

MESSIAEN'S 8 *PRÉLUDES*: THE ORIGINS OF A STYLE

by

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Preliminary notes

Translations:

In this research, we have dealt with many sources in French. All the translations in this document are by the author.

Abbreviations:

In order to avoid unnecessary heaviness in our prose, we decided to abbreviate some key terms, listed below:

Modes – Modes of limited transposition.

Préludes – *8 Préludes pour piano* by Olivier Messiaen.

Technique – *Technique de mon langage musical* (Technique of my Musical Language).

Traité – *Traité de rythme, couleur et d'ornithologie* (Treatise of Rhythm, Color and Ornithology).

Introduction

Olivier Messiaen is one of the greatest and most original composers of the twentieth century. His importance is due to the fact that his works explore a wide range of musical elements in a very personal and innovative way, influencing a whole generation of composers. His output is vast and comprises a large variety of genres and instrumentations: opera, orchestra, large ensembles, vocal music, chamber music, solo organ and solo piano. He often described his music as a “sound-theology,” manifesting his fervent Catholic faith, and divided it into three main characteristics: rhythm, color and ornithology. These three key words make reference to a lifelong research on non-traditional rhythmic patterns and meter, a harmonic language highly influenced by synesthesia, and his love for transcribing and incorporating birdsongs in his music. The piano plays an important role in his output; more than half of his compositions include piano.

Messiaen composed the set of eight *Préludes pour piano* in 1928-29 while still a student at the Paris Conservatory. He considered them his first serious endeavor as a composer, his opus one. These early pieces already show a great deal of original ideas, while at the same time display a clear influence from other composers, especially Claude Debussy. An educated listener can easily identify the impressionistic sonorities in the *Préludes*, however many of the chords and harmonic progressions are complex and original. Messiaen’s own voice as a composer is already present, although the elements of his mature musical language are not yet fully developed.

His harmonic innovations, mostly based on his own modes of limited transposition, are already in an advanced stage of development in the *Préludes*. The other elements of his mature musical language, most particularly in the realm of rhythm and birdsong, appear in the *Préludes* in what we can call an “embryonic stage.” The purpose of this research is to find out in which ways the *Préludes* reflect their heritage from the French impressionists, particularly Debussy, and also to investigate how they represent a step further towards the formation of a new style. To fully understand these early pieces, we will give especial attention to harmonic novelties, since these are the main elements that set them apart from any previous work. But we are also interested in showing that Messiaen’s interest in complex rhythmic structures and birdsong already existed in this work of his youth. In any case, the *Préludes* are extraordinary pieces of music, exploring many different possibilities to create new colors on the piano, achieving a variety of moods and evoking visual images. Appreciating and understanding the *Préludes* is a key to comprehend how Messiaen’s style evolved.

It seems that the eight *Préludes* are somewhat underestimated, as evidenced by the limited scholarly research available specifically about this work. The reason behind this might be that Messiaen’s own mature works, displaying a fully developed musical language, overshadowed these early pieces. His most famous works, such as *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, *Vingt regards sur l’enfant Jésus*, *Visions de l’Amen*, *Modes de valeurs et d’intensités*, to name a few, have been subject to extensive scholarly research. However, we have not found any source available with a detailed analysis of each prelude. There are a few publications analyzing in depth

some of the *Préludes*, but none of the entire cycle. Michèle Reverdy published a book in which she analyzes all of Messiaen's solo piano works, but her analysis of the *Préludes* rarely exceed one page each.¹ Thus, we decided to provide a full, detailed analysis of each prelude in the cycle to counter the lack of such scholarly research.

To prepare for the analytical part of this document, a study of the main aspects of Messiaen's musical language will be provided in Chapter 1. We believe that the events that contribute to the development of a composer, as well as aspects of his psychology and personality, are reflected in his output. For that reason, we start with a short biography of Messiaen, focusing on the years until the composition of the *Préludes*. Then, we present the elements of his musical language, giving especial attention to the modes of limited transposition, already fully developed in the *Préludes*. We follow with a discussion on the relationship between sound and color in Messiaen's music. He had synesthesia, a condition that allowed him to see colors when exposed to music, and he already considered himself a sound-color musician by the year of composition of the *Préludes*. The last part of Chapter 1 is about the influence of Debussy, particularly the Debussy preludes. We show that, even though there are several similarities between their preludes, Messiaen's unique voice as a composer is already present.

In Chapter 2, we present a thorough analysis of each prelude in the cycle. Our analysis focuses on several elements of Messiaen's music, such as similarities with the music of Debussy and other composers, the relationship between tonality and the modes of limited transposition, formal structure, the relationship between title

¹ Michèle Reverdy. *L'oeuvre pour piano d'Olivier Messiaen*. Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1978.

and musical content, the use of the instrument, and other elements when pertinent. We also gave especial attention to the elements of Messiaen's mature language that appear in the *Préludes*, showing that the origins of his future style are present in embryonic stage. Finally, during our analysis, we discovered some elements that suggest Messiaen may have conceived the *Préludes* as a cycle and intended them to be performed as such.

