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Christopher Dingle, *Messiaen's Final Works*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013. 369 pp. 70£ (cl). ISBN-10: 0754606333.

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This book is the first major study of Olivier Messiaen's *Éclairs sur l'au-delà...*, the final composition to be completed before his death in 1992. It is arguably his finest orchestral masterpiece. Musicologists and orchestras alike continue to overlook it, however (this may be owed to the persistent popularity of the far less refined *Turangalîla-Symphonie*). This publication is, therefore, a most welcome and long overdue addition to the literature. Christopher Dingle expertly interweaves biographical detail with scrupulous analytical insight, and the sheer scope of his investigation will surely cement his position as one of the leading Messiaen scholars of his generation.

Messiaen's processes of composition remain elusive, in spite (or perhaps because) of the various tomes he wrote about his own music. The portions of *Messiaen's Final Works* devoted to analysis are particularly fascinating. The second chapter, "A Few Techniques from Messiaen's Musical Language" (pp. 11-30), and, of course, the vast interrogation of the *Éclairs* itself (pp. 139-275), break considerable new ground. Dingle's work is informed by a lucid engagement with the monstrous, multi-volume *Traite de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie*, which remains largely uncharted territory. The only conceivable augmentation to the second chapter would have been a section on the *langage communicable*. This involved the assignment of a fixed pitch, rhythm, and duration, to each letter of the alphabet, and it enabled Messiaen to 'spell' words in the form of melodies. It played a significant role in the final works.[1] This minor quibble aside, the analytical insights in *Messiaen's Final Works* will prove especially valuable for scholars and students alike.

The author expresses a desire that his book should "not be envisaged as the last word on Messiaen's final years. It intends to further the understanding and debate regarding the last works of a composer about whom discussion too often ends with *Saint François* [*d'Assise*, the mammoth opera that premiered in 1983]" (p. 10). Three thoughts occur as to how this may unfold. First, Dingle is perhaps too willing to take the composer's accounts of his own life and oeuvre at face value. Second, his dating for the composition of *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, Messiaen's last work for the organ, is demonstrably incorrect. This matters because much of his argument hinges on the idea that Messiaen had stopped composing altogether in the wake of *Saint François*. Finally, and perhaps most problematically, Dingle rejects the critical-theoretical concept of "late style", preferring instead to employ the term "final works." For me, this decision is inadequately explained. I will deal with each of these points in turn.

With the possible exception of Richard Wagner, there has surely been no composer more adept at brewing mythology and legend around his own music—"building a brand", to borrow Nicholas Vazsonyi's terminology—than Olivier Messiaen.[2] Interviews with the composer must be approached with a more critical eye than is sometimes assumed. Rebecca Rischin's excellent book *For the End of Time*, a detailed study of the compositional and performance history of Messiaen's *Quator pour la fin du Temps*, is an example to be followed. She fills out, reworks, and in some instances simply corrects Messiaen's accounts of the *Quator's* birth, much of which he "noticeably passed over." [3] He was particularly unreliable regarding matters of chronology. For example, in

interviews, he repeatedly claimed that the *Quator* was conceived and born while he was imprisoned in Stalag VIII-A. Whether this amounted to more than an innocent accident of poor memory matters less than Rischin's firm establishment of the work's beginning in 1940, in Verdun, long before Messiaen was captured by the Nazis.

Dingle, on the other hand, routinely accepts the composer's word with little scrutiny. The disingenuous, and by now rather clichéd, insistence that he would "never compose anything else" (cited on p. 4) in the wake of *Saint François* is one example. Later on this page, Dingle's observation that Messiaen did not die "during or immediately after" the opera opens into a leading question: "what should an artist do after they have created what they believe to be their final work?" This is really a false premise for the discussion that follows.

One case on which I wish to focus is *Livre du Saint Sacrement*. According to Dingle, it was composed "within a year of the opera's premiere" (p. 44). He does admit "the fact that he wrote the work so soon after *Saint François*, and composed it so quickly, contradicts the image of a composer in crisis"; and adds that "the specific impetus for the work came in 1984 in the form of a joint commission by the city of Detroit and the American Guild of Organists." As I have pointed out elsewhere, however, Messiaen in fact accepted this commission on 1 August 1982.[4] Moreover, his correspondence with Ray Ferguson of the AGO leaves no doubt that there was a considerable overlap between opera and organ cycle. This problematizes Dingle's account of the composer's final period, as the opera was evidently not the creative cataclysm portrayed by Messiaen.

