

# Messiaen: Poetics, Polemics and Politics

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## Abstract

In this article, the author reassesses elements of the early career of Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992), drawing on a range of sources that include the composer's early writings. Much of this early writing, which includes a range of music criticism and journalism, has only recently come to light and some of it is presented here for the first time. This provides a wealth of detail on Messiaen's development in general and on his engagement in the aesthetic debates of the 1930s in particular, which are the focus of this article.

Olivier Messiaen is a figure we might instinctively feel we know. In a time of skepticism, he was the musical visionary; in an urban world he was the 'ornithologist-composer'; in a complex and secular age he was the 'simple man of faith'. This notion of the composer is underpinned by the sense that he stood apart from the rest of the twentieth century, that he was somehow different, and it is deeply ingrained: the entry on Messiaen in the second edition of *The New Grove*, for example, begins 'He was a musician apart.' (Griffiths, 2001, p. 491)

New material that has recently come to light throws considerable doubt on the notion of the 'musician apart'. In this article, I look at two aspects of this fresh evidence and consider the extent of Messiaen's engagement with the aesthetic and political milieu of the 1930s. My research has revealed that between 1936 and 1939, Messiaen contributed to a range of French and Belgian journals, producing articles that ranged from concert reviews to discursive essays on aspects of the music of the time, and explanations of his own music. These early writings supplement the Messiaen bibliography considerably and provide a glimpse of the composer before fame had induced the caution and discretion that characterise the later writings and interviews.

At around 24,000 words spread over 3 years, the quantity of writing is significant as a new resource, but also fairly limited, reflecting the fact that this was a relatively minor activity for Messiaen. His articles cover a wide range of topics and, though the supposition cannot be confirmed, there is a sense that Messiaen had the freedom to write about the concerts and musical issues that interested him most – the feeling that he was 'on assignment' is entirely absent from the journalism. Although the territory that Messiaen explores in his writing embraces many of the themes familiar from later writings and interviews, there is an abundance of detail and much new material – often expressed in forthright language.

The journalism may not be extensive, but it offers a rich seam of new data on the composer. Here, I look firstly at what fresh light it casts on Messiaen's famous collaboration in La Jeune France. I then examine some work on Messiaen's position in the highly-charged politics of the time before concluding with an analysis of Messiaen's critical response to Darius Milhaud.

## Messiaen and La Jeune France

Of all the famous episodes in Messiaen's life, one in particular seems most at odds with the image of the 'composer apart' that I have just caricatured: his participation in La Jeune France. This group was the initiative of Yves Baudrier, who approached Messiaen in 1936 with the idea (and the funds) to form an alliance that would publicly champion the notion of a return to the spiritual in music and make a conscious effort to reject the largely neoclassical consensus. Together with Daniel-Lesur and André Jolivet, they launched themselves with an impressive symphonic concert and a splash of publicity in June 1936.

Baudrier penned a manifesto laying out the aims of the group, and this was printed in the programme of their first concert and signed by all four members. It clearly rejects the key ideas of neoclassicism and makes several pointed references to Jean Cocteau's 1919 polemic *Le Coq et l'arlequin*. *Le Coq* was the standard around which the composers of Les Six rallied: the firebrand Cocteau seemed to have shown a radical way forward for a generation tired of romantic symphonic excess. Within a relatively short period, however, the revolutionaries of 1919 had become a new orthodoxy, an establishment in which the prevailing aesthetic principle was neoclassicism. Whilst the question of a relationship between Messiaen's aesthetic and political preferences lies beyond the scope of this article, it is clear that this was not an abstract or sterile debate. Jane Fulcher, for example, has claimed that the anti-fascist coalition Front Populaire, whose cabinet was formed on the 4 June 1936, the morning after the first Jeune France concert, effectively co-opted neoclassicism as the normative anti-fascist, anti-Germanic music.

We can read Messiaen's signature on the Jeune France manifesto as an engagement of sorts in the debates of his time. However, Messiaen later distanced himself from the manifesto and played down the significance of the group. In conversation with Almut Rößler in the mid 1980s, he commented:

I wasn't in complete agreement with that Manifesto [...] [La Jeune France] lasted only two or three years. When war broke out, we became separated from each other. (Rößler, 1986, p. 105)

This seems entirely consistent with the notion that Messiaen was a composer who avoided getting involved in the earthbound realities of day-to-day musical politics. Manifestos, positions and polemics all seem far removed from the man we feel we know. (Messiaen's comment that La Jeune France lasted only two or three years is rather more perplexing and might give us pause – since we know from Nigel Simeone's work that La Jeune France were still giving concerts in 1945, some nine years later.)