Chapter 1. Theoretical Background

1.1. Messiaen's early life and the context of the *Préludes*

1.2. Messiaen's Musical Language

1.2.1. *Rhythm*

1.2.2. *Ornithology*

1.2.3. *Modes of limited transposition*

1.2.4. *Other considerations of harmony*

1.3. The colors in the *Préludes*

1.4. The influence of Debussy

1.1. Messiaen's early life and the context of the *Préludes*

Olivier Eugène Prosper Charles Messiaen was born in Avignon, a small town in southeast France, on December 10, 1908 and died in Paris on April 27, 1992. Both of his parents were well-educated people. His father, Pierre Messiaen, was an English teacher and translator of Shakespeare's works to French. His mother, Cécile Messiaen (born Sauvage) was a poetess. It was during her pregnancy that Cécile wrote the collection of poems *L'âme en bourgeon* (The budding soul), dedicated to Olivier. Not only are these texts of great literary quality and originality, they also have prophetic qualities. Some of the topics covered include several of Messiaen's future interests such as music, the Orient and birdsong.

On the outbreak of the First World War, Pierre Messiaen joined the French army. Cécile and her two sons moved to Grenoble, a town about 140 miles north of Avignon. Later in his life, Messiaen recalled that all men in his family were sent to the front. His uncle, Léon, also an artist and talented sculptor, was the only one to perish in the battlefield. It was in Grenoble and mainly because of the influence of his mother that Messiaen developed at a young age a passion for literature. Before turning 10, he had developed a taste for drama through the works of Shakespeare, particularly "Macbeth," "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and "The Tempest." He would perform Shakespeare's plays with great enthusiasm for his younger brother, acting all the parts himself.

It is not surprising that his love for drama soon attracted him to opera. From a speech Messiaen gave in 1984, the composer recalls: "I was 5 when I arrived in

Grenoble and 10 when I left (...) It was in Grenoble that I realized I was a musician. I was seven-and-a-half and had just been bought, from Deshairs [music shop], Gluck's *Orphée*, and with my present under my arm, I went into the park."² His first contact with music also happened in Grenoble, improvising at his grandmother's piano. The composer also mentions other scores as childhood gifts such as Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and *Die Zauberflöte*, Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* and Wagner's *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried*. From reading operas on park benches, he soon moved to his uncle's piano where he would play and sing the principal roles from the operas. Messiaen taught himself how to play the piano, and his interest in the instrument granted him more musical gifts from the years in Grenoble: scores for Debussy's *Estampes* and Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit*, a very impressive repertoire for a young self-taught pianist.

It was also in Grenoble, in 1917, that Messiaen composed his first piece, *La Dame de Shalott*, for piano, inspired by Tennyson's poem "The lady of Shalott." According to Messiaen, this short piece is "very infantile, but not completely idiotic and not completely deprived of meaning. I still think of it with a certain tenderness."³ During the time in Grenoble, Messiaen started developing an ardent and passionate faith. He used to claim he was born a believer, but his faith nonetheless needed guidance. Given that his mother was atheist, it was up to his father to later nurture his Catholic beliefs. Religion became an important part of his

² Olivier Messiaen, "Discours pour la cérémonie du 20 janvier 1984 à Grenoble", typescript of Messiaen's speech when he was made an honorary citizen of the city. In Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

³ Olivier Messiaen, *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*. Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1994.

adult life and even though much of his music is inspired by religion or meant to praise God, he composed very few pieces intended to be used in religious service.

Following the end of the war, Messiaen's father was appointed to teach at the *Lycée Clemenceau* in Nantes, northwest France. The family lived there for two years (1918-19) until they established residency in Paris, where his father was transferred to teach in a different school. It was in Nantes that Messiaen had his first formal music lessons. He studied piano, theory and composition with teachers from the local conservatoire. The most important of them was Jean de Gibon, a talented composer to whom Messiaen wrote an affective obituary notice several years later. He expresses his gratitude for the passionate discussions on music and especially for the gift he received from Gibon, which marked Messiaen for life: the score of Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

It did not take long after the Messiaen family arrived in Paris for the 11 year-old Olivier to start frequenting the Paris Conservatoire. In the first year, he attended classes as an *auditeur* and in October of 1920 he was officially accepted as a student at a much younger age than average. In the following ten years, Messiaen studied with many renowned figures in the music field. He took preparatory piano with Georges Falkenberg; harmony with Jean Gallon; piano accompaniment, keyboard skills, score reading and improvisation at the piano with César Abel Estyle; music history with Maurice Emmanuel; composition with Charles Widor and especially Paul Dukas; and organ with Marcel Dupré. He was awarded several first and second prizes in different disciplines.

