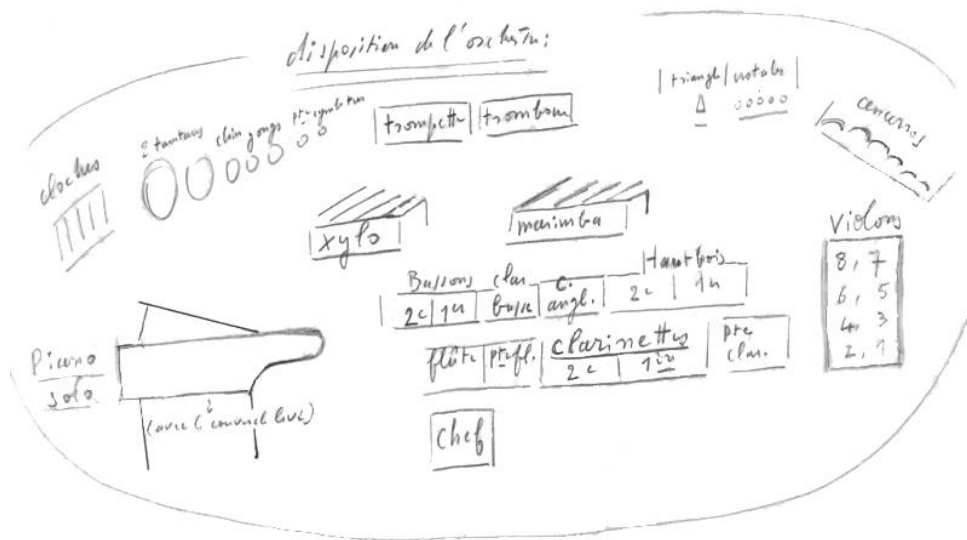




JAPANESE INFLUENCE on OLIVIER MESSIAEN'S *SEPT HAÏKAI*



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“...There is an Oriental country that I know well, which totally fascinated and captivated me the first time I went, and that’s Japan...the Japanese musical traditions: the *Nō* drama and *Gagaku*, immediately carried me away. I consider *Nō* the most powerful theatrical expression in existence, and *Gagaku*, which must date from the eighth century, remains incredibly modern. Just think: *Gagaku*, established when Europe was still unaware of the rules of harmony...it remains terribly expressive.”¹

A majority of Olivier Messiaen’s compositional organization and technique lies in his personal gathering, synthesizing, and combination of disparate musical practices through a Western-classical musical framework. His obsession with Eastern music, birdsong, and religious depiction of the divine, created his modernist voice that uniquely transcends a single genre or style. As a Japanese-American with a keen interest in French classical music, I was captivated by the influence of Japanese culture, aesthetics, and music on Messiaen’s compositional language, and what implications it may have for both European and Asian audiences of today. *Sept Haïkai*, his multi-movement work for piano and orchestra completed in 1962, poses unique questions in its complex and interweaving tapestry of musical and extramusical references. How did Olivier Messiaen integrate his experiences with Japanese culture, music (*gagaku*), aesthetics, and natural observations into his compositional language? What inspirations led Messiaen to writing *Sept Haïkai*, and how are these ideas depicted in his music? How, specifically, did Messiaen synthesize ideas from Eastern and Western musical traditions in his work? Before these questions can be answered, a broad overview of Messiaen’s compositional language must be established. Then, through an analysis of the work’s musical components, his textual descriptions of Japanese culture and *Sept Haïkai*, and analysis on *gagaku*, the authentic musical tradition that he borrowed, a full picture emerges.

¹ Olivier Messiaen and Claude Samuel, *Music and Color* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1994), 99-100.