We might, nonetheless, be drawn to conclude that Messiaen's role in *La Jeune France* was relatively limited – at least in the context of the group's engagement in the complex manoeuvrings of the day. And we would be supported in this assumption by Messiaen's extensive interviews with Claude Samuel, since neither the original interviews of 1967, nor the considerably revised and extended 1986 version mentions *La Jeune France* at all.

Fortunately, however, we need not rely entirely on the composer's later pronouncements for an insight into his role in *La Jeune France*, because Messiaen's journalism allows us to short-circuit the caution of the revered *maître* that he became, offering us instead a fresh, relatively unmediated route to a greater understanding of this fascinating episode.

One of Messiaen's better-known writings from the 1930s is a short piece on Stravinsky's rhythmic procedures for *La Revue musicale* in 1939. The article contains a biting sideswipe at neo-classicism that seems rather uncharacteristic.

Chose curieuse, s'ils ont subi sa puissante influence dans le double domaine de la polytonalité et des somptuosités orchestrales, ses contemporains immédiats ont peu utilisé ses rythmes. Ils les ont admirés, mais d'une admiration paresseuse, béate, et sans fruits. Les lamentables mesures à 3 et 4 temps, qui constituent l'habituelle nausée de nos concerts parisiens, en sont la preuve. Quant aux 'tout jeunes', ils suivent des voies très différentes de leurs aînés ; ils retournent au sensible, au spirituel. (Messiaen, 1939c, p. 91)

It is strange that, whilst Stravinsky has exerted a powerful influence over his immediate contemporaries in the dual domains of polytonality and sumptuous orchestration, they have rarely used his rhythms. They admire them, but it is a lazy admiration, complacent and fruitless. The lamentable bars of 3 and 4 that are the habitual sickness of our Parisian concerts are proof of this. As for the young composers, they have followed a very different path from their elders — they have returned to the sensual and the spiritual.

Writing in 1985, Paul Griffiths judged Messiaen's outburst inconsequential and incorporated it into the familiar narrative as the exception that proved the rule.

The harsh judgement on neoclassical aesthetics could have come from any of the members of *La Jeune France*. For Messiaen, however, this was not only his first but also his last engagement in polemics. His halfhearted career as a public musician – writing essays, backing manifestos, accepting commissions, composing for the conventional concert world – was at an end. (Griffiths, 1985, p.76. Italics original)

Griffiths's assessment perfectly captures the way that Messiaen's role in *La Jeune France* has been seen up to now. In fact, however, the Stravinsky article was no aberration: Messiaen waged a sustained and public campaign against neoclassicism through his journalism for some three years between 1936 and 1939.

## ‘Treasure troves of furious hailstones’

In the article on Stravinsky, Messiaen bemoans the ‘lamentable’ rhythmic squareness of much Parisian music, employing the striking and rather unpleasant image of a ‘sickness’ infecting French musical life. It is clear that for Messiaen, issues in musical language are inseparable from the wider concerns of his aesthetic outlook. Rhythm is used as a symbol of a wider malaise that Messiaen detects. He seems to see rhythmic blandness as an indication of the paucity of neoclassicism on one hand and rhythmic innovation (presumably, his own) as the key to a new age of expression on the other. Writing in *La Page musicale* in April 1936, he further linked square rhythm with polytonality (a technique he associates uniquely with neoclassicism) and contrasted these with his own musical preferences:

Plus de rythmes monotones par leur carrure même; nous voulons librement respirer! Laissons les polytonalités vagues (et faciles) et retrouvons la somptueuse ‘modalité’, génératrice d’atmosphères chaudes et vibrantes en accord avec des rythmes souples et sinueux n’enchaînant pas, dans la ‘métrique’, une pensée d’essor libre. (Messiaen, 1936a: 1. Also quoted in Samuel, 1999, p. 51)

More rhythms made monotonous by their squareness? We want to breathe freely! Let us leave to one side vague (and simple) polytonalities, and rediscover sumptuous ‘modality’, which generates a warm and vibrant atmosphere in keeping with supple and sinuous rhythms and free-flowing imagination, unhindered by ‘metre’.