Messiaen's first contact with the organ was during his lessons with Marcel Dupré. Shortly after, the organ became Messiaen's primary instrument as a performer. Two years after finishing his studies, the composer was appointed the organist at the church *Sainte Trinité*. He kept this position until the end of his life. Dupré attests to his talent:

He joined my class in 1927. When he came out to Meudon for the first time (he was nineteen), he sat stupefied in front of my organ keyboards. He had never seen an organ console before. After an hour of explanations and demonstrations, I gave him the Bach C minor Fantasia to learn. He came back a week later and played it to me by heart, perfectly; an astonishing feat!⁴

In August 1927, soon after Messiaen joined the classes of Dukas and Dupré, his mother died from tuberculosis. The composer was deeply affected by her death, but it was not until three years later that he set to music one of her poems, extracted from *L'âme en bourgeon*, in the short cycle *Trois mélodies* for soprano and piano. It is the only song in which Messiaen uses a text other than his own. There is evidence that the *Préludes*, composed a year before the song, are also influenced by mourning for his mother. In a conversation with music critic José Bruyr, Messiaen says that his *Préludes* are "a collection of states of the soul and of personal feelings. It seems to me now that it is my mother, after her death, who guides my hand or my spirit."⁵ Messiaen never said that the *Préludes* were an expression of his feelings in regards to the loss of his mother, but undoubtedly they are permeated with profound melancholy.

⁴ Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, p. 22.

⁵ Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, p. 38.

Messiaen was awarded the first prize in composition at the Paris Conservatoire in 1930 with the works *Trois mélodies*, *Diptyque* for organ and the *Préludes*. All of them were composed during the period he was attending Dukas' class. Messiaen started working on the *Préludes* during the summer of 1929, while spending the holiday with his aunts in Fuligny, and finished them after his return to Paris. Composing at that time of the year would become a lifelong habit. With his later heavy teaching commitments at the Conservatoire, numerous concerts and foreign tours, he had little time for creation. It was Paul Dukas who recommended the *Préludes* for publication by Durand. Although Messiaen considered his *Préludes* as his opus one, *Diptyque* appeared in print first, in May 1930, quickly followed by the *Préludes* in June and *Trois mélodies*, in October of the same year.

The premiere of the *Préludes* happened in a private performance in Durand's salon on 28 January 1930, several months before its publication, with the composer at the piano. However, the "official" premiere, in a public concert, was on 1 March 1930 in the prestigious *Salle Érard*, as part of a concert organized by the *Société Nationale*. The pianist was Henriette Roget, Messiaen's close friend, to whom he dedicated the work. The pianist comments on that concert:

Already very conscious of the parallels between sounds and colors, Olivier Messiaen asked me not to wear white or pink. He wanted sky blue or pale green, the color of water, of leaves, of the sky. These *Préludes* caused a sensation among a group of enthusiasts; there are in these pieces more than a promise of a very individual musical palette, a modal style of writing inspired by Hindu scales,

experimentation with rhythms and a unity of conception. Consequently it was only a few years later that Messiaen became famous.⁶

At a young age, even before finishing his studies at the Conservatoire, Messiaen's unique compositional style was taking shape. These works of youth represent the emergence of a new voice in French music. It is not surprising, though, that the young boy who manifested an interest in literature, opera and modern piano music before turning 10 was already mature enough at age 20. He would prefer classics of the literature and musical scores to toys as Christmas gifts. In a way, it seems like Messiaen skipped childhood to immediately enter adulthood. The composer has always mentioned in his publications and interviews that the music he was exposed to as a child had a strong impact in his own development as a composer. Without a doubt, the classes at the Paris Conservatoire were also decisive in his formation as a musician. Not only was he given the basis of a traditional education, but was also presented with an entire new world of possibilities. Messiaen's natural autodidacticism, with the encouragement and guidance of teachers such as Dupré, Dukas and Maurice Emmanuel, made it possible for him to find his personal identity as a composer at an early age. In the next section, we will discuss the most relevant elements of Messiaen's musical language.

⁶ Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, p. 27.

