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Stephen Broad, *Olivier Messiaen: Journalism 1935-1939*. Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2012. xiii+ 169 pp. Appendices, bibliography, and index. \$100.95 U.S. ISBN 978-0-7546-0876-9 (hb), 978-1-4094-4477-0 (ebook).

Review by Barbara L. Kelly, Keele University.

Stephen Broad makes available for the first time Messiaen's early music criticism (1935-1939) in both French and English. The collection gives us a new insight into the young composer's emerging musical priorities and preoccupations in the years preceding his *Technique of My Musical Language* (1944). In addition to techniques close to the composer, the collected writings also reveal just how closely connected his musical ideas were to his Catholic faith. The collection gives insights into the activities of his circle of musical friends, his efforts to promote new music in Paris, and his attitudes to his musical predecessors in the years before World War Two. Broad makes a valuable contribution not only to Messiaen scholarship, but to current debates about the francophone musical press in the twentieth century and the role composers played in promoting and advertising their own works and projecting their distinctive musical contribution.

Broad's translations read well with very few exceptions indeed. This not an easy task, given the distinctiveness of Messiaen's literary style. It is possible to read the English and not feel that one is missing out on too many of the nuances of the French text. It is a shame, therefore, that the reader needs to turn to the French for most of the editorial notes, including knowing the basic bibliographical details of the article; there are a few footnotes in the English version too, mainly but not exclusively concerned with translation issues. Broad appears to have assumed that most readers will concentrate on the French and only refer to the translation on occasion. However, a great value of the volume is in making this material accessible to Anglophones. I was also surprised that he decided to use the King James Version of the Bible. Given the centrality of Catholicism to Messiaen, the use of this version of the Bible, which is so closely tied to specific Protestant traditions, just does not adequately reflect the traditions in which Messiaen was working. In other respects, Broad is sensitive to the different register Messiaen adopts in his writings for the Belgian journal, *La Sirène*, and the Parisian journals, *Le Monde musical*, *La Revue musicale*, *La Page musicale* and other miscellaneous reviews. He reveals Messiaen to be highly aware of his audience, and capable of polemics and self-promotion. He concludes that "the journalism reveals a sustained campaign of aesthetic debate and demonstrates that Messiaen was more militant in promoting the aesthetic agenda of the group than he later acknowledged" (p. 10).

Broad's introduction, although short, gives sufficient sense of the content and themes of Messiaen's articles. He promises brief editorial interventions into the texts, more detailed footnotes and brief details of the key figures. Concentrating on the more extensive footnotes in the French section, I was struck by the numerous occasions when he comments that "this work does not appear on published...worklists," or does not appear in *The New Grove*. Given that worklists in *The New Grove* are restricted to a selection except for the most major composers, I thought I would look further. A particular stumbling block was tracing the component parts of the collective work, *Les Fêtes de la lumière*, which was written for the 1937 Paris Exhibition (pp. 30-31). Without too much effort, I was able to supply details of contributions mentioned by Messiaen by Honegger, Milhaud, Barraine, Delannoy, Roussel and others, some of which were never published. My sources were mainly the on-line catalogue of the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, Milhaud's published catalogue and Nigel Simeone's article on the 1937 Paris Exhibition. [1] Another instance on the over reliance on what he

styles as “Grove” and the need to push further in locating and identifying sources is the uncertainty over the première of Koechlin’s *3 Sonatines pour orgue*, op. 107. Robert Orledge’s Koechlin book confirms the date suggested by the 1975 Koechlin catalogue.[2] I would also have liked to have seen slightly more detail in the short biographical notices, which sometimes tell us little more than the nationality of the composer/musician and where (s)he studied music. The issue is that of fulfilling the expectations of the likely readership, who may already know, for instance, that Milhaud was a French composer and member of Les Six. It is important to clarify too, which *La Revue musicale* Emile Vuillermoz directed and when; it would be misleading for readers to think it was the post-World War I journal directed by Henry Prunières. The note on Ravel, by contrast, is illuminating (pp. 152-53, 156).

These quibbles aside, there is a lot to value in this collection of writings. Messiaen’s early journalism gives us a number of insights into his character, musical priorities and ambitions for himself and his small circle of artistic friends. It is immediately striking that he makes the music of other composers sound similar to his own. In a review of Dukas’s *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* in *La Revue musicale*, for instance, he writes about “the light” making “colour leap forth from the shadows,” seeing his teacher as a precursor for “many modern theories on luminous vibrations, coloured listening and the rapport between colour and sound” (p. 80). Placing Dukas into the context of the French preoccupation with colour and sound, Messiaen manages to write about his modes of limited transposition, chord clusters, resonance, luminosity, the celestial and birds, thereby linking Dukas very clearly to his own technique.