A year later, in May 1937, Messiaen noted some ‘Réflexions sur le rythme’ for the Belgian journal *La Sirène* that enlarge this theme. In this article Messiaen asserts that Ravel’s ‘failure’ to build on Debussy’s rhythmic advances is a clear sign of wider artistic shortcomings:<sup>1</sup>

Debussy, par quelques touches impalpables, a su construire dans la souplesse un échafaudage inébranlable de rythmes savamment dosés et poétiquement respirés. Ravel, son merveilleux continuateur dans le domaine ‘timbres et accords’, a oublié les rythmes exquis de son devancier. L’émotion qui était liée à ces rythmes a disparu aussi. (Messiaen, 1937c, p. 14)

Debussy, by certain impalpable touches, knew how to achieve through suppleness an unwavering structure of skilfully proportioned and poetically breathing rhythms. Ravel, his marvellous disciple in the domain of ‘timbre and chords’, has completely forgotten the

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1 Messiaen’s early writings reveal somewhat ambivalent attitudes to both Ravel and Stravinsky due, it might be surmised from Messiaen’s later comments (see, for example, Messiaen and Samuel, 1994, p. 195), to a conflict between aspects of each composer’s music that attracted the young Messiaen and their later conversion to neoclassicism. In 1938, Messiaen devoted an article to Debussy and Ravel, in which his ambivalence towards the latter becomes obvious (Messiaen, 1938b, pp. 25-6).

exquisite rhythms of his predecessor. The emotion that was contained in these rhythms has also disappeared.

Rhythmic simplicity is not Messiaen's only target. His campaign against neoclassicism is wide-ranging and in other articles, the 'truth' of sincere expression and the implied 'falsity' of music that lacks a spiritual dimension are important motifs. This is from *Carrefour* in June 1939:

On a beaucoup parlé, ces temps derniers, du 'retour à l'humain'. C'est 'retour au divin' qu'il faudrait dire. L'homme n'est ni ange, ni bête, encore moins machine: il est homme, chair et conscience, corps et âme. [...] Dans L'Évangile de saint Jean, ce qui est spirituel est dit 'vrai'. 'Vraie Lumière', 'vraie Vigne', 'vrai Pain du ciel'. Il y a donc une certaine fausseté dans l'oubli du spirituel. Surtout en musique. Car, la musique — quoi qu'on en dise — reste le plus immatériel des arts. (Messiaen, 1939b, p. 75)

There is much talk these days about a 'return to the human'. One should really speak of a 'return to the divine'. Man is neither angel nor beast, far less machine. He is man: flesh and conscience, body and spirit. [...] In the Gospel according to Saint John, that which is spiritual is called 'true'. The 'true Light', the 'true Vine', the 'true Bread of heaven'. There is therefore a certain falsity when spirituality is forgotten. Above all in music. For music, as they say, remains the most immaterial of the arts.

Elsewhere, and with a greater rhetorical flourish, Messiaen characterises neoclassicism as a brief fashion, no longer taken seriously by the coming generation:

On nous parlait avec enthousiasme, hier, de musique d'usines, de sports, de locomotives ou d'avions, de dissonances capables d'extérioriser, sinon de poétiser, cette esthétique du bruitisme. Puis le vent tourna: simplifions! et, alors, autre question: 'Qui vais-je bien imiter pour être original?'

Parallèlement, mais souterrainement pourrait-on dire, à ces sursauts, quelque chose a germé, quelque chose qui peut restituer à la musique ses richesses perdues. Les jeunes — les très jeunes — pensent à l'émotion d'abord, à une émotion inspirée par l'Amour. (Messiaen, 1936a, p. 1)

Yesterday, they spoke enthusiastically to us of the music of factories, of sports, of locomotives or aeroplanes, of dissonances capable of expressing, if not poeticising, this aesthetic of noise. Then the wind changed: simplify! And, then, another question arose: 'Who should I imitate to be original?'

At the same time as these shocks, something germinated, one might say underground, something that could return to music the riches that it has lost. The young composers — the very young ones — think firstly of emotion, of emotion inspired by Love.

The reference to young composers ('Les jeunes') is notable. It reinforces the implication that the trends he attacks are outmoded but, since this particular article was written just two months before the first Jeune France concert, also seems to pre-empt Baudrier's manifesto. (Messiaen uses the same term in the 1939 Stravinsky article quoted earlier)

Messiaen was not afraid to make his arguments with great force. In an article for *La Page musicale*, written in 1939, he argued his convictions with extraordinary vigour, stepping quite deliberately into the realm of polemic. The article, which I will quote in its entirety, is given the strong headline 'Contre la paresse' ('Against laziness') and appeared on the front page of the paper with a large byline: 'by Olivier Messiaen'.

Ce siècle enfiévré, ce siècle affolé n'est qu'un siècle de paresseux.

