setting in which one finds the bird, pointing out the cliffs' grave appearance and passing around photos for the students to examine.[194] "*Le merle*" also represents other birds that were present at the location at different times of day. For example the cliffs and the late-night great horned owl represent fearful forces. In *Des canyons*, Messiaen similarly contextualized his usage of birdsong through sonic considerations of appropriate landscapes. Indeed, all twelve movements contain avian vocalizations, all based on real life models.

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[192] Norman Demuth, "Messiaen's Early Birds" *The Musical Times* 101, no. 1412 (1960): 628.

[193] Olivier Messiaen and Jean Boivin, "Bird Music," trans. Arthur Goldhammer, *Grand Street* 55: "Egos" (1996): 136.

[194] Ibid., 136.

Imagination plays a major role in the interpretation of birdsong and landscape in the highly subjective compositional process. In the class on "*Le merle*," Messiaen revealed that he made no attempts to remain objective during his observations when he described a series of rocks as ghosts. He stated "here, you see, imagination and landscape play a part."[195] In this way Messiaen creates a soundscape piece, incorporating the sounds of birdsong, the setting of those sounds, and the personal significance of the sounds into the music.

These same factors play a role in *Des canyons*. The second movement, "*Les Orioles*," for example, contains musical references to a total of eight birds. Incorporated with these birdsongs are keynote sounds evoking the openness of canyon landscapes. The *éoliphone* proffers one such keynote while short homophonic passages provide a musical backdrop. Thus, it is apparent that Messiaen sought to provide a faithful, rather than fanciful, depiction of both bird and place. He memorialized not only the relevant birdsong but also the environment in which the bird may be observed, and in so doing indirectly fulfilled a goal of the Wilderness Act (1964). In particular, this act meant to "preserve for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness."[196]

However, the accuracy of Messiaen's portrayal of birdsong has been a topic of much contention among both critics and scholars alike. Fallon argued that assessing the precision of Messiaen's birdsong style allows a deeper understanding of his bird aesthetic. By matching a bird's song to the correct habitat or place, Messiaen reveals his respect for nature sounds outside of their musical application. Assessing accuracy, however, necessitates

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[195] Ibid., 137.

[196] Joseph M. Petulla, *American Environmentalism: Values, Tactics, Priorities* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1980), 47.

an understanding of his models for representing nature in music. Messiaen did not literally transcribe birdsong into his compositions. Instead, he reinterpreted it. Fallon found that Messiaen conformed to his own models of altered tempo, tessitura, tuning, and timbre about two-thirds of the time; the purpose of these alterations was to make the often too-high and microtonal birdsong playable for human performers using instruments tuned to equal temperament.[197]

Messiaen laid out the compositional model he used to alter birdsong in a conversation with Samuel:

> A bird . . . sings in extremely swift tempos, absolutely impossible for our instruments. I'm therefore obliged to transcribe the song into a slower tempo. Moreover, this rapidity is combined with an extreme shrillness, for birds are able to sing in extremely high registers that cannot be reproduced on our instruments; so I write one, two or three octaves lower. And that's not the only adjustment: for the same reasons I'm obliged to eliminate any tiny intervals that our instruments cannot execute. I replace those intervals . . . by semitones, but I respect the scale of values, which is to say . . . all are enlarged, but the proportions remain identical, and as a result, what I restore is nevertheless exact. It's a transposition of what I heard, but on a more human scale.[198]

Thus, Messiaen's model for transforming birdsong into human musical material addressed three parameters. He altered tempo, register, and intervals in order to make his transcriptions playable on the instruments available to him. In her review of a concert of six

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[197] Fallon, "Messiaen's Mimesis," 199-200.

[198] Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 58.

piano birdsong works (an early stage of *Catalogue d'oiseaux*), Suzanne Demarquez called the pieces "translations"[199] of birdsong, capturing the essence of Messiaen's results.

One can also assess Messiaen's faithfulness in reproducing a birdsong by determining if he associated the species depicted with the correct habitat. Fallon's comprehensive catalog of Messiaen's birdsong usage from *Quatuor* in 1941 until his death proves an indispensable resource in this endeavor.[200] The entry for *Des Canyons*[201] reveals that, as a whole, the work makes sixty-seven separate references to North American birds and thirty references to birds not native to the North American continent. Messiaen used exclusively North American birds in the three movements titled after Cedar Breaks, Bryce Canyon, and Zion Park (movements 5, 7, and 12 respectively). This suggests that he sought more accuracy in these movements than in others, perhaps due to his more intimate connection with these places.

Alterations to natural sound for the purposes of human consumption directly relates to Naess's concept of shallow ecology—it is anthropocentric. Natural sound is collected, altered, and packaged out for the human consumer. Messiaen's association of birds with God (see Chapter 2) confirms that birdsong functions also as an example of deep ecology. As argued in Chapter 2, birds and nature mediate between the earthly and the heavenly. This liminality mirrors their ability to straddle the deep-shallow divide. Thus, Messiaen's usage of natural sound does not only mediate between heaven and earth, it connects him to both sides of Naess's political spectrum for ecological thought.

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[199] Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 221.

[200] Robert Fallon, "A Catalogue of Messiaen's Birds," in *Messiaen Perspectives 2*, ed. Christopher Dingle and Robert Fallon (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013), 112-146.

[201] Ibid., 135-139.

Subtle Civics: Aspects of Messiaen's Environmental Politics and Philosophy

Starting from Philip Bohlman's idea that any attempt to depoliticize music is in itself an essentializing act and "the most hegemonic form of politicizing music,"[202] my goal here is to demonstrate Messiaen's political engagement. Through his subtle incorporation of political influences, couched in religious metaphor, Messiaen expressed his views in his musical works. Robert Fallon argues, "Messiaen devoted himself to birdsong in part because of politics."[203] Messiaen's apparent non-engagement with politics actually constituted an attempt to find a new path, to break new ground, and to show it through music. Birdsong provided the opportunity to break free from the dominant political discourse and connect all aspects of Messiaen's influences in the composition of *Des canyons*: God, nature, and politics.

A precedent for developing politicized readings of Messiaen's music exists. Fallon argued that in *Messe de la Pentecôte*, Messiaen displays the work's political underpinnings through religious metaphor.[204] Armed with an understanding of Messiaen's religious worldview, Fallon makes the subtext clear: nuclear anxiety. This anxiety, he explained, is one rooted in fear of "the Cold War assault on peace and freedom."[205] The evil stems not from the weapon itself, but from human agency that results in its use. Indeed Fallon stated, "if the beast is part of creation, so too is nuclear weaponry. By affirming that all creation comes

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[202] Philip V. Bohlman, "Musicology as a Political Act," *Journal of Musicology*, no. 11 (1993): 419.

[203] Fallon, "Messiaen's Mimesis," 224.

[204] Robert Fallon, "Birds, Beasts, and Bombs in Messiaen's Cold War Mass," *The Journal of Musicology* 26, no. 2 (2009), 204.

[205] Ibid., 203.

from God, the movement (*Offertoire*) insists that the beast must be accepted."[206] From this it follows that Messiaen's fear centers around war rather than weaponry.

Des canyons, subtler still in its political positioning than the post-war organ works, also promulgated pacifism through symbolism. In this instance, Messiaen sought to support peace between humankind and nature. Unlike in the *Messe*, he doesn't liken human destructive force to the Beast of the Apocalypse. However, he does place humanity and the natural environment into dialogue with one another. Similar to his acceptance of the atomic bomb as a part of God's creation, Messiaen must have accepted that humanity needs to utilize environmental resources. In fact his own appropriation of avian vocalizations for compositional material would be viewed in this vein. More profoundly, in *Des canyons* he uses the same metaphors for peace, namely birds and birdsong, as he did in the *Messe*.

His music fulfills an American environmentalist ethical goal of his time. Joseph Petulla related this goal, saying it is "one based on respect for the natural environment rather than its exploitation for little more than increased profits."[207] National parks and shared public spaces features in related debates. Indeed, while protesting dam construction in the Grand Canyon in 1963, David Brower, executive director of the Sierra Club, took out ads in the *New York Times* and other papers making statements such as, "Should we also flood the Sistine Chapel so tourists can get nearer the ceiling?" and "Now only you can save the Grand Canyon from being flooded . . . for profit."[208] The 1972 book *The Limits to Growth* outlines the dangers of overuse of finite natural resources, warning against overpopulation

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[206] Ibid., 198.

[207] Petulla, *American Environmentalism*, 13.

[208] Ibid., 50.

and hyper-industrialization.[209] Messiaen similarly called for a harmonious and sustainable relationship between humanity and Creation.

At the core of this sonic pacifism is the notion that birdsong represents, as musicologist Elizabeth Eva Leach stated, "the emblem of a type of beauty, or better sublimity, that lay outside the realm of art."[210] Schafer also addressed birds as a factor in the soundscape, associating them with delicacy.[211] In this manner, he stated:

> Nature is indeed marvelously beautiful and pacifying, and, for me, ornithological work was not only an element of consolation in my pursuits of musical aesthetics, but also a factor of health. It's perhaps thanks to that work that I was able to withstand the misfortunes and complications of life.[212]

For Messiaen, birdsong thus represented peace and, in a sense, renewal via a spiritual healing. This concept is key to my politicized reading of *Des canyons*. By associating his representations of birdsong and nature in general with peace, the soundscape Messiaen creates in *Des canyons* constitutes a heavenly representation of reality. In this manner, Messiaen's depictions of nature in music simultaneously act as depictions of divine perfection—an example of the peaceable relationship for which he advocated.