The other predecessor to get special attention is Charles Tournemire, particularly his *Orgue Mystique*, which Messiaen regarded, at that point, as a model of religious writing. The affinity here is much clearer. His singling out of Georges Migot is significant. This now neglected composer played a somewhat passive part in the musical debates of two generations. The critics Emile Vuillermoz and Léon Vallas upheld Migot as the antidote to the somewhat aggressive publicity tactics of Les Six in the 1920s. He symbolised for them a more respectful connection to the musical past. In the 1930s Migot received renewed attention, this time from *Jeune France* and helped to shape and nurture the musical goals of this new generation through his leadership of *La Spirale*. For both Jolivet and Messiaen, he shared their desire to inject spiritual values into contemporary music. Messiaen, in his review of Migot’s *Premier Livre d’orgue*, identified musical points of attraction such as the “rhythmic modulations,” the “implicit vibrations” and the “Hindu modes” (p. 85). While Vuillermoz sought to pit Migot and Milhaud in opposing aesthetic camps, Messiaen is not so restrained by the musical politics of the 1920s. Indeed, he is warm and enthusiastic towards Milhaud, reviewing both earlier works, such as *Les Choéphores* and more recent performances of *Esther de Carpentras* and his Ninth String Quartet with enthusiasm and respect. In this case he does not try to liken his music to his own; rather he identifies the humour, energy and harmonic experimentation that permeate Milhaud’s work (pp. 89, 91).

This period of Messiaen’s journalism coincides with Ravel’s death and inevitably with attempts to evaluate his contribution to French music. Describing him as “one of France’s greatest musicians,” he tends to judge him alongside his more famous near contemporary, Debussy, reiterating and reinforcing what had already emerged as the stereotypical contrast between the two composers; while Debussy was able to express the human spirit through music, Ravel, “the magician,” preferred to depict and play with the exterior world. Furthermore, while both shared an interest in timbre and sonority, Ravel, in Messiaen’s view, seems to have “forgotten the exquisite rhythms of his predecessor” (pp. 91 and 99). It is no accident that for both Messiaen and Jolivet, Ravel’s greatest work was his expressive, rhythmically vibrant and complex Concerto for the Left Hand (p. 90).

Rhythm is at the forefront of Messiaen’s assessment of Stravinsky’s contribution. While critical of Stravinsky’s neoclassicism, he does not forget to thank Stravinsky “for returning rhythm to its place of honour,” particularly in his “masterpieces,” *Le Sacre du printemps* and *Les Noces*. In his view, not only did Stravinsky renounce this element in his neoclassical works, his contemporaries failed to build on his rhythmic experiments; he urges his own generation not to neglect it either: “As for the young composer, they have followed a very different path from their elders—they have returned to

the sensual and the spiritual. However, they should take care not to leave the rhythmic path that Stravinsky has beaten" (p. 86).

Messiaen's music journalism reveals his disdain for many aspects of contemporary concert life. He is particularly critical of the more sterile aspects of neoclassicism, complaining about "fake classicism," "dissonanced Scarlatti" (p. 89), "sub-Fauré and sub-Ravel," "fake Couperin maniacs," and "odious contrapuntalists of the 'return to Bach'" movement (p. 129-130). Indeed, his contempt for such imitations is made clear in a number of challenges to the status quo, in particular, in "Against Laziness," *La Page musicale* (17 March 1939). For Messiaen, new music should be experimental and forward looking. Conscious of building on the advances of the past, he could not understand the desire to turn back. In a review of some uninspiring concerts he asked: "Why this time-lag, not just in light music but, quite simply, in lots of music" (p. 94). Such "laziness" on the part of composers and concertgoers demanded action. It is in this context that his music criticism becomes an important platform for the promotion and explanation of his aesthetic ideas and achievements and those of his close circle.

Broad identifies a striking instance of "unashamed promotion of those closest to him" in his review of Claire Delbos's setting of *L'Ame en bourgeon* for *La Sirène* in June 1937. Here the context is private rather than professional since it concerns his wife's work, which is based on Messiaen's own mother's poems (Cécile Sauvage) celebrating his own birth! In the same review he also draws attention to the "sensational Jeune France symphonic concert," in a conscious campaign to promote and support the work of his own artistic circle (p. 92). The sense of urgency and isolation is palpable in his important review of Jolivet's *Mana*.^[3] Frustrated that music seems to lag "piteously, stupidly" behind the other arts, he argues, "that is why we must energetically support the tiny handful—only three or four in the world—who try to make up the lost ground" (p. 95-6). Messiaen had recognised the proximity of Jolivet's aesthetic to his own when he first read through his String Quartet in 1934. In his enthusiasm, he wrote to Jolivet, "Monsieur, you write the music I would like to write. Can we meet?"^[4]