Messiaen codified an elaborate compositional language that synthesizes Ancient Greek and Indian rhythmic processes. Messiaen himself wrote many detailed texts that outline his compositional procedures, inspirations, and meaning behind his work. These primary sources detail his use of ametrical rhythms derived from Indian rhythmic formulae (*Deçî-tâlas*), created through additive mathematical processes: “They are always built from multiples of a basic unit; but this basic unit is generally faster than the succession of notes that we hear, whereas in most Western music the notes either move more or less with the pulse, or are at least clearly placed in relation to it...the resulting rhythms can no longer be assimilated into a meter.”²

Regarding tonal structure, Messiaen organizes a system of *modes of limited transposition* to organize melody and harmony. These collections of notes follow structural order in a way that creates a unique interval set, transposable until reaching an equivalent inversion. Messiaen explains in his treatise that “they are at once in the atmosphere of several tonalities, without polytonality, the composer being free to give predominance to one of the tonalities or to leave the tonal impression unsettled. Their series is closed. It is mathematically impossible to find others of them, at least in our tempered system of twelve semitones.”³ Harmony and chords were closely associated with colors throughout his music, evidenced in detailed writings and score notations on color associations with specific chords and intervals. These ideas were also applied to his modes: “Messiaen’s employment of the modes of limited transposition is closely associated with his deliberate presentation of combinations of colours. [In this study], there is a high degree of correlation between individual transposition of modes and certain colours and combinations of colours.”⁴ Through his conception of mode and harmony, Messiaen used

² Anthony Pople, “Messiaen’s Musical Language,” 35.

³ Olivier Messiaen, *The technique of my musical language* (Paris: A. Leduc, 1956), 55.

⁴ Jonathan Bernard, “Colour,” in *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1994), 205.

transcribed birdsong, and employed these stylized natural transcriptions as motivic devices. In his treatise, he espouses the role of birdsong in his life and music: “I...admire, analyze, and notate some songs of birds. Since they use untampered intervals smaller than the semitone, and as it is ridiculous servilely to copy nature, we are going to give some examples of melodies of the “bird” genre which will be transcription, transformation, and interpretation of the volleys and trills of our little servants of immaterial joy.”⁵ Through the lens of these compositional devices, religion, was also profoundly influential on the genesis of Messiaen’s music—his ideas on the ‘charm of impossibilities’ reflects his religious sensibility and fascination with the passage of time, the eternal, mystical, and miraculous in Christianity.⁶ These religious fascinations guided much of the conception of *Sept Haïkai*, explained in many of his personal writings on his trip to Japan.

On *Sept Haïkai*, it is important to note the personal stories, interviews, and writings on his journey to Japan in order to analyze its deeper imprint on his established style. In 1962, Messiaen traveled with Yvonne Loriod, his wife, for rehearsals, concerts, receptions, and press conferences dealing with his music, but also spent many days exploring the countryside and attending *Nō* drama, *gagaku*, and koto performances.⁷ His detailed, poetic journal entries and descriptive musings on nature and color created the programmatic organization of *Sept Haïkai*: “For a work about Japan: use a rhythmic plan based on odd numbers with permutations; also use *gagaku*, no, *bunraku*... The sea: salty smell, of seaweed and of water, and the scent of a grove of pines. Large red torii in the sea – stone lanterns on the path beside the sea – the mountains velvety with pines.”⁸ He notes and details the landscape (sea, sky, mountains, animals, foliage),

⁵ Messiaen, *The technique of my musical language*, 31.

⁶ Pople, “Messiaen’s Musical Language,” 43.

⁷ Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (Yale University Press, 2005), 249.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 252.

structures (temples, lanterns, *torii* gates), exact calls of many native Japanese birds, and later directly imports these fragments into various movements in his work. These obsessions with natural phenomenon and his musical interpretations also find strong connections to Japanese philosophy on “nature-worship”; mating calls of birds inspired blind shakuhachi players centuries prior.⁹ Most importantly, Messiaen notes the close relationship between Japanese religion, philosophy, and practices to his own views: “To Western ears, so-called exotic music is monotonous. Japanese music is static, and I myself am a static composer because I believe in the invisible and in the beyond; I believe in eternity. Now, Orientals are on much closer terms with the beyond than we are...this no doubt explains my attraction to Japan.”¹⁰ With these religious ideas framing his conception of *Sept Haïkai*, the traditional musical practices of Japan (*gagaku*) to which he drew inspiration must be investigated to find the true relationship between his work and that which was truly experienced.