Again, Messiaen engaged with both the deep and shallow sides of ecological thought articulated by Arne Naess. Messiaen's utilization and transformation of birdsong in his

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[209] Donella Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York, NY: Universe Books, 1972), 23-25.

[210] Elizabeth Eva Leach, *Sung Birds: Music, Nature, and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 284.

[211] R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994), 106.

[212] Quoted in Fallon, "Birds, Beasts, and Bombs," 189.

works parallel the shallow type of ecology; he actively sought and preserved birdsongs in his transcriptions and then utilized them in composition, adding to the human cultural compendium. Deep ecology, however, rejects anthropocentrism in favor of a holistic view of human identity. This holism operates upon the idea that the relationship between two subjects partially defines both, such that without the relationship the subjects cease to be the same.[213] Put more succinctly, Naess implies that when such a relation ends, the subjects become entirely different subjects. For example, a human is partially defined by his or her environment. If that environment changes in any significant way, the human also changes. In this way, Messiaen's exposure to nature played a role in his process of self-identification as well as the development of his religious ideals (note that Messiaen's ideas concerning nature and religion developed simultaneously). For instance, his experiences in Grenoble prompted his career in music, just as Messiaen's experiences at Cedar Breaks, Bryce Canyon, and Zion Park prompted *Des canyons*.

Sounds (and Sights) of Nature

Messiaen musical language expressing these political beliefs employed both religious symbolism (as explored in Chapter 2) and a musical language for depicting nature. The gestures depicting nature draw upon both auditory and visual stimuli. In a conversation with Claude Samuel Messiaen said, "nature is primarily a very great power in which one can lose oneself, a kind of nirvana, but above all it's a marvellous teacher, and this last aspect of it has

[213] Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 28.

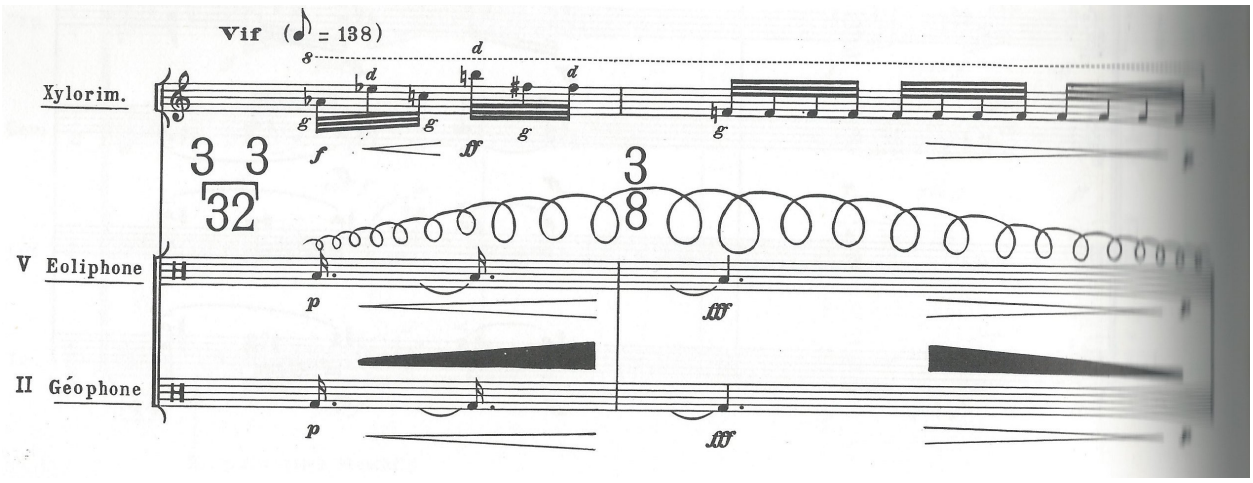


Figure 3.1 The *éoliphone* and the *géophone* in "*Omao, Leiothrix, Elepioa, Shama*"[214]

been very useful to my work."[215] Messiaen's environmental engagement within his music attends to a variety of these visual and auditory aspects.

Considering the emphasis on landscapes in *Des canyons*, it is clear birds do not hold a monopoly as Messiaen's source of aural inspiration found in nature. Indeed, Messiaen clarified this fact stating, "I've listened with intense emotion to the waves of the sea, to mountain torrents and waterfalls, and to all the sounds made by water and wind. And I would add that I make no distinction between noise and sound: for me, all this always represents music."[216] In *Des canyons*, Messiaen demonstrates this propensity via inclusion of the *éoliphone* and *géophone*. These instruments simulate the whistling of powerful winds and the gentle rustling of moving sand, both keynotes of canyon landscapes. Both are heard at two measures after rehearsal figure forty-five of the eleventh movement, "*Omao, Leiothrix,*

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[214] Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*, 414.

[215] Claude Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, trans. Felix Aprahamian (London: Stainer and Bell Limited, 1976), 12.

[216] Ibid., 13.

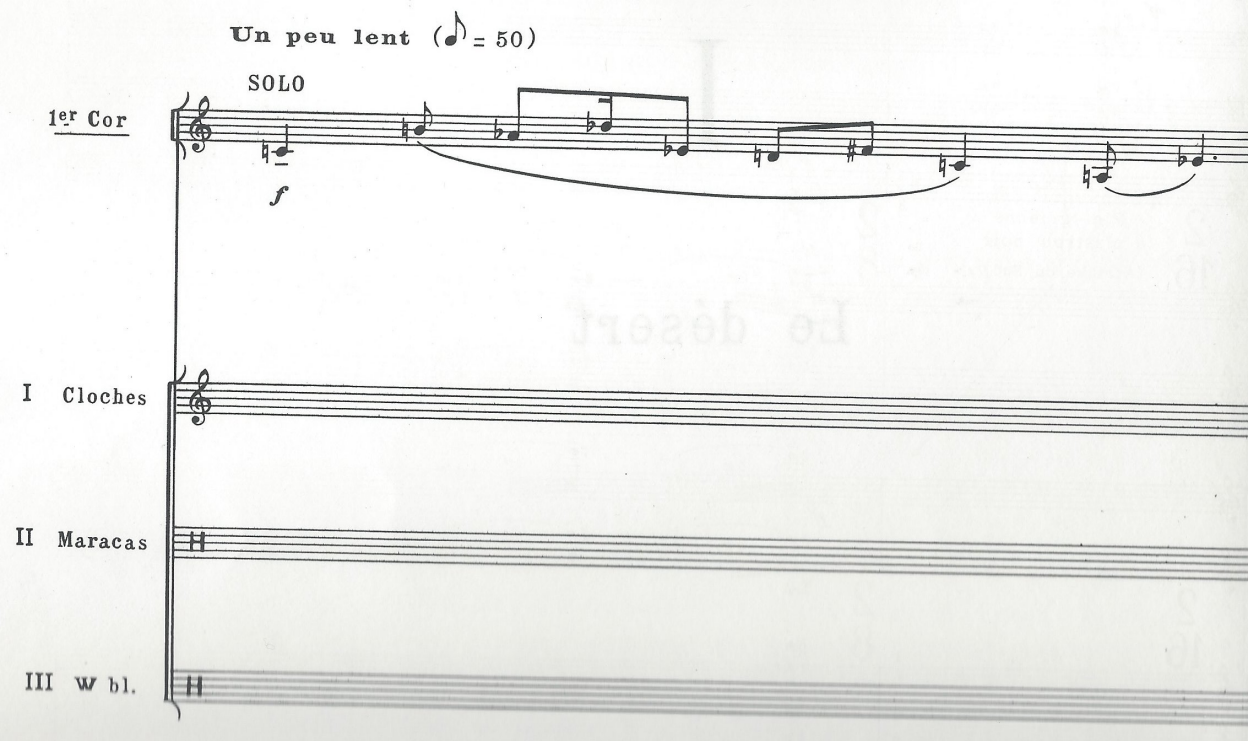


Figure 3.2 Peaceful horn motive[217]

Elepioa, Shama" [Hawaiian Thrus, Red-billed Mesia, Elepaio, White-rumped Shama] (see figure 3.1, p. 75). Even the swirling arch-shaped notation for the *éoliphone* evokes spaciousness. With this, Messiaen adds a concern for geology to his concern for ornithology.

Des canyons begins with a movement that takes advantage of the keynote sound (a la Schafer) of wind in depicting the conditions of desert canyon ecology. Wind was a defining factor of Messiaen's sonic experience in Utah's deserts, providing a constant backdrop for the striking visual effect. In Messiaen's opening commentary for "*Le désert*" [The desert], he describes the emptiness of the desert as a place suited to the interior conversation of the spirit.[218] The piece starts with a solo horn motive (see figure 3.2, above). It gently leaps

[217] Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*, 22.

