Olivier Messiaen
Born December 10, 1908, Avignon, France.

Sept haïkaï

Messiaen composed these seven Japanese sketches in 1962. The first performance was given as part of the Domaine Musical concert series in Paris on October 30, 1963, with Pierre Boulez conducting, and Yvonne Loriod, Messiaen’s wife, as the piano soloist. The score calls for solo piano and an orchestra consisting of one flute and one piccolo, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, two bassoons, one trumpet, one trombone, xylophone, marimba, cencerros, crotales, triangle, tam-tams, chinese cymbals, turkish cymbals, gongs, bells, and eight violins. Performance time is approximately twenty-one minutes.

Olivier Messiaen visited Japan for the first time in 1962, shortly after his marriage to Yvonne Loriod, for the première there of his Turangalîla Symphony. Messiaen had already “quoted” the songs of Japanese birds, which he learned by listening to phonograph records, in Chronochromie, composed in 1959, but his first-hand impressions of Japan were so powerful that he immediately set about recording them in these seven Japanese sketches.

Japan has had an undeniable influence on many composers. Stravinsky read a collection of Japanese lyrics, some of them haïkaïs, in 1912. “The impression which they made on me was exactly like that made by Japanese prints and engravings,” he wrote. “The graphic solution of problems of perspective and space shown by their art incited me to find something analogous in music.” The result was his Three Japanese Lyrics, composed in 1912 and 1913, while warming up for The Rite of Spring. But like many evocations of unfamiliar places, they are merely superficial tourist snapshots, in this case taken from afar. Claude Debussy, on the other hand, was able to achieve something more lifelike in the Japan of his Pagodes from Estampes and in “Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut” from Images—without ever visiting the country. He was, as Boulez has written, “the composer who received this influence at the deepest level and transcended it in the most marvelous way.”

The Japan evoked much later by Messiaen is at once a more literal transcription of what he heard there—in his careful rendering of Japanese bird song and of the gagaku ensemble—and at the same time a deeper expression of the essence of Japanese music. There are several elements in Messiaen’s life that gave him a special affinity for a non-Western understanding of music, starting with his mother’s unusual and prophetic assertion, made in a cycle of poems she wrote during her pregnancy: “I carry within me the love of mysterious and marvelous things.” As a child, Messiaen was fascinated with the rhythmic shapes of the Sanskrit characters he found in the Lavignac encyclopedia. Much later, after he had begun to write music, he was bowled over by hearing Indonesian gamelan music—played by an ensemble primarily of gongs, chimes, and drums—at the 1931 Exposition Coloniale in Paris. Japan was merely the latest stop on Messiaen’s ambitious itinerary, for there have been few composers who yearned to travel as much as Messiaen, and arguably none whose music was as fundamentally changed by the experience.

These seven haïkaï, for solo piano and small orchestra (with hyperactive percussion, including important virtuosic cameo roles for xylophone and marimba) introduce the sounds and sensibilities of Japan into Messiaen’s already distinctive language, fusing rich chromaticism, the virtuosity of Japanese bird song, and the sonorities of the gagaku. This is part landscape painting and part field work, and it’s all pure Messiaen. The fascination with Japanese birds was hardly surprising, for Messiaen began notating bird songs while he was still in his teens, and early in the 1950s he started to turn to his notebooks for ideas to use in his own music. Working with this “true, lost face of music,” untouched by civilization, gave Messiaen’s music new direction (he later described himself not as a composer, but as “an ornithologist
and a rhythmician”). Over the years, Messiaen spent hours, in countries around the world, standing in fields with his binoculars and a notepad, painstakingly transcribing these distinctive songs. (He once commented that there are roughly 12,000 species of birds, each with its own song, and lamented the fact that he would never hear them all.) In Sept haïkaï, Messiaen acknowledges the contributions of twenty-five birds, from the Kuro tsugami (a blackbird) to the Juichi (a kind of cuckoo), the Ruribitaki (a nightingale), and the Ko-mukudori (a Japanese Martin). Messiaen identifies each bird’s song in the score: the sixth movement, for example, begins in the woodwinds with the cry of the Uguisu: a long, swelling note followed by three fast notes.

The arrangement of the seven sketches is carefully organized. The two outer movements are framing devices, which resemble “the two guardian gods flanking the entrance of Buddhist temples.” The second and fifth movements evoke places—the serene Nara Park, with its four Buddhist temples, and Miyajima, “perhaps the most beautiful landscape in Japan”—

An island, a mountain covered in dark green Japanese pines and maples (red in autumn). A shinto temple, white and red. In the blue sea, opening on to the invisible (which is the real temple), a great red gateway, or torii.

Here, for the first time in his career, Messiaen actually “composes” the colors into his music, identifying each one in the score—the opening string chords begin gray and gold, for example, and then turn from red to orange. The third and sixth movements are choruses of birds—each one a dialogue between chattering woodwinds and elaborate piano cadenzas.

Standing alone at the center of these Sept haïkaï is Messiaen’s own gagaku—the mid-twentieth-century French composer’s rendering of the court music of seventh-century Japan. Here Messiaen dispenses with the piano, using the trumpet, two oboes, and the english horn to suggest the sounds of the hichiriki, a double-reed bamboo pipe, and eight violins (playing without vibrato) to evoke the sho, a mouth organ. The extraordinary accomplishment of this music is not that it’s a modern-day recreation of an ancient art—the very music the Reigakusha ensemble will play next—but that it manages to make something entirely new by confronting, honoring, and at the same time breaking with that tradition.

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