Paresseux, les compositeurs qui ne produisent plus, paresseux les compositeurs qui produisent trop sans prendre le temps de méditer, de mûrir leurs conceptions hâtives.

Paresseux, les artisans du sous-Fauré, du sous-Ravel. Paresseux, les maniaques du faux Couperin, les fabricants de rigaudons et de pavanés. Paresseux, les odieux contrapuntistes du retour à Bach qui nous offrent, sans remords, des lignes sèches et mornes, empoisonnées par un semblant d'atonalisme.

Paresseux, les vils flatteurs de l'habitude et du laisser-aller qui méprisent tout élan rythmique, tout repos rythmique, toute variété, toute respiration rythmique, toute alternance dans l'art si difficile du nombre musical, pour nous servir sur le plateau illusoire du mouvement perpétuel de vagues trois temps, des quatre temps plus vagues encore, indignes du plus vulgaire des bals publics, de la moins entraînante des marches militaires.

Et que dire des habitués auditeurs de nos salles de concert? Leur haine du changement est vraiment inouïe! Bon nombre d'entre eux n'admettent pas encore des noms déjà classés, comme Stravinsky, Alban Berg, Bartok, Darius Milhaud, par exemple. S'ils entendaient du plain-chant pur, d'authentiques râgas indous, peut-être siffleraient-ils? Leur cerveau obscurci n'enregistre que certaines combinaisons sonores, à l'exclusion de toutes les autres.

Contre une telle catégorie de paresseux — le génie nécessaire, le grand libérateur attendu de la musique à venir — quels tonnerres, quels trésors de grêlons furieux ou de douce neige enverra-t-il? (Messiaen, 1939a, p. 1)

This feverish century, this crazy century is nothing but a century of laziness.

Lazy: those composers who produce nothing any more. Lazy: those composers who produce too much without ever taking the time to think, to let their hurried work ripen.

Lazy: those artisans of sub-Fauré and sub-Ravel. Lazy: the fake Couperin maniacs, writers of rigadoons and pavans. Lazy: the odious contrapuntalists of the 'return to Bach' who offer us, without remorse, dry and doleful lines poisoned by a semblance of atonality.

Lazy: the vile flatterers of habit and *laissez-faire* who scorn all rhythmic undulation, all variety, all respiration, all alternation in the subtle art of musical metre, giving us instead on the illusory platter of perpetual motion, vague 3-in-a-bars and vaguer 4-in-a-bars, native to the most vulgar of public dances and the most limping of military marches.

And what do our regular concertgoers say? Their hatred of change is truly unprecedented! A good number of them still do not acknowledge musicians who are already celebrated, like Stravinsky, Alban Berg, Bartok and Darius Milhaud for example. If they heard a pure plainchant, or an authentic Hindu raga, would they hiss? Their little brains can only understand certain combinations of sounds, to the exclusion of all others.

What thunder, what treasure-troves of furious hailstones or of sweet snow will be brought to bear on this kind of laziness by the genius we await, the great anticipated liberator of the music of the future?

'Laziness', 'maniacs', 'odious', 'vulgar': as with the image of 'sickness' employed in the article on Stravinsky (written the same year), the forcefulness of the diatribe is quite shocking. The stirring rhetoric is confident and effective, and the exuberance with which he hits out so relentlessly in so many directions, is almost Cocteau-esque. But most important of all, this is a public statement identifying Messiaen personally, in the strongest terms imaginable, with the anti-neoclassical ideals of La Jeune France.

Given these strong ideals, we might expect Messiaen to condemn the music of Les Six – of Poulenc, Honegger, and Milhaud, for example – but here we meet a contradiction, for one of the most striking features of Messiaen's journalism is his consistent support for Darius Milhaud. Messiaen's support for Milhaud is surprising not only because he was – at least ostensibly, through his association with Cocteau and Les Six – a neoclassicist, but also because of the Rightist politics that have been presumed of Messiaen: Milhaud was a composer who attracted the full venom of anti-Semitism from some other Rightist critics.

## Messiaen and Milhaud

I have a horror of politics. I've never been engaged in them, and I've a horror of being engaged by them. (Samuel and Messiaen, 1976, p. 102)

Olivier Messiaen generally eschewed political comment, but has nonetheless regularly been situated on the Right. This is, however, an assumption predicated on rather limited evidence, and the journalism casts fresh light on how Messiaen negotiated the highly-charged circum-

stances of the late 1930s. It is only against the backdrop of Messiaen's presumed Rightist politics that the significance of his response to Milhaud may be understood, so a short detour into Messiaen's politics is necessary. I will then trace that response, including Messiaen's review of Milhaud's allegorical opera *Esther de Carpentras*.