[218] Ibid., 13.

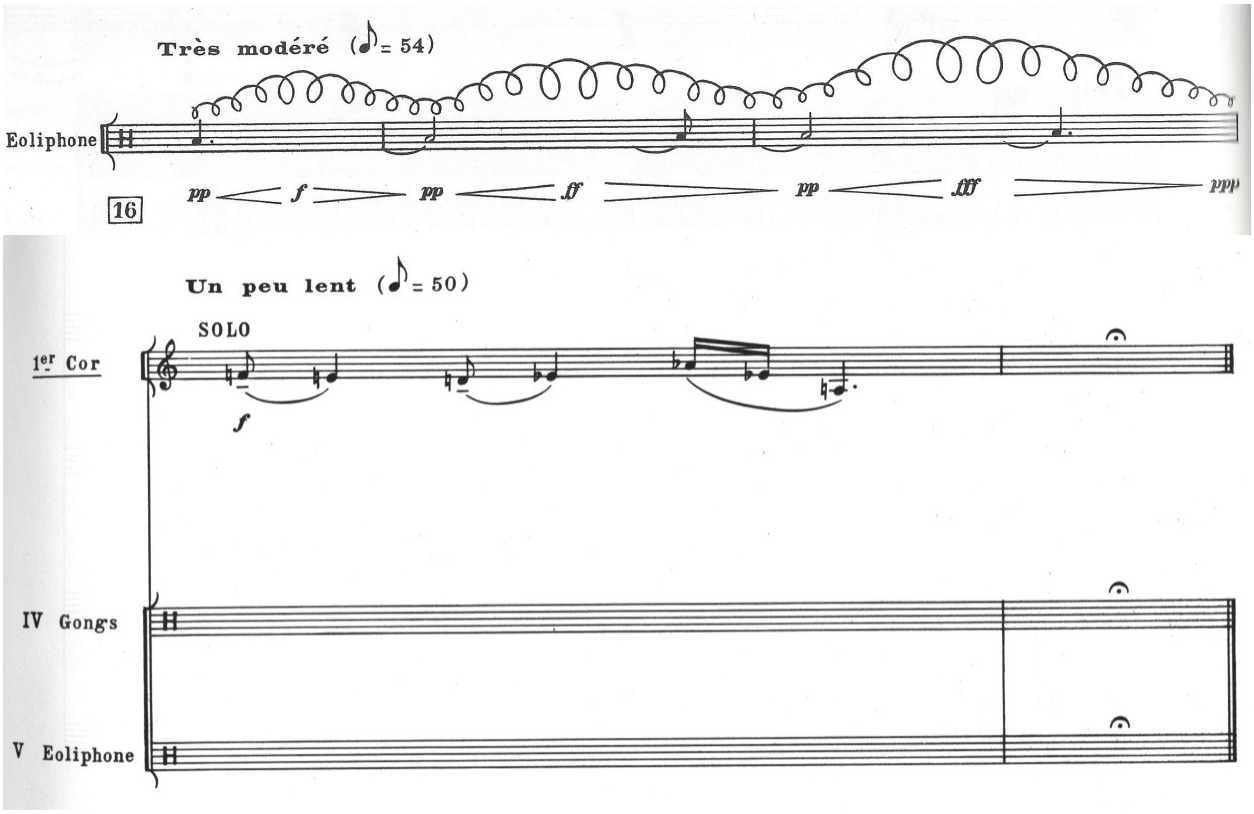


Figure 3.3 *Éoliphone* and horn motive variation closing the first movement[219]

through a disjunct series of intervals, creating the sonic image of a canyon. The slow, lilting, lyrical melody, acts as a sound signal and as Messiaen stated, "evokes the peace (*la paix*) of the desert."[220] Thus even in the very first moments of *Des canyons*, Messiaen focused on representing peace. The horn presents a single unaccompanied voice in a vast stillness.

Furthermore, the use of the horn in this case brings with it generations of pastoral associations. Indeed, R. Murray Schafer made this association clear, stating "more than any instrument, the horn symbolizes freedom and love of the outdoors."[221] Thus, the use of horn

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[219] Ibid., 36-37.

[220] Ibid., 13.

[221] Schafer, *Soundscape*, 107.

in this passage evokes desert experiences and connects to both a love of the outdoors and a love of peace. Messiaen reiterates this sentiment when the solo horn figure returns, marking the start of the closing section of the movement. Moreover it recurs in a less disjunct variation in the penultimate measure (see figure 3.3, p. 77). The prominent placement of this peaceful and pastoral horn motive frames the entire movement with pacifist gestures.

Birdsong within *Des canyons* occasionally comes from sources outside of Utah. In some movements, Messiaen utilizes birds he could not possibly have heard during his visits. For example, in the first movement he made use of four different bird species, yet only one of these—the *Moqueur polyglotte* [Northern Mockingbird]—is native to the United States. Further problematizing this, Messiaen indicates the Mockingbird comes from California.[222] Utah, however, is within the range of the Northern Mockingbird according to International Ornithologist Union's[223] range designations. The other three birds, a *Pie grièche à plastron noir* [Bokmakierie] (labeled southern Africa), *Gobemouche narcisse* [Narcissus Flycatcher] (labeled Japan), and *Sirli du désert* [Greater Hoopoe-Lark] (labeled Sahara), come from Africa and Eurasia. I should note here that the IOU defines the region of Eurasia as "Europe, Asia from the Middle East through central Asia north of the Himalayas, Siberia and northern China to Japan."[224] Birdsong, it follows, does not function as a representation of a single specific place or soundscape within this movement, but rather a more generic idea of desert spaces. Messiaen's choice to draw upon avian vocalizations from around the world demonstrates a global sensibility and interaction with space.

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[222] Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*, 25.

[223] Hereafter, IOU.

[224] Ranges, IOC World Bird List: Version 4.1, last modified April 2012, http://www.worldbirdnames.org/ioc-lists/range-terminology/.

Further concretizing the connection of the first movement to the idea of "desert," Messiaen made use of the *éoliphone* to mimic the keynote sound of wind. During these sections, all other instruments drop out, deferring to the sound of the wind, and acknowledging its omnipresence in desert life. Messiaen stated in the opening commentary "the wind machine recalls the wind that always blows"[225] in Utah's deserts. Furthermore, it adds moments of rest to the movement, complementing the solo horn. In the final measures of "*Le désert*" the two figures are found side by side: the *éoliphone* gives way to the variation of the opening horn theme that ends the movement (see figure 3.3, p. 77). The first movement therefore utilizes tropes of desert imagery on a shallow level, while also incorporating a deep-level call for pacifism.

The sixth and eighth movements of *Des canyons*, like the first, evoke vast spaces and calm soundscapes. Accordingly, they employ some techniques similar to movement one. The sixth, "*Appel interstellaire*" [Interstellar call] utilizes only a solo horn. Through the use of large intervals, mutes, and other effects, Messiaen creates wild variations in the dynamics of the movement. This creates the image of large distances for the listener. The addition of religious symbolism, such a vertical symmetry (see fig 2.5, pg. 51), generates the notion that the call of the movement's title is for God himself.

The eighth movement "*Les ressuscités et le chant de l'étoile Aldébaran*" [The resurrected and the song of the star Aldébaran] also gestures toward the heavens. Inspired in part by the star Aldebaran, an orange giant within the constellation Taurus,[226] and a passage from Job in

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[225] Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*, 13.

[226] Aldebaran, Stars (University of Illinois), last modified May 22, 2009, http://stars.astro.illinois.edu/sow/aldebaran.html.



Figure 3.4 The Amphitheater at Cedar Breaks National Monument[227]

which the stars sing, this movement also utilizes the full orchestra to evoke vast spaces. On the whole, it is a slow and quiet movement. Like "*Appel interstellaire*," it expands toward outer space and God rather than confining itself to Earth. Nonetheless, it prominently draws on the worldly influence of birdsong.

The most concrete connections to Utah landscapes appear not in the opening movement of each formal part, but at the end of each, in the movements named for Utah's parks. These movements (five, seven, and twelve) occupy a prominent place within the large-

[227] Geology (photo gallery): Cedar Breaks National Monument, National Park Service, last modified March 14, 2014, http://www.nps.gov/media/photo/gallery.htm?id=6C12EC88-155D-451F-670D6EF5BB45C32B.

scale work because of their connection to Utah (see figure 1.1, p. 10). As each of the three parts of *Des canyons* opens with depictions of open space and spirituality, these movements represent the culmination of each part, tying the piece to its specific American inspirations. They draw upon the dimensions of the natural landscapes as well as the particular experiences Messiaen had during his visit in 1972.