1.2. Messiaen's Musical Language

When dealing with Olivier Messiaen's music, the researcher faces two main categories of sources: the composer's own words, and all other sources, ranging from contemporary testimonials to highly sophisticated analytical articles. Messiaen was one of the most prolific critics of his own works and was very specific when describing his compositional technique. His first book dedicated to his musical language is called "*Technique de mon langage musical*" and was finished in 1943. It is a rather short but dense book, in which he briefly describes the main aspects of his music, giving examples not only from his own works but also from other composers. The other publication is a large treatise in 7 volumes called "*Traité de rythme, couleur et d'ornithologie.*" It took several decades to finish (1948-1992) and was published after Messiaen's death. It is a compilation from Messiaen's almost four decades of teaching in the Paris Conservatoire. In addition to these two important books, Messiaen gave numerous interviews, especially for the French critic Claude Samuel. He also wrote shorter texts (including prefaces to certain compositions) and left a few video recordings in which he talks about his music.

As the title of his large treatise suggests, Messiaen divided his music into three main characteristics: rhythm, color and ornithology. We shall see how these three elements manifest in his music. We will especially focus on the word color, because it is more relevant to the *Préludes* compared to the other two. Messiaen uses the word "color" with its literal meaning, but also as an analogy for harmony. We decided to discuss them as two separate categories: Modes of limited

transposition and the colors in the *Préludes*. Ornithology stands for Messiaen's lifelong research and collection of birdsongs from several parts of the world. Both rhythm and ornithology became important elements in Messiaen's music after the *Préludes*, but as we will see in our detailed analysis of the work, they already appear here in an embryonic stage.

1.2.1. Rhythm:

Most of Messiaen's music is ametrical and/or rhythmically complex. His idea of rhythmic music (*musique rythmée*) is not the kind where a strong feeling of regular pulse is present, like in a military march. It is instead the kind of music where there is a great variety of rhythmic patterns and an irregular pulse, very different from the Western tradition. The absence of metric definition is reflected in Messiaen's use of highly structured rhythms that do not fall into periodic meters. His music is highly influenced by Greek and Indian rhythms. Many of his rhythmic techniques were developed through a profound study of music of these two cultures.

During his years at the Paris Conservatoire, he first discovered the ancient Greek meters (in Greek music, but mostly in Greek poetry) from his music history classes with Maurice Emmanuel and also from his organ lessons with Marcel Dupré, who encouraged him to improvise on Greek rhythms. Also, many of his rhythmic innovations come from his studies of the 120 Indian *deçî-tâlas* (regional-rhythms), collected and published by Lavignac in the "*Encyclopédie de la Musique et Dictionnaire*

du Conservatoire". These 120 rhythmic patterns dating from the thirteenth century range from one single note-value to thirty-five notes. The combinations are usually metrically irregular. Messiaen used several of these patterns *ipsis litteris* in his music but also transformed them to his needs. Example 1 shows the rhythmic pattern *Râgavardhana*, from the 120 Indian *deçî-tâlas*, as it appears in *Technique*. We can notice the absence of a regular pulse in the short pattern.



Example 1: *Râgavardhana*, from the 120 Indian *deçî-tâlas*.

The most striking element in the example is the dotted 8th note, main generator of an irregular pulse. Without the dot, the fragment would have a regular pulse subdivided into 8th notes. Messiaen calls this rhythmic technique a *valeur ajoutée* (added value). It consists of adding a note, a rest, a dot or a tie to transform straightforward rhythms into irregular patterns. As we saw in example 1, which dates from the thirteenth century, Messiaen did not create this technique, but he was the first to consciously use it to transform or create complex rhythmic patterns. Chapter III of *Technique* is entirely dedicated to the technique of *valeur ajoutée*. It is a rather simple technique, but it definitely has a strong impact in his music. We will see a few examples of *valeur ajoutée* in our detailed analysis of the *Préludes*.

Another important rhythmic device, discussed in Chapter V of *Technique*, is the non-retrogradable rhythmic patterns. As Messiaen explains it: "If we read them

[rhythms] from right to left or from left to right, the order of the values stays the same.”⁷ The composer compares the non-retrogradable rhythms with the modes of limited transposition, because they are both based on symmetrical patterns. We will discuss more in detail in the section dedicated to the Modes the symbolic meaning of such symmetry. There are a few short examples of non-retrogradable rhythms in the *Préludes*. Example 2 shows the low voice in the fourth prelude, *Instants défunts*:



Example 2: Non-retrogradable rhythm in *Instants défunts*, m. 1.

Other rhythmic techniques Messiaen uses include: polyrhythm; the chromatic scale of durations, consisting of changing the duration of the given note-value by increasing or decreasing its duration by a constant rhythmic figure; the “*personnages rythmiques*” (rhythmic characters); symmetrical permutations; the rhythmic neumes, from Gregorian chant; rhythmic canons; use of prime numbers, which is often associated with the technique of “*valeur ajoutée*,” resulting in irregular meters, among others.