### 'Something of the Right'

The assumptions of political position that have arisen around Messiaen are supported by a certain amount of evidence. The only comment Messiaen ever made about support for a political position was made in connection with de Gaulle, of whom Messiaen was a supporter – he signed a call for the General's re-election in 1965. (Hill and Simeone, 2005, p. 140) Amongst other evidence is his staunchly-held Catholic faith, traditionally associated with the French Right as Eugen Weber (amongst many others) has shown, and his reverence for the musical teaching of Vincent d'Indy, who was famously an anti-Semite and *Action Française* activist. (Messiaen and Samuel, 1994, p. 175).

This is all rather circumstantial stuff – but it has created an aura around Messiaen that could be characterised (to misquote the British politician Anne Widdecombe) as 'something of the Right', especially when it is combined with the conclusions of some scholarly work that has touched on Messiaen's place in the maelstrom of the late thirties. Jane Fulcher's study of this period seeks to trace connections between musical tendencies and political attitudes, and she has traced the support that Messiaen received in the far Right press in the late 1930s, even going so far as to suggest that this assisted his nomination as Professor of Harmony at the Paris Conservatoire in occupied Paris (Fulcher, 1995, p. 451).

Her thesis (in broad terms) is that different musical styles were celebrated and appropriated by critics of different political persuasions, and she assesses a range of individuals and groups, among them Messiaen and La Jeune France. The first Jeune France concert coincided (almost to the day) with the rise of the French anti-Fascist conglomeration known as the Front Populaire, and according to Fulcher the Front Populaire promoted through its *Fédération Musical Populaire* a musical style that was to be representative of the democratic Republic – based on the well-established neoclassical style.

Fulcher proposes that by proclaiming neoclassical music 'anti-Fascist', the Front Populaire not only set up a cultural banner to rally the French nation: they also, whether wittingly or unwittingly, created a duality whereby all music that is not neoclassical becomes implicated as Fascist music. Notwithstanding the nationalist allusions in its title, La Jeune France as a whole held no explicit political allegiances (and French nationalism could be indicative of elements of both the Left and Right). However, the group (and, as we have seen, Messiaen himself) was emphatically, and very publicly, not neoclassical. Fulcher suggests that their musical style – symphonic, serious, and spiritual – made them ripe for adoption by the Right.

Fulcher expands her argument by reference to what she calls the ‘aesthetic of Vichy’. By the end of 1938, she says, when the Right had become the ascendant political force in France, Right wing critics began to promote music that had apparently been rejected by the Front Populaire, and the members of La Jeune France found themselves supported by the Fascist press:

Despite their ambiguous or intermediary ideology, within this politicized context interpretation was based upon their musical style: hence the support for “Jeune France” was most consistent in both the pro-fascist and conservative press. (Fulcher, 1995, p. 451)

Messiaen was indeed widely praised in the Right wing press: favourable articles appeared in the openly Fascist newspapers *Je suis partout* and *Gringoire*. (Fulcher, 1995, p. 450) Some particularly prominent and influential critics who wrote for the far Right press at this time were supportive of Messiaen – André Cœuroy, Emile Vuillermoz and Paul Landormy – and some of these had associations with the composer (in particular, Messiaen corresponded with André Cœuroy around the time of the first Jeune France concert in 1936 to thank him for a positive review in *Gringoire* – more incriminating evidence, perhaps?). (Messiaen, 1936b: n.p.; published in Eng. Trans. in Simeone, 2002, p. 14)

Aspects of Messiaen’s own writing appear at first sight to lend further support to this thesis – especially, perhaps, the vehement critiques of neoclassicism that we have already encountered. If, as is claimed, neoclassicism was from 1936 to around 1938 the ‘official art’ of the anti-Fascist government, it might be tempting to read these essays as a part of a politicised musical discourse.

We should recall the stylistic gestures and frames of reference of Messiaen’s polemics. In the most striking of these, the article entitled ‘Against laziness’ that I discussed earlier, Messiaen argues in a rapturous, almost ecstatic, style – more akin to oratory than prose. On the page, the rhetoric is rather overdone (indeed, it reads almost like an anthology of rhetorical techniques) – read aloud, it takes on an almost disturbing demagogic quality. We might also note the (perhaps unintentional) reference to Wagner in Messiaen’s final phrase (‘the music of the future’). The messianic tone and the stinging attack on neoclassicism (supposedly the sanctioned anti-fascist music) might contribute to the Right wing ‘aura’ that Messiaen has attracted. When we add to this the sorts of circumstantial evidence I mentioned earlier, and the suggestion that Messiaen’s popularity in the far Right press ‘assisted’ him in his nomination to the Conservatoire in 1941, there seems little reason to doubt Messiaen’s place in the political landscape of the time.