The fifth movement "*Cedar Breaks et le Don de Crainte*" [Cedar Breaks and the Gift of Awe], is the final movement of Part One. It depicts Cedar Breaks National Monument, one of the locations Messiaen visited during his trip to Utah. In his introduction, Messiaen spoke of the amphitheater at Cedar Breaks (see figure 3.4, p. 80), expressing a spiritual reaction of awe, but noting that Cedar Breaks lacks depth of color in comparison to Bryce Canyon.[228]

Messiaen composed this movement by deriving sound material from his experience at Cedar Breaks. The sound signals of birds constantly arise amid iterations of the keynotes of wind and moving sand. In this movement, Messiaen used exclusively North American birds for the first time within *Des canyons*. Indeed every labeled birdsong in the score gives the location of "Utah." This decision to limit himself to North American birds decidedly connects the movement to the location of Cedar Breaks. The music evokes large-scale canyon geology in *forte* sections that use the full range of registers available in the ensemble. Frequent use of the *éoliphone* and *géophone* further evoke the keynotes of Cedar Breaks's desert canyon landscape. In sharing these impressions via music, Messiaen created sonic place imbued with divine value and a political sentiment for the listener.

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[228] Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*, 14.

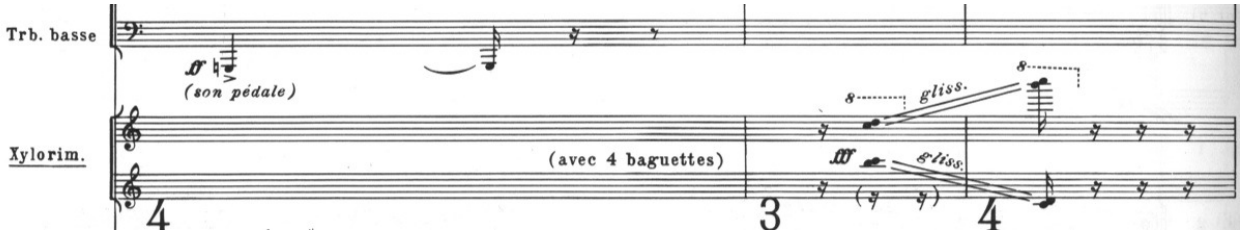


Figure 3.5 Growth and sweeping upward gesture in the xylorimba[229]

Religious symbolism in this movement is readily observable through an excellent sample of both growing intervals and sweeping upward gestures that evoke the vast open space of the Cedar Breaks amphitheater (see figure 3.5, above). This encodes in sound Messiaen's sense of awe in experiencing the amphitheater. This addition of intrinsic value (a philosophical value rather than one of practical purpose) suggests an agenda of preservation, one aspect of the peaceful relationship between humankind and the wilderness that Messiaen sought.

The seventh movement, "*Bryce Canyon et les rochers rouge-orange*" [Bryce Canyon and the red-orange rocks], exemplifies the bridging of the Heaven/Earth gap and incorporates several of Messiaen's techniques for depicting religion and nature. First though, Messiaen's impression of Bryce Canyon itself:

> It's quite amazing; first, it's so big, immense, it's a landscape of nothing but cliffs and boulders in fantastic shapes. There are castles, towers, dungeons, there are turrets, bridges, towers, windows, and then, even more beautiful, there are the colours.

[229] Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*, 132.

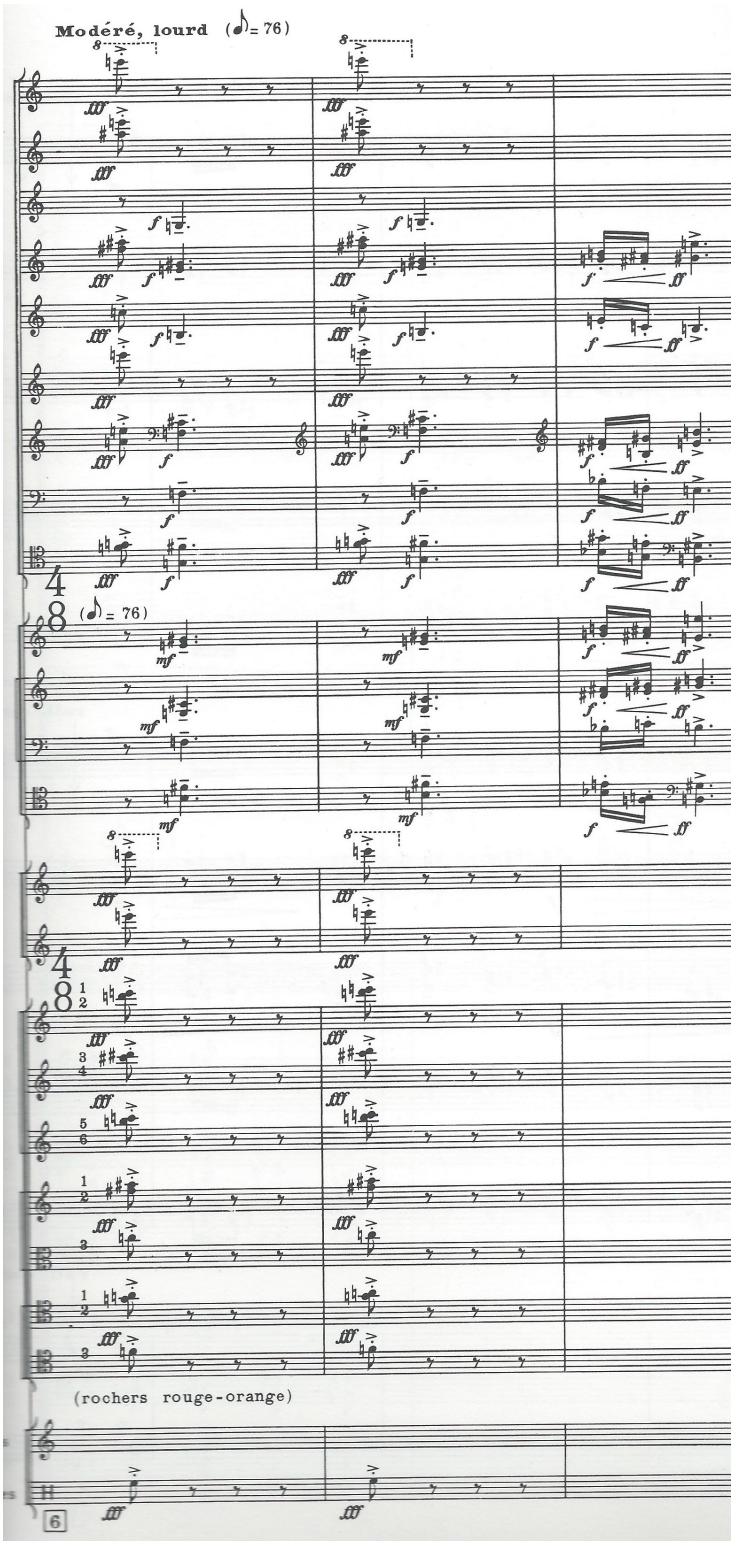


Figure 3.6 The red-orange rocks[230]

[230] Ibid., 147.