As we will see throughout our detailed analysis of the *Préludes*, there are several hints of an early interest in unconventional rhythmic patterns. There are

⁷ Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical avec des exemples musicaux*. Paris: A. Leduc, 2010, p. 13.

several examples of unusual time signatures and also a constant change in time signature to accommodate the musical material. In a few instances, Messiaen keeps conventional time signatures, but by using syncopations and disregarding the strong beats, he fits some rhythmic figures that are unrelated to the metric suggested by the time signature.

1.2.2. *Ornithology:*

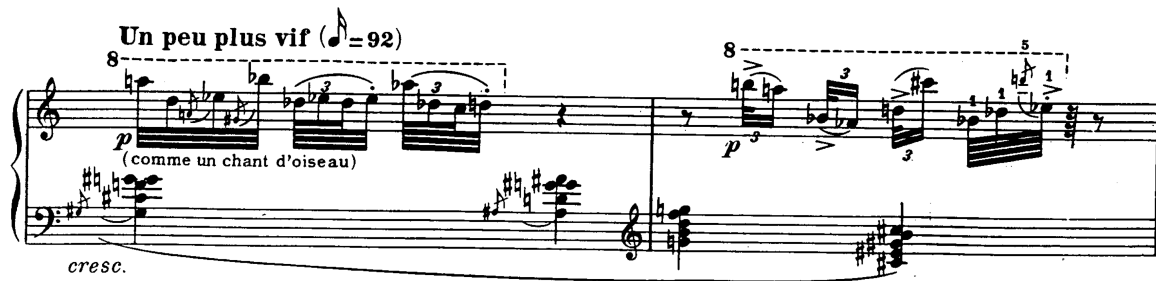
Even though we can find musical elements inspired by birds' chant in works by previous composers, such as Beethoven or Rameau, there is no precedent in music history of a composer being so deeply and seriously devoted to birds and incorporating their chant into music as Messiaen. His love for the *chants d'oiseaux* (birdsongs) is best explained by his own words: "it's probable that in the artistic hierarchy, birds are the greatest musicians in our planet."⁸ Throughout his entire life, he transcribed birdsongs in tours around the globe, occasionally helped by professional ornithologists, and accumulated a profound knowledge of hundreds of different species, their habitats and behavior.

It is important to notice that Messiaen's transcriptions of bird songs in his music are not – and were never intended to be – literal. Such attempt would fail because, as Trevor Hold points out, it is actually impossible to literally reproduce those sounds with our musical instruments, since the chant of a bird is highly pitched, not based on human scales, is metrically irregular and has a great variety of

⁸ Messiaen, *Music and Color*, p. 85.

timbres.⁹ Moreover, if such transcription were possible, human ears would not be capable of appreciating it. What Messiaen actually achieved was capturing some musical aspects of birds' chants and their habitat; the transcriptions are very imaginative and artistic.

The most important collections of birdsongs in Messiaen's output are the seven volume-work *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (Catalogue of birds), *La Fauvette des jardins* (The Garden warbler), both for piano, *Oiseaux exotiques* (Exotic birds) and *Réveil des oiseaux* (Awakening of the birds), both for solo piano and orchestra. These works are entirely devoted to birdsongs and most of the time the composer indicates on the score which bird he was portraying in the music. However, Messiaen also incorporated birdsongs in parts of several other works. In these cases, very often he does not indicate which species of bird he is referring to. Example 3, excerpt from *Le regard du fils sur le fils*, from the *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus*, shows a typical use of birdsong.



Example 3: *Regard du fils sur le fils* (birdsong on the right hand).

Careful score analysis reveals some general characteristics of his birdsong transcriptions: high-pitched notes, very fast and repetitive motives, grace notes, trills, staccatos, repeated notes, syncopation, irregular pulse, unpredictability,

⁹ Trevor Hold, "Messiaen's Birds", *Music & Letters*, v. 52, no. 2 (April, 1971), pp. 113-122.

relatively complex rhythmic patterns (including his “*valeur ajoutée*”), frequent use of intervals such as tritone, major second, major seventh or minor ninth, etc.

In the *Préludes*, we do not have any examples of a birdsong similar to the one in *Regard du fils sur le fils* (ex. 3). The composer admittedly said he did not know by the year of composition of the *Préludes* how to translate the *chants d'oiseaux* to music. However, he was already interested in birds and birdsongs. The first prelude in the set makes a clear reference to a bird in the title: *La colombe* (the dove). In the music, the 32-note pattern in the upper register of the piano symbolizes a bird, although a very different one, when compared to Messiaen's later style of notating birdsongs.

1.2.3. Modes of limited transposition

The modes of limited transposition originated from Messiaen's interest in exploring non-diatonic writing, especially rhythm and pitch modes from Indian and other Eastern cultures. Maurice Emmanuel, who also composed using Oriental modes, encouraged him to explore the possibilities of unconventional modes. Emmanuel's most celebrated work is his Sonatina no. 4, for piano, "based on Hindu modes." Messiaen was also well aware of the examples of non-diatonic writing in the Franco-Russian axis in the music of Satie, Debussy, Scriabin and Stravinsky. Marcel Dupré encouraged Messiaen to be methodical in his improvisations at the organ using unconventional modes. All of these factors led Messiaen to create a series of modes based on symmetrical patterns.