Mana was a key work to the identity of this musical circle; it was performed at the first concert of concert society La Spirale on 12 December 1935 alongside Messiaen's *L'Ascension*. This analytical note was published some years later, in *La Sirène*, December 1937, a year after the launch of Jeune France. Messiaen prioritizes "the transmutation of sounding material" (Broad should have retained the idea of sonority in the French "sonore") and "the very particular conception of sound-space," where "low and high registers contrast with one another, mix, interpenetrate and separate in an atmosphere of constant change" (p. 96). The fact that Messiaen used this text as the basis for the Introduction to the published score of *Mana* in 1946 indicates Jolivet's approval.^[5] Jolivet explained his ideas about natural resonances in an *Enquête* also published in 1946. In place of traditional four-part writing, he sought to establish a hierarchy between superior and inferior resonances and a dynamism between sonorities. He defined his notion of "the transmutation of sounding material" as "abrupt changes of volume (therefore of intensity and timbre) obtained by the addition of harmonic elements to the melodic line."^[6] Not only is the influence of his teacher, Edgar Varèse, evident, he sounds remarkably like Messiaen, who became famous for his own experimentation with modes, register and intensity in *Modes de valeurs et d'intensité* (1949). It is important to appreciate the proximity of Messiaen's and Jolivet's musical experiments during this formative period of their careers, despite obvious differences in style and subject matter.^[7]

Messiaen uses his role as music critic to explain and present his own work. As Nigel Simeone asserts, the articles were written in close proximity to their first performance.^[8] If Simeone notes that in the case of *La Nativité*, the article in *Le Monde musical* tells us little that is actually new, it is because Messiaen's approach to publicity was multi-faceted. Messiaen prepared a commentary on a small piece of paper, which was to be read out at each performance. He devoted two articles to this work, one published in the January-February 1936 issue of the *Tablettes de la Schola Cantorum* in response to feedback from the première of the work and the other in *Le Monde musical* in April to announce the publication by Leduc. While the explanatory note for the performance outlined the religious and musical aims of the work in accessible and general terms, the two articles targeted a

more musically literate audience, borrowing from the preface to the score in identifying the theological narrative and the different musical techniques. In both, Messiaen prioritises rhythmic experimentation (added half values) and the modes of limited transposition. In *Le Monde musical*, these explanations are supplemented with musical examples of his emerging system.

The desire to explain musical systems was not new; Les Six had been criticised for proclaiming their musical priorities and Georges Migot published a theoretical volume to support his idea of polylinearity in music, art and architecture.^[9] What was new was the language Messiaen (and Jolivet) adopted to describe their techniques and their renewed engagement with the spiritual, the cosmic and the human. In Messiaen's case, the expressive language he adopts in his writings is far from the dry and acerbic descriptions of concerts and new music. Its closest relation is Debussy's early private letters to Henri Vasnier and others about finding new forms and modes of expression and describing his musical ideas in terms of colour and light. Messiaen, in his public statements, also adopts a painterly language to describe music, but it is more three-dimensional than Debussy's contrastingly private reflections. Among the many examples in these writings is his comment about Migot's *Premier Livre d'orgue*: "no one could remain unmoved by its intense jubilatory motion that breathes life into this sumptuous stained glass and noisily twirls around the space, clinging to a thousand-and-one ribbons of light" (p. 85).

Messiaen shows considerable ambition in these articles: he reveals a desire to challenge readers, concert goers and fellow musicians and a need to be noticed in order to project his ideal of new music that would demonstrate innovative technique, re-engage the human heart and reflect the dogma of his Catholic faith. I will allow Messiaen the final word: "I called for 'true', that is to say spiritual, music. Music that is an act of faith. A music that touches all subjects without ever ceasing to touch God. An original music, finally, whose language pushes back the boundaries, pulls down some distant stars" (p. 137).

NOTES

[1] See Nigel Simeone, "Music at the 1937 Paris Exposition, The Science of enchantment," *The Musical Times*, 143/1878 (Spring 2002), p. 12-13. Paul Collaer, *Darius Milhaud*, translated and edited by Jane Hohfeld Galante (San Francisco: San Francisco Press, 1988).

[2] Robert Orledge, *Charles Koechlin (1867-1950): His Life and Works* (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood academic publishers, 1989), pp. 364-65.

[3] Messiaen was a member of both the concert society, La Spirale, and the group of four musicians, Jeune France, which was formed in June 1936. The other members of Jeune France were André Jolivet, Jean-Yves Daniel-Lesur and Yves Baudrier. For a discussion of the formation and identities of both groups see Nigel Simeone, "La Spirale and La Jeune France: Group Identities," *The Musical Times* 143/1880 (Autumn 2002), pp. 10-36.

[4] Hilda Jolivet, *Avec André Jolivet* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), p. 83; see Nigel Simeone, "La Spirale and La Jeune France, Group Identities," *The Musical Times*, Autumn 2002, p. 10.

[5] André Jolivet, *Mana*, 6 pièces pour piano (Paris : Editions Jobert, 1946, 2000).

[6] André Jolivet, "André Jolivet, ou la magie expérimentale," *Contrepoints* 1 (January 1946), pp. 31-7, in Jolivet, *Ecrits*, vol. 1, p. 192.

[7] See Barbara L. Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism in France: A Fragile Consensus, 1913-1939* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2013), pp. 117-119.

[8] Simeone, "Messiaen in the 1930s, Offrandes oubliées," *The Musical Times*, 141/1873 (Winter 2000), p. 40.

[9] See Georges Migot, *Essai pour une esthétique générale* (Paris: Figuière, 1920) pp. 85-97. See also Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism in France*, pp. 174-180.

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