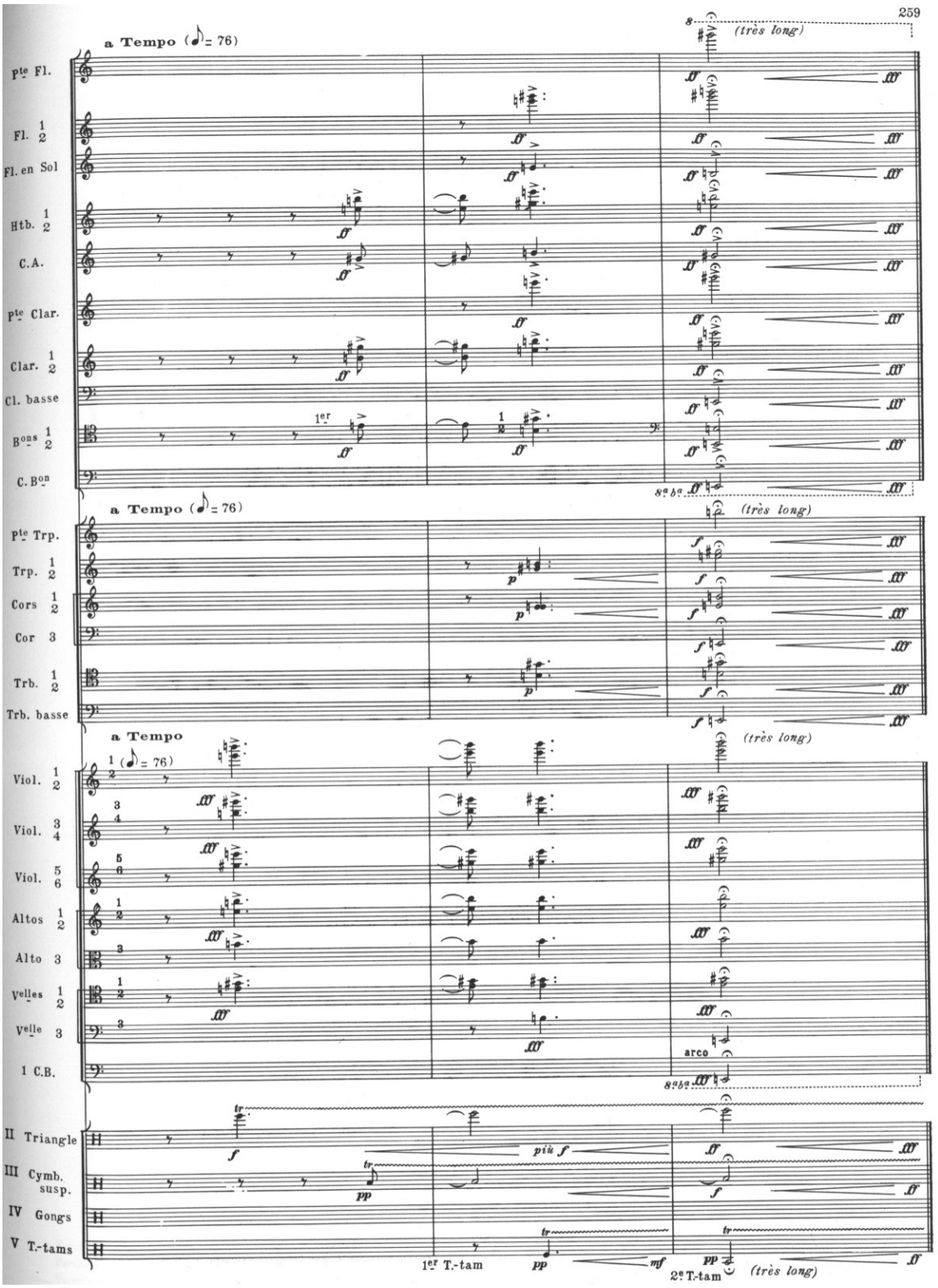


Figure 3.7 Red-orange E major chord, ending movement seven[231]

[231] Ibid., 259.

> Everything is red, all sorts of reds: red-violet, a red-orange, rose, dark red carmine, scarlet red, all possible varieties of red, an extraordinary beauty.[232]

Messiaen translates these geological characteristics into musical expression in the seventh movement. Here he portrays the colors he associated with Bryce Canyon through musical symbolism. He confirms this in the commentary for the movement, stating, "the music of the piece tries to reproduce all these colors."[233] For instance at rehearsal figure six, he presents the red-orange rocks of the canyon walls, as indicated in the score. The variety of harmonic constructions used in the homophonic texture demonstrate the variety of shades and hues seen in the shadows. The music's arrival at a bright brass E major chord represents the full splendor of the rock face in the sunlight (see figure 3.6, p. 83).

From rehearsal figure seven through seventeen Messiaen continues his exploration of Bryce Canyon's landscape with the music rising and falling like the "turrets and towers" of the cliffs, suggesting to listeners why Ebenezer Bryce had once cautioned against losing a cow within its walls. Further, Messiaen mimics the soundscape through the use of the *éoliphone* and *géophone*. This "rochers rouge-orange" section returns twice more in variation from rehearsal figure twenty-three through thirty-four and forty through forty-one. The red-orange E major chord ends the movement, this time with the force of the full orchestra (see figure 3.7, p. 84).

A total of eight birdsongs appear in this movement and it is during these sections that most of the religious characteristics can be found. This points to birds' mediating role as both natural and divine. First and most obvious are the upward gestures in the string

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[232] Olivier Messiaen and Harriet Watts. "Canyons, Colours and Birds: An Interview with Olivier Messiaen." *Tempo*, New Series, no. 128 (1979): 2-8.

[233] Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*, 16.

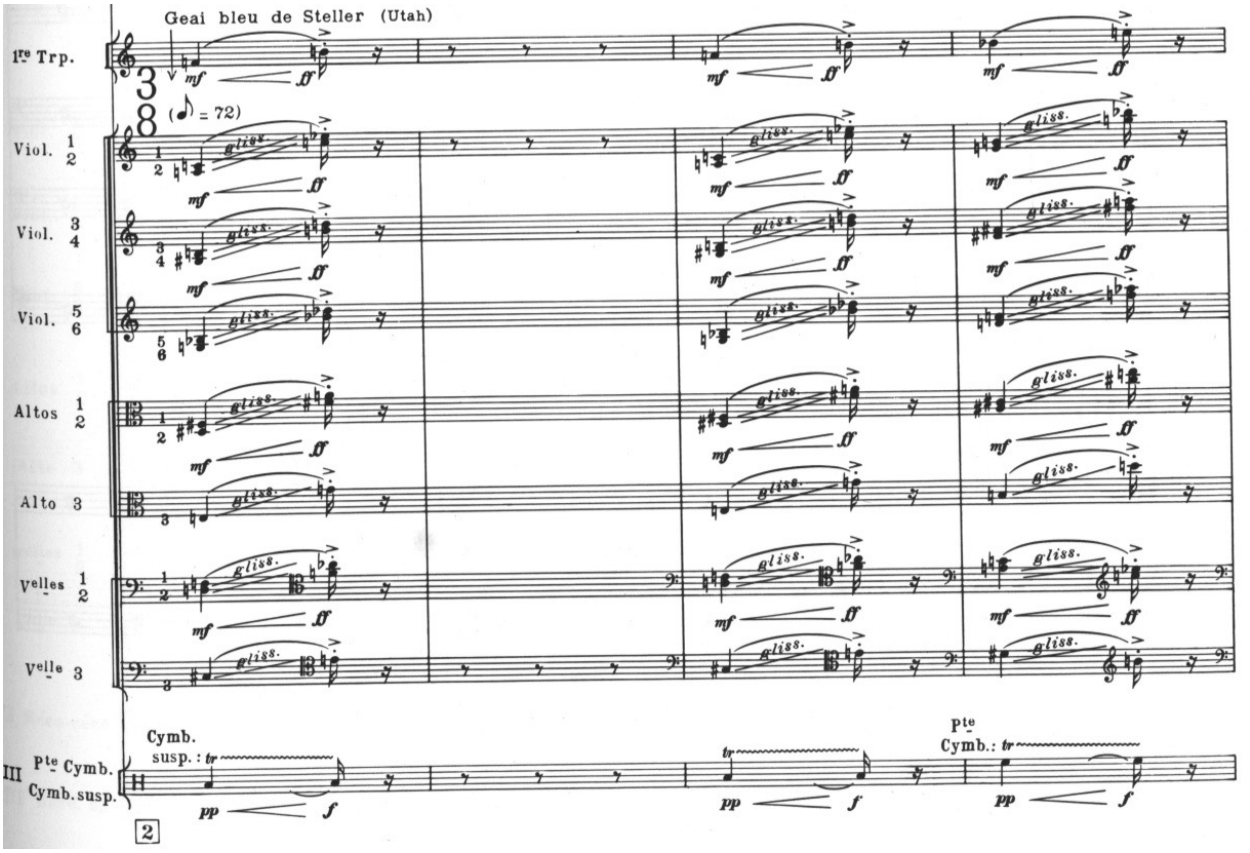


Figure 3.8 Sweeping upward gestures in the strings[234]

section used during the depiction of the *Geai bleu de Steller* [Steller's Jay] at rehearsal figure two (see figure 3.8, p. 86). The sound signal of the bird's characteristic call is slowed and expanded, then ornamented by glissandi, emphasizing the dialation of the chord and the rising line. Solidifying nature's role as mediator, the "*rochers rouge-orange*" section contains both an instance of rhythmic augmentation and *éblouissement* (see figure 2.11, p. 59). Messiaen presents the previously mentioned E chord first as a dotted quarter-note, but at the end of the section changes it to a half note, imbuing the music and the rocks themselves with divine value. The placement of an instance of *éblouissement* in the "*rochers rouge-orange*"

[234] Ibid., 163.

section supports the notion that, for Messiaen, exposure to this landscape and soundscape constituted a transcendent religious experience. Importantly, this spiritual transcendence originates with the experience of natural phenomena. Since Messiaen attempted to render this experience in musical form, it follows that he attempted to preserve it for future listeners, a type of conservation.

The twelfth movement, "*Zion Park et la Cité céleste*" [Zion Park and the Celestial City], ends the work with a representation of both Zion Park and Paradise. This conjunction resolves the divide between Earth and Heaven by showing the divinity of nature. Indeed, the experience of the place itself with its high cathedral-like walls and variety of colors prompts such spiritual associations (as with the Mormons who named it Zion). Messiaen confirmed this sentiment in the introductory text for the movement. Presumably referring to himself he wrote, "those who discover the pink, white, purple, red, and black walls, green trees, and clear river at Zion Park saw in it a symbol of Paradise."[235] Much like in movements five and seven, "*Zion Park et la Cité céleste*," includes only birds native to North America (though some of these also have ranges in Middle America Mexico through Panama).[236] These birds link the movement to Zion Park while the use of the *géophone* further demonstrates Messiaen's attempts to duplicate its soundscape. As a whole, the movement remains relatively slow and lyrical, harkening back to the horn motive that opened movement one. In conjunction with the constant presence of one or more of the fourteen birdsong utilized, the theme of peace pervades the movement.

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[235] Ibid., 18.

[236] Ranges, IOC World Bird List: Version 4.1, last modified April 2012, http://www.worldbirdnames.org/ioc-lists/range-terminology/; Fallon, "Catalogue of Messiaen's Birds," 138-139.