Messiaen called his Modes "*Modes à transpositions limitées*" because, contrarily to the diatonic scale or any other existing mode, they do not allow a total of twelve different transpositions in the chromatic system. Therefore, all of Messiaen's modes have a limited number of possible transpositions. After that number is reached, the following transposition repeats the same notes of a previous one, only changing the order in which the notes appear. It is important to notice that these modes do not have a predefined tonic or final. The tonal center always depends on the context of the music. The order the notes appear in the examples we show below, starting from middle C and going chromatically upwards for each transposition, and is used merely to show the composition of the Modes. In no way

does the first note imply a tonal center; any note of the mode can be a tonic, depending on the composer's intentions.

There are a total of 7 Modes. Messiaen explained in *Technique* that it is mathematically impossible to create a new mode with limited transpositions. All the other modes, the existing ones or any others invented in the future, are transposable twelve times. He does not mention the hexatonic scale (C, C#, E, F, G#, A), which has also a limited number of transpositions. The reason is probably because this scalar pattern is found in his Mode 3, which contains two extra notes. Messiaen's Modes are divided into smaller groups that are symmetrical. For example, Mode 1, the whole-tone scale, is divided into 6 groups of 2 notes each. Each group is composed of one interval of a whole-step. Mode 2, the octatonic scale, is divided into 4 groups of 3 notes each. Each group is composed of two intervals: one half-step and one whole-step. The last note of every group in Messiaen's Modes is also the first note of the following group. Thus, each group shares a note with its neighbors.

Considering the fact that none of the notes in Messiaen's Modes is a tonic or a final, they do not have a "prime" form; all forms are considered transpositions. Thus, for analytical convenience, every mode starting on middle C is called 1st transposition; every mode starting on C# is called 2nd transposition and so forth. For example, Mode 2 starting on C is called Mode 2¹; Mode 2 starting on C# is called Mode 2²; and its last possible transposition is called 2³. The fact that all scalar patterns of the Modes are called transpositions has caused some confusion in scholarly research. It is unfortunately common to find sources mistakenly calling the

second transposition of a Mode the 1st transposition, and considering the first transposition as its prime form.

We will proceed by giving a brief description of each of the seven Modes of limited transposition. More information about some of their individual particularities can be found in our analysis of the *Préludes*. We find it more meaningful to provide more in depth details when it is in the specific context of musical examples. Some of the intrinsic qualities of the Modes could be considered too theoretical if explained out of context. Our description of the Modes will be followed by a list containing every transposition of each one of them. It is extremely helpful to have this list accessible during the analytical task of the *Préludes* and of Messiaen's music in general.

Mode 1:

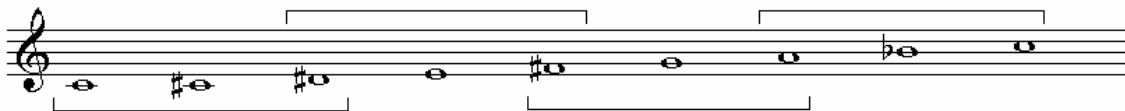
It is equivalent to the whole-tone scale. It is transposable only two times and is divided into 6 groups of 2 notes. Messiaen avoids this Mode because he considered that Debussy and Paul Dukas had already exhausted all possibilities it offers. He only mentions this Mode in detail in *Technique*, but not in *Traité*. He only uses this Mode if it is hidden in a texture combined with other Modes.



Example 4: Mode 1, first transposition.

Mode 2:

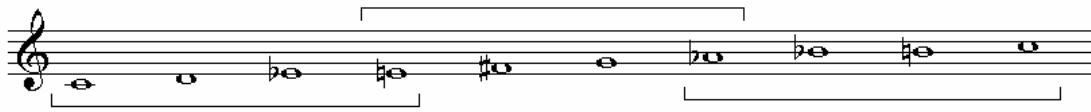
It is equivalent to the octatonic scale. It is transposable three times and is divided into 4 groups of 3 notes. Each group is composed of one half step followed by one whole-step. Inverting the order of the intervals in this Mode produces the same notes in a different order, which is irrelevant to the way Messiaen conceived his Modes. In that case, the first transposition would be enharmonically equivalent to the third transposition in the original interval order. In any case, in both *Technique* and *Traité*, the composer uses the order half-step followed by whole-step. It is one of Messiaen's favorite Modes, appearing in his music since 1927, in *Le Banquet céleste*, for organ, and until the end of his life. Although many other composers had used the octatonic scale before (for instance, Rimsky-Korsakov and Stranvinsky), Messiaen considered that he was the first composer to systematically use it to compose entire sections of works, without adding other notes.



