

Olivier Messiaen

Background

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) is a fascinating figure who has inspired many twentieth-century composers. His music is very colourful and exotic but is at the same time very technical, using a highly original approach to scales, rhythms and structure. Messiaen wrote extensively about his compositional technique, which makes him a useful figure from which to take ideas. He was influenced by Eastern music, bird song and his deep religious faith, which resulted in quite a mystical approach to the power of musical sound. You could spend a lifetime finding interesting influences within Messiaen's works – I have chosen two pieces as a starting point to understanding some aspects of his harmony and structure. Messiaen's approach to rhythm is also very novel, but not explored here.

'Le baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus' from *Vingt Regards sur l'enfant Jésus*

This whole piece is a series of twenty meditations on the baby Jesus and shows both Messiaen's deep faith and his love of colourful piano textures. This movement (No. 15) is called 'The Kiss of the baby Jesus' and is perhaps the most ecstatic of the set, starting slowly and calmly and building to the climax shown in Extract 2.

Inspiration: Use of colourful scales to create interesting harmonies

One of the things that makes Messiaen's music so distinctively colourful is his use of unusual scales, which he called 'modes of limited transposition'. He uses the second of these modes (sometimes called the octatonic scale) particularly frequently and it is this mode that he uses in 'Le baiser'. The second mode consists of alternating tones and semitones and is interesting because it allows for lots of more or less functional chords (triads, dominant seventh etc.) but does not allow for them to have the usual functional relationships of fourths and fifths

As with Messiaen's other modes, it can only be transposed a limited number of times before arriving back at the original scale (in this case twice - t1 and t2). If you go up another semitone from t2 you have t0 again, but this time starting on the third note.



More on this scale: http://moodle1.kedst.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/35835/mod_resource/content/0/Alternative_scales.pdf

Look at the extracts over the page, on which are marked the relevant transpositions.

ACTION: try writing out some of the chords (triads, sevenths etc) that you can get from, for example, t0. Now try writing some chordal progressions and/or harmonising a melody also taken from the scale using only your 'menu' of chords.



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Inspiration: extended chords

Some of the chords in this movement are very dissonant and cannot easily be explained by conventional means, but many of the chords that Messiaen comes to a rest on can be understood as triads with various added notes, as at the beginning of each bar in extract 1.

The combination of exotic scales with extended chords creates a rich and colourful harmonic language that many composers have imitated.

<p>ACTION: experiment with adding to your menu of mode two chords by creating some extended chords – i.e. added sixths, ninths etc.</p>
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'Liturgie de cristal' from *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*

The *Quartet for the end of time* has a very interesting history as it was both written and first performed in a prisoner of war camp during WW2. Messiaen's description of this movement is typically mystical and poetic and worth quoting in full:

Between three and four in the morning, the awakening of birds: a solo blackbird or nightingale improvises, surrounded by a shimmer of sound, by a halo of trills lost very high in the trees. Transpose this onto a religious plane and you have the harmonious silence of Heaven.

The construction of this piece reflects this mystical vision and is the main inspiration you might take from it. Before outlining this aspect though, it is worth showing also an aspect of the chords construction that is interesting.

Inspiration: chromatic 'appoggiaturas' onto dissonant chords

Messiaen described chord progressions such as that at the beginning of the piano part as a 'chord on the dominant'. The second chord is an F dominant seventh with lots of added notes (G, Bb, D – the 9th, 11th and 6th) and the previous chord can be understood as a kind of appoggiatura. There are already lots of dissonances, but the first chord uses notes that are chromatic to the F dominant seventh and therefore 'resolve' to the second more diatonic chord.



ACTION: try taking an extended chord from your menu above and adding a chromatic double or even triple chromatic appoggiatura. You can use perhaps this sort of dissonance at the climax of the phrase.



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Inspiration: the use of musical 'scaffolding'

This piece is constructed in a way that looks back to Mediaeval times. Both the piano and the cello use a strict system of repetition, in which both the pitches and rhythms follow a repeated series. What is interesting is that the pitch and rhythm series are of different lengths so you do not get the a given duration with the same pitch each time. The repeated series of pitches is called a **color** and the series of rhythms a **talea**. Their combination is called **isorhythm** and is found in music by such mediaeval composers as Guillaume de Machaut. You can see how the isorhythmic structure works in the "Messiaen Cristal Analysis" PDF file in this folder.

The piano and cello are constructed quite mechanistically – it is always interesting using pre-compositional tools such as this and hearing how different combinations work out. Around this scaffolding, Messiaen writes two freer parts – the clarinet and violin – which are an example of the composer's interest in bird song. Messiaen notated bird song that he heard and incorporated it into his compositions. The Clarinet starts with the song of the Blackbird followed by that of the Nightingale.

ACTION: try writing a passage in which one or more parts are isorhythmic