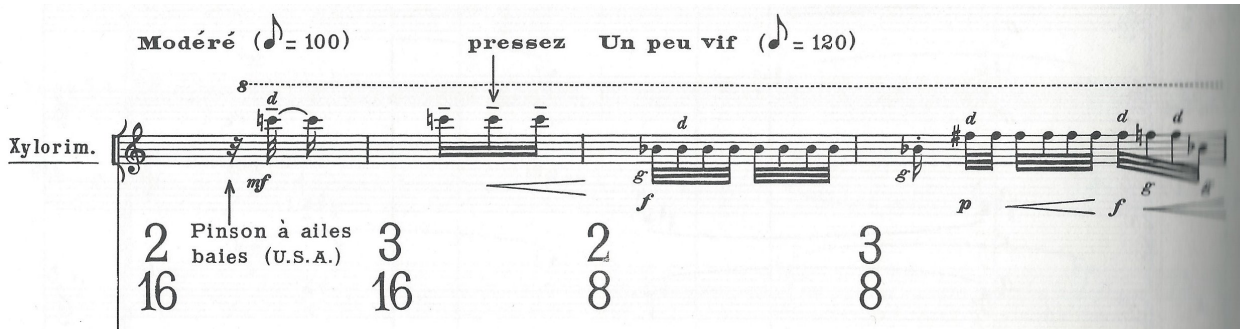


Figure 3.9 Alternation between duple and triple divisions of the beat[237]

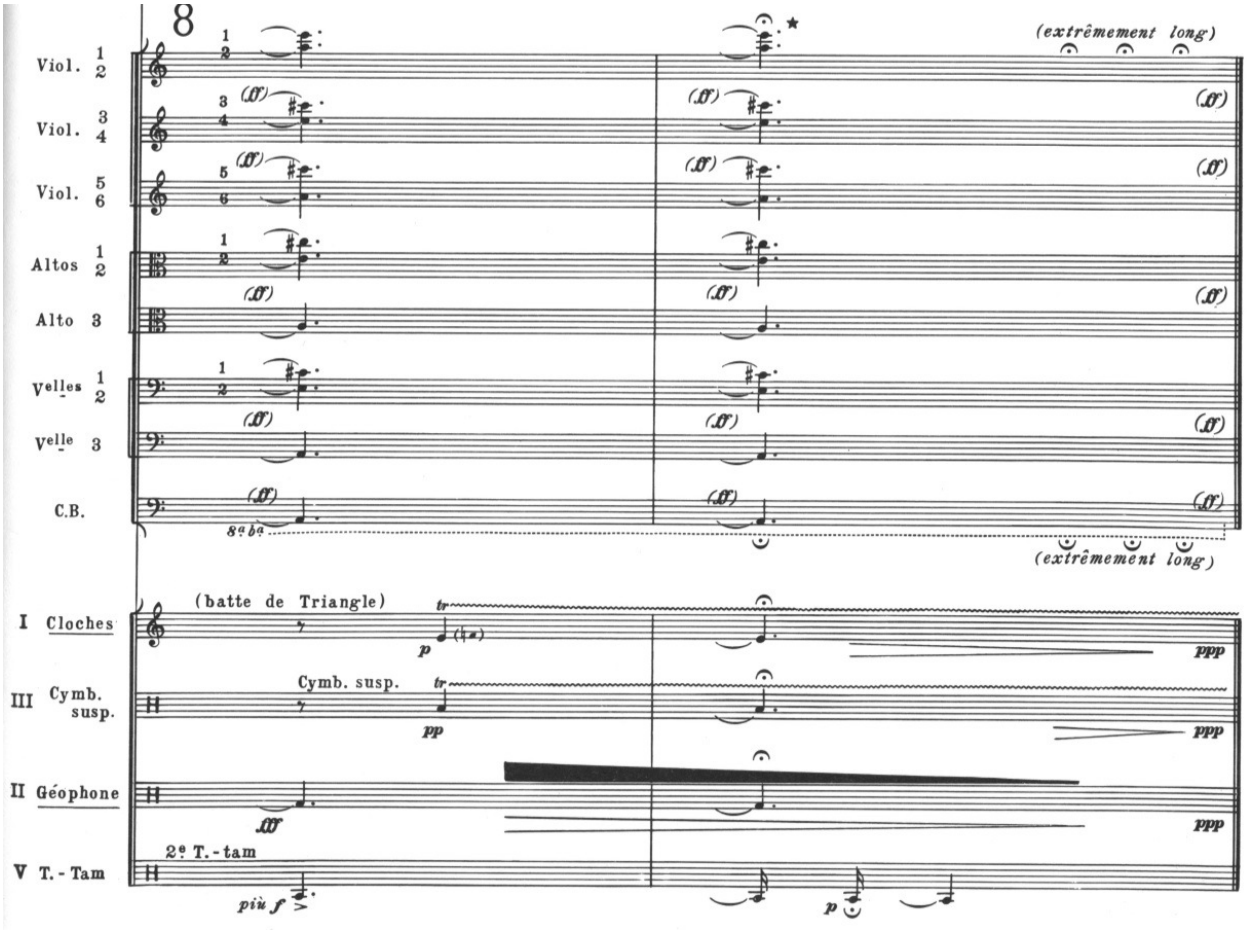


Figure 3.10 The "immutable" A major string chord[238]

[237] Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*, 454.

[238] Ibid., 515.

The movement also frequently alternates between triple and duple divisions of the beat, adding religious and natural connotations. The xylorimba part at rehearsal figure seven provides an excellent example (see figure 3.9, p. 88). It is interesting to note that in this movement, the alternations shift subtly, unlike in previous movements. This again suggests a resolution of the divide between humanity and the divine through nature. *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .* ends with an *extrêmement long* [extremely long] A major chord. While the rest of the orchestra carries out an elongated diminuendo, the strings hold the chord at a forte until the final cut off (see figure 3.10, p. 88). This, Messiaen stated, makes the strings "immutable like eternity."[239] Perhaps this immutability includes his impression of Zion Park itself—its imposing landscape certainly suggests it will stand for all time.

Thus, for Messiaen, Zion Park acts as a sort of window into Heaven in his musical rendition of the place, mirroring the Mormon reaction to the place that resulted in it being named after the holy city of "Zion." Through these gestures, the movement becomes inextricably linked with Messiaen's notion of Paradise. This notion, as I've argued, includes at its base, the glorification of God's creation. By glorifying Creation, Messiaen called for a peaceful and sustainable relationship with the natural environment, addressing issues still relevant in today's political discourse.

Political Action Inspired by *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*

Since *Des canyons* creates place in relation to locations in Utah, it follows that its strongest political effect would be felt in the United States. As described in Chapter 1, Musica Aeterna Orchestra gave the premiere on Novermber 20th, 1974 in Alice Tully Hall at

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[239] Ibid., 19.

Lincoln Center under the baton of Frédéric Waldman.[240] With environmentalism already at the fore of American politics at this time, Messiaen's *Des canyons* addressed these concerns through a naturally inspired musical aesthetic. This approach stood in stark contrast to the primarily scientific dialogue of the 1960s and 1970s evidenced by the debates over the Clear Air Act (1970), the National Environmental Policy Act (1970), the Federal Environmental Pesticide Control Act (1972), the Federal Water Pollution Control Act (1972), and more. These acts focused on establishing a system of data collection and regulation rather than enacting shifts in American culture.[241] Messiaen's work is more akin to the closing sentiment of *Silent Spring*, which illustrates two possible paths for the future of humanity.[242] Conjuring the poetics of Robert Frost, Carson suggested that human history must take the fork in the road that is less traveled—"our last, our only chance to reach a destination that ensures the preservation of the earth."[243] She elaborated that the human goal to control nature stems from the arrogant assumption—one which must be eradicated—that "nature exists for the convenience of man."[244] The shift Carson suggested here is then one of values. Messiaen took a political and religious stance on this issue in *Des canyons*, finding value in nature through his direct experience and Catholic faith.

Des canyons presents nature as a manifestation of divinity, offering an alternative to exploitative capitalists concerned only with shallow ecology. Joseph Petulla, an environmental philosopher, posited that "value change is not possible without structural

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[240] Ibid., 4.

[241] Petulla, *American Environmentalism*, 144-46.

[242] Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Mariner Books, 2002), 277.

[243] Ibid., 277.

[244] Ibid., 297.

adjustments within societal institutions along with alternative images embodying new values."[245] Messiaen provided the option of deep ecology with *Des canyons*, though this image is veiled by layers of religious metaphor entwined with soundscape influences.

Three years after *Des canyons* premiere, Messiaen's sonification of Utah landscapes inspired a strong response from several Americans. This ultimately led to the effort, spearheaded by Julie Whitaker, to name a mountain from among those represented in *Des canyons* after Messiaen.[246] She explained how the idea arose in a 20 May 1976 letter; when she learned where Messiaen drew inspiration for *Des canyons*, she was, as a Utahan, honored and:

> decided that something should be named for him. When I was in Southern Utah, Parowan to be exact, I contacted the Mayor and asked him if he didn't agree. He did. In fact, he offered his own mountain for the occasion. . . . located about 15 miles from a national park called Cedar Breaks, which Messiaen specifically mentioned in an interview as one of the areas which has so moved him.[247]

Thus, the naming of Mount Messiaen stemmed directly from *Des canyons*'s recognition of canyon landscapes (and soundscapes) in Utah. Messiaen's deep engagement with the landscape and soundscape created a sense of place for Whitaker and inspired her efforts to memorialize his accomplishment.