Sept Haïkai is scored for piano, percussion (xylophone, marimba, and various bells), flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, and trumpet, organized into seven movements. The outer movements, an Introduction and Coda, have identical compositional structures, while inner movements are uniquely organized and depictive of Japanese landscape, birdsong, and colors. The Introduction and Coda primarily reference retrograde Indian *deśī tālas* and Greek rhythm, and include no direct reference to Japanese aesthetics other than his expressed religious conception of the work: “crafted and grimacing, like the two kings-guards who frame the entrance of the Buddhist temples.” From a Western standpoint, the bell-like sounds of the metallic percussion perhaps evoke an image a temple, while the symmetrical form of both

⁹ Malcolm Troup, “Orchestral Music of the 1950s and 1960s,” in *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1994), 192.

¹⁰ Messiaen and Samuel, *Music and Color*, 107.

movements symbolize these statues.¹¹ Structurally, this movement represents a standard “layered” and static organization of Messiaen’s previous output: “four layers of different rhythmic activities are superimposed on a melodic line in ternary form, laid end-to-end and in an almost mechanical manner.”¹² His “strophes” of music, notated in the score, reference Messiaen’s literary influence and attempt bind the work’s poetic and mathematical formula to the *Haiku* form. The 2nd movement, Nara Park and Stone Lanterns, based on the landscape in a Japanese park, was also based on similar Indian rhythms, rhythmic permutations, and melodic interplay, but introduces an element of Japanese reference—the 8 violins imitate the mouth harp (the *shō*)¹³, almost as a foreshadowing of the 4th movement of Gagaku. Messiaen pre-composed chords of transposed inversion for use in this movement (as well as the 4th), and remarked that each color was meant to “reproduce the marvelous effect of sunlight on the Japanese cedar tree.”¹⁴

The central piece of this work, titled *Gagaku*, only borrowed ideas of instrumentation and tone color from true Japanese *gagaku*, and did not imitate true form, structure, rhythm, or pitch organization. However, traditional *gagaku* superimposes and juxtaposes melodic, homophonic, and rhythmic elements—all of which are referenced in the thematic structuring of each instrument’s role in the ensemble (melody, counter-melody, chordal accompaniment).¹⁵ *Gagaku* has its origins in court music, but was also performed at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples as part of religious rituals. Indigenous songs, dances, vocal genres, and recitation are performed

¹¹ Desmond Oliver, “Cultural Appropriation in Messiaen’s Rhythmic Language” (PhD diss., Worcester College, University of Oxford: 2016), 148, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

¹² Olivier Messiaen and Melody Baggech, “An English Translation of Olivier Messiaen’s *Traite de Rythme, de Couleur, et D’Ornithologie*” (PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 1998), 119, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

¹³ Andrew Shenton, *Messiaen the Theologian* (Ashgate Publishing: 2010), 244.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁵ Olivier Messiaen and Melody Baggech, “*Traite de Rythme, de Couleur, et D’Ornithologie*,” 166.

with a non-standardized “orchestra” of Japanese woodwinds, strings, and percussion.¹⁶ The programmatic and structural organization of *gagaku* is so deeply entrenched in Eastern philosophy, that a Western analysis of the music would not prove useful to deriving its musical intentions. Messiaen however notes his interpretations of the role of each instrument in the ensemble, and how each timbre was unfamiliar to his conception of orchestration: “This music contains a melody that is surprising to European ears, played by a small, primitive oboe: the *hichiriki*. Its sound is extremely vinegary and it is doubled badly by other instruments which add flourishes and don’t stick to the same notes. These false doublings are both extremely disagreeable and at the same time expressive.”¹⁷ This sentiment on “acid” and harsh tones is highly evident in his use of extreme register, dissonant interval, and non-vibrato “*sul ponticello*” markings throughout his stylized Western score. Messiaen recreates the tone of the *Shô* with these violins; the *Hichiriki*, a Japanese reed instrument, is replaced with the trumpet as the only melodic instrument of the ensemble, recreating the noble and religious sentiment of *gagaku*. A “strong and acidic” piccolo and Eb clarinet part mimics the sound of a high-pitched *Ryûteki*, a small Japanese flute. On the relationship of melody in the *gagaku*, Messiaen remarks: “extraordinary for us, disciples of accompanied melody: the harmony is not placed under the melody; because, for the Japanese as for the Chinese, the harmony is above the melody as the sky is above the earth.”¹⁸