Example 5: Mode 2, first transposition.

Mode 3

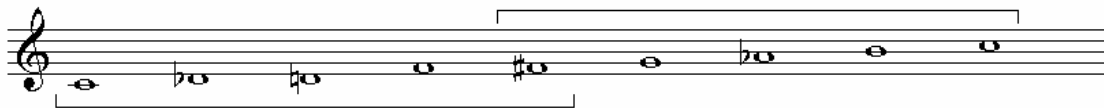
It is transposable four times and is divided into 3 groups of 4 notes. Each group is composed of one whole-step followed by two half-steps. This Mode, and all the following others, is entirely new; no other composer had used it before. It is also one of Messiaen's favorite Modes. It appears in several of the *Préludes*.



Example 6: Mode 3, first transposition.

Mode 4:

It is transposable six times and is divided into 2 groups of 5 notes. Each group is composed of two consecutive half-steps, one minor third followed by another half-step. This Mode does not appear very often in the *Préludes*. The first time Messiaen used it more consistently was in the 1935 piece for organ, *Nativité du Seigneur*. However, from this Mode, Messiaen extracts an important melodic contour (ex. 8) that already appears in the second prelude, *Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste*.



Example 7: Mode 4, first transposition.



Example 8: Melodic contour typical of Mode 4.

Mode 5:

It is transposable six times and is divided into 2 groups of 4 notes. Each group contains one half-step, one major third followed by another half-step. This Mode is absent in *Traité*, appearing only in *Technique*. The reason for that is because it is very similar to Mode 4, with two notes less. Since the composer very often does

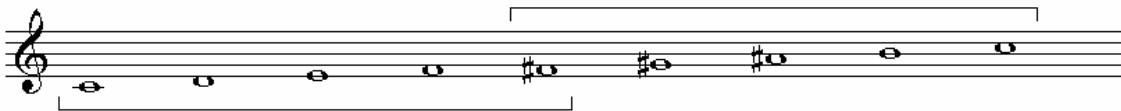
not use all the notes from a Mode in his music, preferring, as Gareth Healey points out, “to select pitches from a mode rather than employing them all,”¹⁰ Mode 5 does not have intrinsic characteristics not already found in Mode 4. In other words, Mode 4 contains Mode 5 in its composition, making the latter not as important.



Example 9: Mode 5, first transposition

Mode 6:

It is transposable six times and is divided into 2 groups of 5 notes. Each group contains two whole-steps followed by two half-steps. It appears in the *Préludes*, although less often than Modes 2 and 3. It contains Mode 1 (the whole-tone scale) in its composition, plus two extra notes, allowing the composer to create very different sonorities from the first Mode.



Example 10: Mode 6, first transposition.

Mode 7:

It is transposable six times and is divided into 2 groups of 6 notes. Each group contains three half-steps, one whole-step followed by another half-step. This mode contains 10 notes in total, almost all the notes from the chromatic scale. It is also absent in *Traité*, appearing only in *Technique*.

¹⁰ Gareth Healey, *Messiaen's Musical Techniques: The Composer's View and Beyond*, p. 84.



Example 11: Mode 7, first transposition.

Messiaen's favorite Modes, especially in the time of the composition of the *Préludes*, are undoubtedly numbers 2 and 3. His preference is due to the fact that these two modes allow a fewer number of possible transpositions. Since very early in his career, Messiaen was fascinated by what he called the "charm of the impossibilities."¹¹ These impossibilities are most evident in the use of his modes, for their limited number of transpositions (after which, we find the exact same pitches in a different order), and the non-retrogradable rhythms. In the case of the latter, the rhythmic formula is the same if read in the opposite direction. For Messiaen, the Modes express the charm of the impossibilities in the vertical direction and the non-retrogradable rhythms, in the horizontal direction. The two impossibilities complement each other.

Messiaen was aware of the fact that listeners, in the case of a live concert, do not have the time to verify if the music is not transposable more than a few number of times or if the rhythms are impossible to retrograde, but he believed they would experience, despite their own will, the charm of the impossibilities. As he points out in *Téchnique*:

He [the listener] will undergo, despite his will, the strange charm of the impossibilities: a certain effect of tonal ubiquity in the non-transposition, a certain unity of movement (...) in the non-retrogradation, all these things that will

¹¹ "Charm des impossibilités." In Messiaen, *Technique*, p. 5.

progressively lead him to this sort of “theological rainbow”, that tries to be the musical language we search.¹²

In this citation from *Technique*, two words immediately grasp our attention: theology and rainbow. The first one is related to his religious beliefs and his will to praise God through his music and the second one to his fascination with colors. It is important to notice that the Modes, used as a compositional device, are the means to achieving a larger goal. Their construction, based on logic and symmetry, can hide the expressive power they have. Interestingly, it is almost ironic that Messiaen was fascinated by the limited nature of his Modes, because he also employed them as a means of freeing both harmony and melody from their traditional constraints.