Upon learning of the dedication, Messiaen expressed delight, gratitude, and great respect for the location itself:

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[245] Petulla, *American Environmentalism*, 21.

[246] Robert Fallon, "Placing Mount Messiaen," in *Messiaen Perspective 2: Techniques, Influence, and Reception*, ed. Christopher Dingle and Robert Fallon (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013), 327.

[247] Ibid., 328.

> Ah, it's just just incredible and very touching. When I told my impresario [Herbert Breslin] about it, he was amazed. When I told my publisher M. Leduc in Paris about it, he was astounded, too. He couldn't imagine that there would be a mountain anywhere with my name; at first he laughed, but then he almost cried. And we plan to go back there soon. It's a great excuse to see Utah again, and, in any case, it seems to me that I now have the obligation to present myself before those three cliffs. They're there waiting for me.[248]

Such expressions show that Messiaen found an intrinsic spiritual value in nature in addition to a practical compositional one. Once again, this mirrors Naess's distinction between deep and shallow ecology. While musical gestures that draw upon natural sounds such as birdsong correspond to shallow ecology, Messiaen's strong respect for and sense of obligation to a landscape demonstrate a deep level of engagement. Yi-Fu Tuan would argue that the intrinsic value Messiaen assigned to the place grew from personal experiences there and a decision to pause and "get to know it better and endow it with value."[249] The work itself, then creates a sense of place within the metaphorical space of musical experience while also garnering official recognition.

Thus, *Des canyons*, with the help of political efforts led by Julie Whitaker, created place from space in the physical realm via the endowment of meaning. The case of Mount Messiaen represents a creation of place with strong political connotations. By naming the mountain and making it a landmark, its preservation is at least partially ensured. Through

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[248] Ibid., 328.

[249] Tuan, *Space and Place*, 6.

official recognition, Mount Messiaen represents a structural change, if only a small privately owned one, that makes up part of the larger tradition of American conservationism.

Conclusion

Messiaen's biography and musical output point to his engagement with the ecological thought in *Des canyons*. He played on notions of natural sound, color, space, and place in the music, synthesizing an artistic product with a specific political connotation. Through his use of environmental sound and his attempts to represent it in an accurate manner, he creates place within the musical space of the piece while engaging with shallow ecology. The opening movement of each formal part creates a sense of space while each closing movement brings the listener to a specific place. Use of religious symbolism further develops the significance of this musically established place by endowing it with divinity, and with it a deep-level sentiment.

These concepts, in conjunction with Messiaen's association of birdsong with peace embed sonic environmentalism deep within the work. Indeed others heard and connected with the sonic place created in *Des canyons*. Julie Whitaker's effort to find a location to name after Messiaen stemmed entirely from the work itself. Indeed, her work resulted in yet another creation of place, granting Mount Messiaen meaning in relation to the music itself. Thus, the sonic environmentalism of *Des canyons* translated into political action by listeners.

Chapter 4: Environmentalism Sonified

Scholars do not often focus on the cultural aspects of Olivier Messiaen's music. Indeed, because of his disengaged image, researchers largely ignore the political aspects of Messiaen's music. Often, Messiaen scholars essentialize his music by disregarding the important connection between music and the moral crises of his day. Bohlman called this type of depoliticization the "most hegemonic form of politicizing music."[250] In this thesis, I've followed the example set by Robert Fallon to fill such gaps in the literature.

I have argued that Messiaen found intrinsic value in nature by seeing it as a manifestation of the divine. This stems from the Aquinian notion that all of creation exists through God. To Messiaen, nature was God's artwork and the birds, his personal musicians. For this reason, Messiaen harbored an environmentalist stance on ecological issues. One can trace these sentiments back to his childhood when his exposure to nature inspired his decision to pursue a career in music. Moreover, the fact that this development coincided with the advent of his religious education makes his conflation of these themes seem all the more natural. This combination of obsession with nature—demonstrated through the use of soundscape-inspired musical techniques—and religious ideas grant a divine significance to nature. This additional meaning endows the natural environment with deep-level intrinsic value, while simultaneously affirming its shallow-level practical applications. Additionally, positioning nature as divine gives a strong reason to preserve it through ecologically sustainable practices.

Messiaen's use of musical sounds inspired by the natural soundscape mirrors Naess's distinction between shallow and deep ecology. These two approaches aren't mutually

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[250] Philip V. Bohlman, "Musicology as a Political Act," *Journal of Musicology*, no. 11 (1993): 419.

exclusive and in *Des canyons* Messiaen exemplified how they may be combined. He drew upon the natural soundscape in order to create enjoyable music for human consumption—a practical use of nature. Here, he focused on humanity, making the effort effectively anthropocentric and thus a shallow-level ecological effort. The variety of birdsongs, the *éoliphone*, and the *géophone* all provide proof of this.

Strikingly, he also added religious significance to the soundscape by incorporating his long established musical signifiers for Catholic truth. Symmetries abound, giving the work an ethereal quality. Juxtaposition of earthly and heavenly themes suggests his desire for earth to mirror heaven. Birdsong again comes to the fore, representing peace and his conservation efforts. In giving the religious significance to his constructed soundscape, Messiaen assigned an intrinsic value to nature itself.

Given the precedent that Messiaen had set in *Messe de la Pentacôte*, he imbued *Des canyons* with a message of pacifism. Pacifism, in the case of *Des canyons*, corresponds directly to sustainability because sustainable practices mitigate humanity's aggression (i.e. overuse of natural resources) toward nature. He shows this goal through a variety of musical techniques, most notably by placing religious and naturally inspired musical sounds side by side. Nature, in this manner, offers a window through which to observe Heaven. The twelfth movement positions Zion Park— nature itself—as Paradise. In manufacturing a representation of this heavenly conception of nature, Messiaen communicated his vision of Paradise on Earth.

To this end, Messiaen invoked a sense of place within *Des canyons*. He titled the most prominent movements, five, seven, and twelve, or "*Cedar Breaks et le Don de Crainte*," "*Bryce Canyon et les rochers rouge-orange*," and "*Zion Park et la Cité céleste*" respectively, after the

locations he visited on his 1972 trip to Utah. Further, he incorporated sound signals and keynotes heard at these locations into the musical texture, closely linking the movements to Utah and its national parks. The birdsongs he utilized in these sections originate exclusively from Utah's landscape. He also presented them against the backdrop of wind and moving sand, contextualizing the music against vast desert spaces while also adding to the timbral range of the ensemble. By invoking his sound-color synesthesia, Messiaen incorporated notions of color into the aural expression of *Des canyons*, making the connection of the music to place even more evident. Ultimately, the sonic place Messiaen created inspired listeners to do the same. In Utah, near the canyons Messiaen so loved, this sentiment led to direct political action by Julie Whitaker. This resulted in cliffs just outside Cedar Breaks National Monument to receive the name Mount Messiaen.

A brief examination of recent performance reviews by professional music critics and bloggers shows that twenty-first century audiences continue to hear the politically-charged juxtaposition of American landscapes and Catholic divinity in *Des canyons*. Bernard Holland, of the *New York Times*, even titled his review of a 2000 performance by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center "Messiaen's Nature Worship Calls on Bird Song and Faith."[251] Critics and bloggers alike focus especially on the natural aspects of the work, pointing toward the work's underlying message.[252] One blogger, who goes only by the pseudonym "Weeping Tudor," even goes so far as to liken the difficult solo parts to the difficulty that

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[251] Bernard Holland, "Messiaen's Nature Worship Calls on Bird Song and Faith," *New York Times*, July 20, 2000, LexisNexis Academic.

[252] John Knappes, "Sensitive Playing Brings Messiaen's *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .* to Life," *Cleaveland.com*, December 15, 2008, http://www.cleveland.com/arts/index.ssf/2008/12/sensitive_playing_brings_messi.html, accessed 01 May 2014; Peter Matthews, "From Concrete to Canyons," *Feast of Music*, January 20, 2008, http://www.feastofmusic.com/feast_of_music/2008/01/21st-century-or.html, accessed 01 May 2014; Weeping Tudor, "Review: LPO - Messiaen's *Des canyons aux étoiles . . .*," *The Sprout: New, Events, Services, and Activities in Cardiff*, http://www.thesprout.co.uk/en/news/review-lpo-mn-aux-toiles/14060.html, accessed 01 May 2014.

hiker's face during a summit approach. She refers to "the four soloists who each have their own mountains to climb when it comes to music."[253] She also takes note of Mount Messiaen, linking readers to the political action spurred by the work. Another blogger, Mark Berry, emphasizes the landscapes—"both American and heavenly"[254]—presented in *Des canyons*. One particular passage effectively sums up his reading of the piece:

> And so it came to pass in "*Zion Park et la Cité Céleste*", a typically Messiaenesque celestial coronation. The birds were far from silenced; rather they were sublimated – assumed? – into a new heaven-scape, itself summoned into being by the divine brass chorale, implacable yet not without tenderness. This final movement thus proved summative in a musical and a theological sense.[255]

Even the well-known critic Vivien Schweitzer noted the distinct and personal connection of *Des canyons* to Utah through Messiaen's experiences there. She points out both Messiaen's belief that the Utah canyon landscape was "the most mystical landscape he had ever seen" and the subsequent naming of Mount Messiaen.[256]

Most intriguing however, are two reviews of a 2012 performance by the Hamburg Symphony Orchestra. Critic Anthony Tommasini and a blogger identified only as "Michael" both devoted considerable energy commenting on a unique feature of the Hamburg Symphony's performance: an accompanying video by filmmaker Daniel Landau. Both

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[253] Weeping Tudor, "Review: LPO - Messiaen's *Des canyon aux étoiles . . .*."