And yet, at the same time, there is that passing reference to the ‘already acknowledged’ composer, Darius Milhaud. The date of this polemic? February 1939. For a composer supposedly of the Right, at the height of what has been called the ‘preparation for Vichy’, Milhaud seems an unusual choice as a touchstone of new music, but in fact this reference to Milhaud is one among several in Messiaen’s newly-uncovered writings.

## Messiaen's critical response to Milhaud

Milhaud is probably mentioned more in Messiaen's journalism than any other contemporary composer.<sup>2</sup> In Messiaen's first article for the Belgian journal *La Sirène*, in March 1937, he paints a gloomy picture of the Parisian music scene:

Musique morne, grise, beaucoup de faux-classique et de Scarlatti dissonancé, pauvreté rythmique générale, perte totale de l'émotion mélodique: voilà ce qui caractérise la plupart des œuvres entendues dans les derniers concerts parisiens. Le système déplorable de la première audition à outrance nous a valu aussi des concertos bâclés, des quatuors inutiles. Quelques rayons de soleil éclairent cependant ce triste paysage. (Messiaen, 1937e, p. 14)

Doleful, dull music, too much fake classicism and dissonanced Scarlatti, a general lack of rhythm and a total absence of melodic emotion: these are the characteristics of the majority of works heard in the most recent Parisian concerts. The deplorable system of the extravagant première has also given us botched concerti and useless quartets. Some rays of sunlight do, however, brighten this sad landscape.

The first 'ray of sunlight' that Messiaen cites is none other than Milhaud. He goes on:

Il faut signaler aux concerts Poulet-Siohan l'exécution des *Choéphores* de Milhaud, toujours aussi grandes et sanguinaires, admirablement déclamées par Madeleine Vhita.<sup>3</sup> Au même concert, première audition des *Adages* de Milhaud, pour quatuor vocal et orchestre: œuvre charmante et fine, délicieusement écrite pour les voix et dont le style pimpant – très *Abandon d'Ariane* – convient parfaitement à la sagesse toute orientale du poème.<sup>4</sup> (Messiaen, 1937e, p. 14)

The performance of Milhaud's *Choéphores* in the Poulet-Siohan concert series must be mentioned. These *Choéphores* are always grand and bloodthirsty, and were admirably declaimed by Madeleine Vhita. At the same concert the first performance of Milhaud's *Adages* for vocal quartet and orchestra was heard: a fine, charming work, deliciously written for the voices. The spruce style – very *Abandon d'Ariane* – conveys perfectly the wholly oriental wisdom of the poem.

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2 See, for example: Messiaen, 1937e, pp. 14-15; Messiaen, 1937d, p. 22; Messiaen, 1937a, p. 14; Messiaen, 1937b, pp. 18-19; Messiaen, 1938a, pp. 25-26; Messiaen, 1939a, p. 1.

3 Darius Milhaud, *Choéphores* (scenario by Claudel, after Aeschylus, op. 14., 1915-1916).

4 Darius Milhaud, *Adages* (words by Richaud, op. 120c, 1932); *L'Abandon d'Ariane* (Opera in 1 act, libretto by Hoppenot, op. 98, 1927 [first performed 1928]).

Elsewhere, Messiaen reviews Milhaud's ninth string quartet, describing it in a way that clearly reflects a great enthusiasm for the work:<sup>5</sup>

C'était sans contredit le plus beau moment de la soirée!<sup>6</sup> Résumons-le: après un *modéré* très mélodique, vient un *animé* vigoureux, alertement troussé, suivi d'un très *lent* fertile en imitations canoniques, et dont le contrepoint sévère et durement dissonant s'élève et plane à des hauteurs vraiment sublimes. Un *décidé*, de forme plus classique, termine ce magnifique ouvrage. (Messiaen, 1937d, p. 22)

It was, without question, the most beautiful moment of the evening! To sum it up: after a very melodic *modéré* came a vigorous *animé*, nimbly dashed off, followed by a très *lent* rich in canonic imitations. Then the severe and harshly dissonant counterpoint rose, levelling out at truly sublime heights. A *décidé* of a more classical form finished this magnificent work.

