

Music Tripos Part II, paper 13

Olivier Messiaen, 1949-64: Experiment and regeneration

Sample exam questions

1. 'Messiaen increasingly inhabits a phantasmagorical universe to which we do not have a key ... every symbol is quite enigmatic for us, and he translates these into a highly individual musical language into which we must be initiated by his printed and spoken commentaries. They don't sit well together.' How does Marc Pincherle's comment apply to EITHER the organ works of 1950-2, OR the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, OR the music of 1962-4 (i.e. *Sept haïkai*, *Couleurs*, *Et exspecto*).
2. Messiaen makes a distinction between three different modes of duration: human, angelic and divine time. What are these modes and is it possible to see them reflected in Messiaen's music between 1949 and 1964?
3. 'Music, in its double aspect of message, of communication [on the one hand] - and of silence, of artistic joy [on the other] - surely came out of birdsong.' (Messiaen). What is the relation between these two aspects of music in Messiaen's birdsong pieces? Include detailed discussion of at least two different works in your answer.
4. 'There is nothing superficial about Messiaen's eclecticism' (Boulez). Does Messiaen's engagement with 'exotic' cultures depart from, or perpetuate, exoticist and Orientalist traditions in twentieth-century French music?
5. Writing in 1930, Messiaen described the basis of his music as 'emotional sincerity, put at the service of the dogmas of the Catholic faith, expressed through a new musical language'. Explore the relations between Messiaen's 'new musical language', the dogmas of the Catholic faith, and the listener, in two or more works from 1949-64.
6. 'Messiaen wants to decipher in his own way the secrets of the universe, just as a scientist can transcribe natural laws in numerical terms. But at the same time he wishes to express himself with greater immediacy, ... foreseeing that beyond the formal law there is a more important order both more difficult to discover and less reassuring, because it cannot be coded numerically.' (Boulez). Discuss.