[254] Mark Berry, "LPO/Eschenbach - Messiaen: *Des Canyons aux étoiles . . .*, 2 November 2013," *Boulezian* (blog), November 2, 2013, http://boulezian.blogspot.com/2013/11/lpoeschenbach-messiaen-des-canyons-aux.html, accessed 01 May 2014.

[255] Ibid.

[256] Vivien Schweitzer, "Canyons, Inspiring to the Eye, Capture the Ear, Too," *New York Times*, March 21, 2013, LexisNexis Academic.

reviewers disliked the video, which "added grim images of environmental ruin and human alienation that are not suggested by Messiaen's music," according to Tommasini.[257] Indeed Tommasini felt the film detracted from the "spiritual celebration of America" the composer intended.[258] Michael felt "Messiaen's birdsongs and glowing brass chorales clashed with the film's symbolic narrative"[259] of the "cyclical process of decay and creation."[260] Thus, both writers perceived in *Des canyons* a celebratory nature in Messiaen's landscape representations, and critiqued the film for failing to reveal "the religious, mystical, social and philosophical layers of the work . . . [that] are of incredible contemporary relevance."[261] Their reaction to *Des canyons* itself confirms the composition's overarching message that nature has a divine aspect, and for that reason it should be preserved.

The research presented here provides a model for understanding the interactions between religion, nature, sense of place, and politics in Olivier Messiaen's *Des canyons aux étoiles* . . .. From this model of Messiaen's subjectivity, I've determined that the political subtext of *Des canyons* expresses an environmentalist sentiment akin to Arne Naess's deep ecology. With some modification to this model, future researchers may address these same themes in other works by Messiaen, in part by contextualizing the chosen piece in reference

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[257] Anthony Tommasini, "A Formidable Piece by Messiaen, Inspired by Two Breathtaking Places," *New York Times*, January 24, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/25/arts/music/hamburg-symphony-orchestra-at-roulette-review.html?_r=0, accessed 01 May 2014.

[258] Ibid.

[259] Michael, "Lost in the Brooklyn Backcountry (Review: Messiaen, Tate, Hamburger Symphoniker)," *thousandfold echo* (blog), http://thousandfoldecho.com/2012/01/24/lost-in-the-brooklyn-backcountry-messiaen-tate-hamburger-symphoniker/, accessed 01 May 2014.

[260] "From the Canyons to the Stars - *Des canyons aux étoiles* . . .," Hamburger Symphoniker, http://www.hamburgersymphoniker.de/artikel-450.htm, accessed 01 May 2014.

[261] Ibid.

to the composer's biography and surrounding culture. In particular, I've sought to set a precedent for future ecomusicological work in the realm of Olivier Messiaen's compositions.

Messiaen's opera *Saint François d'Assise* (1975-1983) offers an excellent opportunity to study how he envisioned peaceful human-animal interactions. The most significant of these interactions in the opera puts the protagonist, Francis of Assisi, in the situation of delivering a sermon to a group of birds. The sermon, which praises God's creation of flight, plumage, and song, positions Francis as a metaphorical shepherd for the animal kingdom.[262] The scene ends with Francis emphasizing that "all creation points the way to the Cross."[263] Taken as a larger cultural statement, this scene suggests that humanity should act as guardians of creation. Further, it gestures toward nature as a means of salvation. These concepts link to the messages I have uncovered here in *Des canyons*.

Scholars may also apply such an approach to other composers who join spiritual and worldly impressions of the environment in their work. For example, Charles Ives's incomplete *Universe Symphony* (1915-1928) conflates such notions. Ives's work calls for both a Heavens orchestra and an Earth orchestra and deals with such mystical topics as the moment of creation.[264] Ives, like Messiaen, was also inspired by American places, as demonstrated in the scholarship of musicologist Denise Von Glahn.[265] Moreover, similar concepts apply to the the study of composers who incorporate notions of place into their

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[262] Paul Griffiths, "Saint François d'Assise," in *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (London: Farber and Farber Limited, 1995), 498-99.

[263] Ibid., 499.

[264] Zachary Lyman, "Completing Ives's Universe Symphony: An Interview with Larry Austin," *American Music* 26, no. 4 (2008): 442-73; Zachary Lyman, "Realizing Ives's Universe Symphony: An Interview iwth Johnny Reinhard," *American Music* 28, no. 4 (2010): 459-80.

[265] Denise Von Glahn, "A Sense of Place: Charles Ives and 'Putnam's Camp, Redding, Connecticut,'" *American Music* 14, no. 3 (1996): 276-312; DeniseVon Glahn, "Charles Ives, Cowboys, and Indians: Aspects of the "Other Side of Pioneering," *American Music* 19, no. 3 (2001): 291-314.

works. Examples include compositions such as *Finlandia* (1899) by Jean Sibelius, *An Alpine Symphony* (1915) by Richard Strauss, and *Baldr* (1943-1947) and *Hekla* (1961) by Jón Leifs. Each of these works corresponds to either a real place or a spatial idea and evokes a particular landscape, making Tuan and Grimley's theoretical concepts applicable. Landscape, Grimley argues, "is as discursive as other forms of musical representation."[266]

Research on compositions outside of Western art music can benefit from these ideas. Popular musicians such as Marvin Gaye ("Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)," 1971), Joni Mitchell ("Big Yellow Taxi," 1970), the Beach Boys ("Don't Go Near the Water," 1971), the Eagles ("The Last Resort," 1976), and Peter Gabriel ("Down to Earth," 2008) have each contributed politically charged songs dealing with environmental issues.[267] Tony Mitchell's scholarship exploring Sigur Ros's role in defining the human geography of Iceland examines how song relates to both people and place.[268] Ska-punk band Streetlight Manifesto posed concerns for the rampant consumerist culture promulgated by capitalism in their song "Would You Be Impressed?" (2007). Indeed, they directly attack those who claim its "not [their] fault," implying all of humanity is responsible. With musicians across such varied genres as the Western avant-garde and third wave ska-punk expressing unease about our current environmental conditions, ecomusicology has an opportunity to expand and establish itself as a significant methodological development in the musicological discourse.

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[266] Daniel Grimley, *Grieg: Music, Landscape, and Norwegian Identity* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2006), 56.

[267] Mark Pedelty, *Ecomusicology: Rock, Folk, and the Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple Univerisity Press, 2012), 72.

[268] Tony Mitchell, "Sigur Rós's *Heima*: An Icelandic Psychogeography," *Transforming Cultures eJournal* 4, no. 1 (2009), http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/TfC

Musical works concerned with notions of natural and built environments, space and place, divinity and mundanity, can enlighten cultural viewpoints on the relationships between humanity and its environment. Olivier Messiaen does exactly this in his monumental work *Des canyons aux étoiles* . . .. He juxtaposes influences originating from his religious upbringing, experiences in nature, and personal politics in order to express a sense of divine place related to the wild locations he visited in Utah and his desire to preserve them. Most importantly, such works have the potential to move hearts and minds toward more sustainable practices that respect and conserve the natural world.

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Vita

Ryan Taussig is a native New Yorker who was raised on Long Island. He began his studies in Musicology at the University of Tennessee in the fall of 2012 after spending a year teaching public school music in Farmingdale, New York. He graduated with his Master of Music degree in August of 2014. He received his Bachelor of Music degree from the Crane School of Music at SUNY Potsdam with a double major in Musical Studies—for which he wrote a senior thesis on the eighth string quartet of Dmitri Shostakovich—and Music Education in May of 2011. His current research interests lie primarily at the intersection of music, environmental philosophy, human geography, and politics. Musicians of interest include Olivier Messiaen, Jean Sibelius, and popular artists such as Streetlight Manifesto. Ryan has presented at several conferences on the eastern seaboard including the Society for Ethnomusicology Southeast and Caribbean Chapter Annual Meeting and symposiums in Athens, Georgia, Stony Brook, New York, and Knoxville, Tennessee. Outside of academia, Ryan finds endless enjoyment in both backpacking and cookery. Indeed, he spent July 2014 hiking on the Appalachian Trail. Ryan will begin pursuing the PhD in Musicology in Fall 2014 at Eastman School of Music where he received the prestigious Ann Clark Fehn Fellowship and a competitive five-year Graduate Award.