Messiaen's article for the March 1938 issue of *La Syrinx* is his fullest discussion of Milhaud's music, and is devoted to a 'Spectacle Darius Milhaud' that had recently been staged by the Opéra-comique. Messiaen discusses all the works on the programme, but reserves pride of place for the *première* of Milhaud's opera *Esther de Carpentras* (Messiaen, 1938a, pp. 25-26).

Milhaud's opera had been written some thirteen years earlier in 1925, and deals with a public celebration in Carpentras of the story of Esther, who won deliverance for the Jews from King Ahasuerus – the story that is the origin of the Feast of Purim. The Jewish leaders in Carpentras must seek the permission of the Catholic Cardinal to hold their street festival, and he consents, secretly planning to force the conversion of all the town's Jews while they are gathered together. The performance goes ahead, and the Cardinal arrives, announcing that they are to convert to Christianity or face banishment. The young girl playing Esther recites her speech to Ahasuerus for the Cardinal, and he relents, allowing them to remain in grace within the city.

*Esther*, though it takes the form of a boisterous opéra-comique, may be seen as a parable of religious tolerance, and Messiaen's review explains the allegorical plot in some detail, noting that it 'engaged both Jews and Christians'. (Messiaen, 1938a, p. 25) His account of the story reveals that he is comfortable with the opera's message, and he concludes his synopsis thus: 'They all return home, true to their own beliefs, under the beautiful sun of the Midi' (Messiaen, 1938a, p. 25).

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5 One slightly equivocal review of Milhaud by Messiaen exists. It is for the former's contribution to the *Fêtes* of the 1937 Exposition: 'Fête de la musique by Darius Milhaud. One could not find in Honegger's *Fête* the counterpoint and contrary motion that have made his work so famous. Likewise, here one looks in vain for the succulent polytonal harmonies dear to Milhaud. This strange desire to remain absolutely diatonic drives him imperceptibly towards a more classical style of intercrossing lines in the flutes and violins, which nonetheless has undeniable charm.' (Messiaen, 1937b, pp. 18-19)

6 Darius Milhaud, String Quartet no.9 (op. 140, 1935).

Barbara Kelly provides a fascinating account of the wider reception of this first performance in her study of Milhaud, noting that, like Messiaen, 'a number of reviewers reflected the theme of tolerance' (Kelly, 2003, p. 100). She then goes on to consider the reviews that were not sympathetic to the themes of the opera and, in particular, discusses the response of André Cœuroy (who was, remember, one of Messiaen's Right-wing supporters):

[Cœuroy] makes it clear that as a Gentile he is uncomfortable with the topic and with all the Jewish composers at the performance, whom he cites. He also comments that the Opéra-comique 'counts as a new synagogue' thanks to 'the great Rabbi of the place', Daniel Lazarus, who acted as secretary. (Kelly, 2003, p. 101)

Naturally, such prejudice also inflected the reception of the music: Kelly goes on to quote the critic Dominique Sordet, of *Action Française*, who describes the music of *Esther* in terms that rehearse classic tropes of anti-Semitism:

[C'est] affreuse; elle est bossue, elle louche, elle boîte. Elle est grossière, souillon, peu ragoûtante. C'est un chaos de notes qui défilent au hasard...

[It is] frightful; it is hunchbacked, it squints, it limps. It is vulgar, sluttish and unsavoury. It is a chaos of notes, unravelling haphazardly... (Kelly, 2003, p. 101)

Messiaen's account could not be more different. Having shown that he has no difficulty with the opera's message, he goes on to enthuse about the music itself:

Milhaud a composé sur ce sujet un peu mince une musique bruyante, bouffonne, carnavalesque, d'une exubérante gaieté. La mélodie, d'allure très populaire, y reçoit des chocs sous-cutanés, provoqués par des 'majeurs-mineurs', des 'ostinatos' de basses polytonales, et une orchestration comique, puissante et joyeusement déboutonnée. Le génie, non point rabelaisien mais provençal, dans tout ce que ce mot contient de lumière et de bonne humeur, voilà ce que M. Milhaud a su mettre en maints endroits de sa partition. Au point de vue théâtre, le premier acte est admirablement troussé. Le Noël comtadin en mode surmajeur, où chaque dissonance a une intention humoristique, est un petit chef-d'œuvre. Le portrait du Cardinal par son valet Vacluse, sur un rythme de polka, est également une trouvaille. Mentionnons aussi la grâce mélodique de l'ouverture, le truculent entr'acte, l'air si personnel de l'astrologue, et la piquante entrée d'Esther sur un mouvement de maxixe. Les acteurs, les costumes, les décors, tout est parfait. (Messiaen, 1938a, p. 26)

Milhaud has composed around this rather simple story a noisy, clownish, carnival music, of exuberant gaiety. The melodies have a popular feel, but receive surreptitious 'shocks' through the use of 'major-minors', polytonal bass ostinati, and comical, powerful and joyously unfettered orchestration. Milhaud's work is shot through with genius, not Rabelaisian genius but provençale in the sense that it is full of light and good humour.

