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## Birdsong in Olivier Messiaen's Opera, *Saint François d'Assise*

### ABSTRACT

This paper examines Messiaen's use of birdsong in *Saint François d'Assise*. Drawing from tome V of the *Traité de rythme*, it considers the physical and musical characteristics of the opera's major avian protagonists, namely: (1) skylarks I and II (*alouette des champs*), (2) blackcap (*capinera* or *fauvette à tête noire*), (3) fan-tailed gerygone (*gerygone* or *fauvette à ventre jaune*), (4) blackbird (*merle noir*), (5) garden warbler (*fauvette des jardins*), and (6) tawny owl (*chouette hulotte*). The paper then analyzes selected passages of music linked with these birds from referential perspectives, showing how they typify the broad spectrum of Messiaen's harmonic vocabulary. It likewise assesses how birdsong links the theological themes associated with Saint Francis's spiritual journey at deeper levels of structure through instrumental color. The songs of the skylarks I and II lead the way in this regard, as their respective xylo and woodwind timbres function as referential timbres, assuming priority over focal pitch classes, chords, or even scale collections.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In a conversation with Claude Samuel in 1986 about *Saint François d'Assise*, Olivier Messiaen declared that *Le Prêche aux oiseaux*, scene 6, was his 'greatest success in the bird-song style', adding that the scene featured his 'best bird tuttis' (Samuel 1994, 239).<sup>1</sup> He based the scene on Saint Francis's sermon to the birds, as described in the sixteenth chapter of the *Fioretti* (Hopcke and Schwartz, trans., 2006, 56–58). But this connection between composer and saint goes beyond a musical rendering of a sermon to the birds in an opera; rather, it speaks to an important motivation of Messiaen regarding his choice of Saint Francis as the subject for his magnum opus.<sup>2</sup> He considered Francis — a bit irreverently I suppose — as a colleague. As a composer and ornithologist, Messiaen admired the saint for his love of nature, particularly in relation to how birds reflect God's providence. Not surprisingly, birdsong plays a significant role in the theology of *Saint François*, as well as in its musical language and structural designs.

This essay explores how Messiaen uses birdsong in *Saint François d'Assise*. Using tome V of the *Traité de rythme*

(Messiaen 1994–2002) as a springboard, it considers the physical and musical characteristics of the opera's major avian protagonists, as well as how their songs underscore its theological symbolism.<sup>3</sup> In addition to giving a general indication as to how they are employed in the opera, this essay analyzes the pitch components of these birdsongs from referential perspectives, in order to better understand how Messiaen structures these pitch materials. It concludes by assessing how birdsong links the theological themes associated with Saint Francis's spiritual journey at deeper levels of structure through instrumental color. The songs of the skylarks I and II lead the way in this regard, as their respective xylo and woodwind timbres function as referential timbres, assuming priority over focal pitch classes, chords, or even scale collections. These timbres intensify the dramatic meaning of *Saint François* by reinforcing its theological themes at critical junctures along Francis's spiritual path.

### 2. MUSICAL STYLE AND RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM IN THE PRIMARY BIRDSONGS OF *SAINT FRANÇOIS D'ASSISE*

#### 2.1 Skylark

We begin our analysis of the eclectic collection of birdsong employed in *Saint François d'Assise* by considering the two skylarks that appear prominently throughout the work. In the *Traité de rythme*, Messiaen remarks that although the skylark is found throughout Europe, he regards it as a French bird (the following discussion is derived from the *Traité de rythme*, 5/1: 244–304). This avian virtuoso sings while in flight. When the female skylark is hidden in a grass nest on the ground, the male ascends almost vertically from this unseen location, rising to an altitude of about 150 meters. While hovering high in the sky and barely visible, the bird sings for a long time, gushing out — in Messiaen's words — a 'torrent of melody', a veritable 'masterpiece of joy'. The skylark will depart from its song and remain silent for a few seconds, as if suspended between heaven and earth. It then plummets to the ground. Throughout all phases of its flight, the bird makes music. Finally, Messiaen regards the skylark's melodic line as shaped by a high-pitched dominant note B, reminiscent of the dominant notes found in plainchant. In his view, this 'acute domi-

<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on 'Birdsong in *Saint François d'Assise*', which forms chapter 6 of my forthcoming book entitled *Olivier Messiaen's Opera, Saint François d'Assise*, to be published by Indiana University Press in 2019. I want to thank Indiana University Press for granting me permission to publish this modified version of chapter 6 in these online proceedings.

<sup>2</sup> Another motivation for Messiaen choosing Saint Francis as the subject for his opera was his desire to avoid the pitfalls of writing one on the Passion or Resurrection of Christ (Samuel 1994, 209–10). He believed that he was unworthy of attempting such a project due to its sacred subject matter, and that such a topic could 'lapse into either the ridiculous or the inappropriate'. Accordingly, Messiaen turned to Saint Francis as a dramatic subject because he felt that the friar was the only human being who most closely resembled Christ: in addition to his personal holiness, Francis suffered greatly from the stigmata he received.

<sup>3</sup> The birds to be covered in this essay are the following: (1) skylarks I and II (*alouette des champs*), (2) blackcap (*capinera* or *fauvette à tête noire*), (3) fan-tailed gerygone (*gerygone* or *fauvette à ventre jaune*), (4) blackbird (*merle noir*), (5) garden warbler (*fauvette des jardins*), and (6) tawny owl (*chouette hulotte*). This essay will not consider what I view as the opera's more minor birds: (1) blue rock thrush (*merle bleu*), (2) song thrush (*grive musicienne*), (3) New Caledonian friarbird (*philemon* or *oiseau-moine*), (4) kestrel (*gheppio* or *faucon crécerelle*), (5) nightingale (*rossignol*), (6) turtle dove (*tourterelle*), (7) wren (*trog-lodyte*), (8) robin (*rouge-gorge*), and (9) superb lyrebird (*oiseau-lyre superbe*).