Finally (no pun intended), Dingle "explicitly resists the term 'late style'" on page 4, and does not return to the issue until pages 316–17. The term's utility is certainly open to question, but to my mind it could bolster many of Dingle's own arguments. In the opening chapter, for example, he describes the 'contention' of the book as being "that Messiaen entered a new phase of creativity [after the opera]", and that "his last works form a distinct period in his creativity" (pp. 8–9 respectively)—precisely the type of foundation upon which theories of late style tend to rest. Surely the ideas honed by many scholars in recent years would have aided Dingle in the unfolding of his theses. And from a purely practical perspective, his use of the word "final" constantly switches between matters of chronology and matters of style. This sometimes makes his prose difficult to follow. The third chapter, for example, opens with a pair of questions:

Which is the first of Messiaen's final works? If there is a body of works that collectively are his final compositional statements, a final period, perhaps, then it must start at some point, so where is the beginning of the end? The obvious answer, following the chronological imperative inherent in the concept of finality, is that it must be towards the end of Messiaen's life (p. 31). On the same page though, he concludes that "the crucial factors [in defining the 'final' works] are not temporal, but stylistic."

Edward Said's memorable definition of late style as "surviving beyond what is acceptable and normal" reverberates with Dingle's idea that the opera marked a transition into a new stylistic period.[5] But he makes only token references to *On Late Style*, Said's posthumous masterpiece. For better or worse, Theodor Adorno, who coined the term *Spätstil* in 1937, is overlooked almost entirely.[6] More troubling than the divisive Frankfurter's absence is the omission of many musicologists who have written in this rapidly expanding area of scholarship since 2000. They include Anthony Barone, Andrew Davis, Margaret Notley, Maynard Solomon, Michael Spitzer, and Laura Tunbridge; and their writing sits alongside notable offerings from Russ McDonald and Gordon McMullan (both Shakespearians), as well as an interdisciplinary volume edited by Karen Painter and Thomas Crow (which includes chapters on a number of composers, in addition to studies of Mark Rothko and Piet Mondrian).[7]

"Lateness", as Dingle rightly suggests, has always been associated with the contemplation of death. The topic should not be reduced exclusively to matters of health or age, however, as he seems to assume. Lateness is also related to the societal situation in which the composer worked,

and to their personal relationship with it. Mahler, for instance, whose music encapsulated the collective sense of the nineteenth century's passing in fin-de-siècle Vienna, was very much a "late" composer from his First Symphony. Beethoven's music, on the other hand, did not become "late" until the dawn of the 1820s, after the *Hammerklavier*, at which point his relationship with the conventions of classical style became destructive to the point of collapse.

Messiaen's works from 1983 until his death in 1992 constitute one of the most interesting instances of "late style", because they veer between the two opposing categories of 'lateness' laid out by Said: those that "crown a lifetime of aesthetic endeavor", and those characterized by "intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction." [8] The *Éclairs* is the most obvious example of a work fitting the former category; and there is a handful of unproblematic and very beautiful, smaller works, such as *Un Sourire*, that also belong within it. On the other hand, some compositions from this time are fragmentary, and often seem closely related to improvisation; they are sparsely harmonized, almost shockingly so; and they sometimes have streaks of the comic and the bizarre. Among the pieces of this type are many movements from *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, the *Petites esquisses d'oiseaux*, and the wonderfully odd *Concert à quatre*. This is contra Dingle, who suggests—in my opinion, quite wrongly—that the works in Messiaen's "unexpected Indian summer" sit collectively in Said's first category of lateness alone (p. 316).

Debates about the final works of Olivier Messiaen have only just begun, and Christopher Dingle's book has made an excellent and provocative opening into an intriguing area of study. It fully deserves its place on the shelf of any Messiaen scholar.

#### NOTES

[1] The most detailed study of the *langage* remains Andrew Shenton's *Olivier Messiaen's System of Signs: Notes Towards Understanding His Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

[2] See Nicholas Vazsonyi, *Richard Wagner: Self-Promotion and the Making of a Brand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[3] Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 3.

[4] See Luke Berryman, "Messiaen as Explorer in *Livre du Saint Sacrement*", in *Messiaen the Theologian*, ed. by Andrew Shenton (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 223-39, on p. 227.

[5] Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 13.

[6] See Theodor Adorno, "Late Style in Beethoven", in *Essays on Music*, ed. by Richard Leppert, trans. by Susan Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 564-68.

[7] See Anthony Barone, "Richard Wagner's Parsifal and the Theory of Late Style," *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol. 7 no. 1 (1995), 37-54; Andrew Davis, *Il Trittico, Turandot, and Puccini's Late Style* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Russ McDonald, *Shakespeare's Late Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Gordon McMullan, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing: Authorship in the Proximity of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Margaret Notley, *Lateness and Brahms: Music and Culture in the Twilight of Viennese Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Maynard Solomon, *Late Beethoven: Music, Thought, Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Michael Spitzer, *Music as Philosophy: Adorno and Beethoven's Late Style* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Laura Tunbridge, *Schumann's Late Style*

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(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and *Late Thoughts: Reflections on Composers and Artists at Work*, ed. by Karen Painter and Thomas Crow (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2006). This brief list is by no means intended to be definitive.

[8] Said, *On Late Style*, p. 7.

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