

Xenia Pestova: Messiaen as Painter: Nature Depictions in the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*

2008 will mark 100 years since the birth of the French composer Olivier Messiaen. Much of this composer's fascinating output is considered standard repertoire today, and his contribution to piano literature in particular is widely acknowledged. However, the monumental solo piano opus *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (Catalogue of the Birds, 1956-58) is still seldom programmed in North America despite being one of Messiaen's most important piano cycles.

This major example of Messiaen's virtuoso birdsong style places unusually heavy demands on the performer. Lasting two and a half hours in performance, the cycle features the habitats of each of the thirteen protagonists in addition to the birds themselves, placing equal importance on the musical depictions of both. Messiaen's harmonic language in these pieces is a complex mosaic of opposing elements and various technical devices. In addition to birdsong transcription, modes of limited transpositions, self-devised chords and twelve-tone elements, nature and landscape "painting" techniques are prevalent.

Landscape descriptions appear in several guises in the *Catalogue*, making use of a number of technical devices at the composer's disposal. These musical representations can evoke contours and shapes of cliffs and mountains, mimic "white-noise" sounds such as rushing water, or characterize the changing hours of the day or night and complex colour displays. In illustrating natural phenomena, Messiaen freely juxtaposed these elements with tonality, modal constructions, and atonal or twelve-tone material. It is the blend of these seemingly contrasting aspects of the composer's palette in the same context that gives the *Catalogue d'oiseaux* such an extraordinary power of expression.

This lecture-recital will examine Messiaen's techniques of landscape "painting" and highlight the importance of Nature as inspiration for the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*. Conclusions will be made showing how analysis and awareness of the composer's inspiration can impact the performer's interpretative decisions and help audiences approach these complex pieces. The discussion will be supplemented by performances of two major movements from the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*: *Le Traquet stapazin* (the Black-eared Wheatear) from book two, and *Le Courlis cendré* (the Curlew) from book seven.