From the theatrical point of view, the first act is admirably formed. The *Noël comtadin* in the lydian mode, where every dissonance is humorous in intention, is a minor masterpiece. The portrait of the Cardinal by his servant Vaocluse, in polka rhythm, is likewise a discovery. I must also mention the melodic charm of the overture, the truculent entr'acte, the very personal melody of the astrologer and the spicy entry of Esther, in the style of a *maxixe*.<sup>7</sup> All is perfect – the actors, the costumes and the sets.

Messiaen's unfettered enthusiasm for the opera and its message is striking in the highly-charged context that is confirmed by the sorts of reviews Kelly quotes, and we should again recall the date – March 1938.

In his journalism, then, Messiaen championed the music of Milhaud. He gave highly positive reviews of individual works; cited Milhaud as an 'acknowledged' giant of new music alongside Stravinsky and Berg; cast him as a 'ray of hope' in the 'sad landscape' that was music in Paris; and welcomed Milhaud's opera *Esther* and its allegory of tolerance. Messiaen's reception of Milhaud clearly problematises the easy conclusions that we might draw from the sorts of evidence that I presented earlier: the apparent conflict between these strands of evidence reminds us of the alarming complexity of this densely knotted context.

Of course, I have only scratched the surface here: a fuller account of Messiaen's engagement or otherwise in the debates of his time would have to take account of the complexities of personal and musical relationships, the statements of ideology made by Messiaen, the people supporting him and supported by him, and his reaction to unfolding events. Clearly a full picture would be highly complex – and perhaps impossible to resolve coherently in terms of competing political ideologies, distinct religious traditions, personal relationships and musical preferences.<sup>8</sup>

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7 The *maxixe* (now usually spelt *matchiche*) is a Brazilian dance, popular in France in the early years of the twentieth century.

8 Fulcher's exposition provides many starting points for a sense of the complexity of Messiaen's relationship to the debates of his time. She mentions, for example, the role played by the composer Charles Kœchlin as president of the *Fédération Musical Populaire*; Kœchlin was a close colleague of Messiaen at the *Schola Cantorum* whom Messiaen supported through performing and reviewing his music. She notes that André Jolivet (Messiaen's close friend and *Jeune France* colleague) joined the *Fédération*, and that Roger Désormière (the conductor at the first *Jeune France* concert, whom Messiaen described as 'A great, a very great conductor, the best in the world for the interpretation of modern works!') wrote for the *Fédération's* journal *L'Art musical populaire*. If we are to place importance on which critics champion which musicians, we might dissect Messiaen's own reviews, noting, perhaps, his enthusiastic endorsement of Guy Lambert – since Lambert was later, according to some biographies, a member of the *résistance*.

In the course of this article, I have referred to ‘our idea of Messiaen’ and said that some of his journalistic comments seem ‘uncharacteristic’, ‘surprising’ or even ‘shocking’. And such they are, at least with respect to the Messiaen that I caricatured at the outset. The reality is much more interesting: far from holding himself apart from the debates of his time, Messiaen engaged publicly with them, and this engagement leaves a trace in his journalism.

The usual (somewhat paradoxical) characterisation of Messiaen’s involvement in La Jeune France – which posits him as the pre-eminent musician of the group, half-heartedly caught up Baudrier’s crusade – is misconceived. His role as activist in La Jeune France was much more significant than has been acknowledged; he was active in publicly promoting the group’s aesthetic agenda, and sustained a personal campaign against neoclassicism.

Messiaen’s comments on Milhaud remind us of the innumerable ‘shades of grey’ necessary in research of this kind, and of the problems that come with clear-cut formulations. They also inadvertently position Messiaen within the currents of his time in a most striking way. He may have eschewed political comment, he may have had a horror of ‘engagement’, but he was a man of his time.

Messiaen presents considerable challenges to the historian, and it is all too easy to lapse into formulas that offer a seductively simple way of understanding him. Messiaen’s engagement in the turbulent debates of the 1930s provides a vivid reminder that there is so much more to understand about the familiar ‘composer-rhythmician-ornithologist’, the ‘musician apart’, that we think we know so well.<sup>9</sup>

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