The 3rd and 6th movements depict superimposed and juxtaposed Japanese birdsong transcriptions in dialogue with the piano. The 3rd, *Yamanaka-cadenza*, uses successive orchestral bursts of twenty complex and layered birdsong with piano cadenzas, that linearly expand a single

¹⁶ Atuko Sawada, “Buddhist Music in Japan,” *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, Vol. 7.

¹⁷ Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 249.

¹⁸ Messiaen and Samuel, *Music and Color*, 172.

bird call (in the first, *Kibitaki*, then *Hookah*, then *Kuro tsugumi*, as notated in the score).

Rhythmic subdivisions were derived from the birds themselves, and harmonic/modal decisions were crafted with Messiaen's modes and color-chords explored in previous works, such as *Catalogue d'oiseaux*. Framed by outer episodes of identical structure, these movements juxtapose specific bird material with application of his devices on any given fragment¹⁹, defining the uniquely "Japanese" imprint of this work, using Western instruments and organization.

Orchestral episodes include "two levels of events running parallel to each other...birdsongs...and materials using the irrational value device...each instrument assigned a particular birdsong."²⁰

The 5th movement, *Miyajima and the torii in the sea*, is most frequently noted in literature regarding Messiaen's musical depictions of color. Color associations are made with individual, dual, and triple combinations of sonorities, each with different pitch content that is specifically notated.²¹ Building the form of this movement through harmonic structures, Messiaen still employs complex rhythmic counterpoint, referencing the 2nd movement in its poetic and complex interplay of melodic voices, and *gagaku* in its acidic combination of piccolo and clarinet. The violins, piano, and brass primarily outline the legato, extended chord-colors that Messiaen sought to depict in his view of the religious *torii* structures at sea.

On this work, Messiaen "consider[ed] this piece my most beautiful homage to Japan, to its birds, its landscapes, and its traditions—not to its traditions in the literal sense, but to the Japanese soul as I felt it...I tried to live like a true Japanese. I forgot about my music, and the

¹⁹ Chinyerem Ohia, "Messiaen's Rhythmic Techniques and Their Structural Application in 'Sept Haïkai'" (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1998), 208, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 151.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 191.

concerts, and I began with the cuisine. I went about in slippers rather than shoes.”²² This detached, yet reverent sentiment on his purpose behind referencing Japanese aesthetics best clarifies the intent behind finding a his own personal expression of respectful fascination with the unfamiliar Japanese culture. Conversely, perhaps this work appropriates Japanese culture—argued by Oliver, that Messiaen’s influences “did not extent their explorations of Japanese subjects to encompass Japanese artistic techniques was doomed to create works whose expressions signified little more than a brief fetish for the Orient...the Japanese assimilation of Western art was not without harm.”²³ Conceptually, Messiaen only loosely borrowed tone colors from true Japanese musical traditions—*Sept Haïkai* was created through his personal reflections on nature, sculpture, temples, and visual aesthetics of Japan, borrowing no elements of style, cultural practice, or structure of *gagaku* or any other Japanese musical tradition. The only elements that truly binds this work to Japanese music and culture are loose references to instrumentation, tone color and a preference for program and depiction (especially of nature). *Sept Haïkai*, on the surface, seems as an authentic homage to Japanese music and practice. However, its diverse synthesis of disparate musical elements spanning time and space creates a vivid, often anachronistic experience that can be more fully understood as a Western European collection of loosely Eastern abstractions—musical depictions inspired by Messiaen’s life perspectives involving of nature, landscape, humanity, color, time, and religion. For Messiaen, perhaps this personal authenticity superseded a preference for period authenticity on the Eastern traditions he encountered.²⁴

²² Messiaen and Samuel, *Music and Color*, 104.

²³ Oliver, “Cultural Appropriation,” 144.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

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