Messiaen’s Modes differ from other existing modes not only for not being transposable more than a limited number of times or for not having a predefined tonic or final, but also because the composer considered them as being essentially colors. In the next section, we discuss how Messiaen perceived colors and their implication in the composition of the *Préludes*.

1.2.4. Other considerations of Harmony:

Messiaen’s harmonic language is not limited to his Modes. In *Technique*, he describes several of his unique chords and provides a large list of harmonic progressions. For many of these harmonic progressions, the composer does not provide an explanation. We know that as a young student, Messiaen was constantly

¹² Messiaen, *Technique*, p. 56.

keeping notes of musical fragments that struck his attention. This list probably goes back to his time at the Conservatoire.

Similarly to the *valeur ajoutée* technique, he employs the *notes ajoutées* (added notes) to change the color of a chord. As he explains in *Technique*, these added notes are “strange [to the chord], without any preparation or resolution, no particular expressive accent, are a natural part of the chord, changing its color, giving it a spice, a new flavor.”¹³ His two favorite types of *notes ajoutées* are the sixth and the augmented fourth, usually added to major triads. In many instances, the composer adds both notes to the same chord. However, the added note can be any note outside the triad. For instance, in prelude no. 2, *Chant d’extase dans un paysage triste* (m. 27), he adds a long C# in the melody to a D⁷ chord, creating a clash with the C₄ in the harmony.

The technique of *notes ajoutées* is also very important to understand how Messiaen transforms musical ideas borrowed from other composers. There are several instances in the *Préludes* where he takes a short passage from another composer and changes it to his own style. The final product is usually so different from its origin that it is almost impossible to recognize any similarities. He mentions in *Technique*, examples from Debussy, Ravel, Grieg and Mussorgsky. We show in detail this process in our analysis of preludes no. 3, 4 and 8 on pages 73 (ex. 24), 80 (ex. 30), and 127 (ex. 57), respectively.

Another procedure, quoted in Chapter XIV in *Technique*, is the “chord on the dominant,” which also involves added notes. Messiaen’s nomenclature has caused

¹³ Messiaen, *Technique*, p. 40.

some confusion, because this chord usually does not have a “dominant” function in his music. The chord is initially formed by appoggiaturas that are resolved in the normal way; then he adds new appoggiaturas, so the chord on the dominant becomes a resolution of a more complex dissonance (ex. 12). The chord on the dominant does not appear in the *Préludes*, but the technique of resolving an appoggiatura on a dissonant chord by preceding it by even more dissonant harmonies is a common device.

201

202

203
Accord sur dominante appoggiaturé

The image shows three musical staves. Staff 201 shows a chord in the bass clef with notes G, B, and D. Staff 202 shows a similar chord with an appoggiatura (F) on the G. Staff 203 shows a more complex chord with multiple appoggiaturas, labeled 'Accord sur dominante appoggiaturé'.

Example 12: Chord on the dominant, as it appears in *Technique*.

Another special chord is the *accord de la résonance*. It is composed of “almost all the perceivable notes – for an extremely refined ear – from the resonance of a low C” (ex. 13).¹⁴ This exact chord also does not appear in the *Préludes*, but Messiaen uses a few times the *effet de résonance*, which is based on a similar idea. We discuss this technique in detail in our analysis of preludes 1 and 6, pp. 51 and 97, respectively.

208
Accord de la résonance

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff is in treble clef and contains a complex chord with notes across all five lines. The bottom staff is in bass clef and contains a similar complex chord. The label '208 Accord de la résonance' is placed to the left of the staves.

Example 13: *accord de la résonance*.

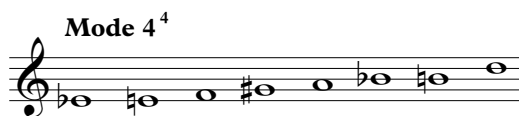
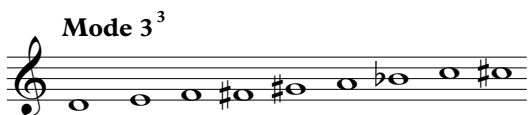
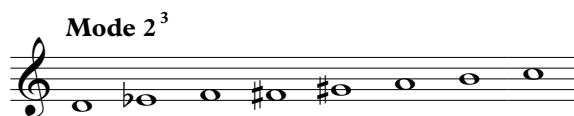
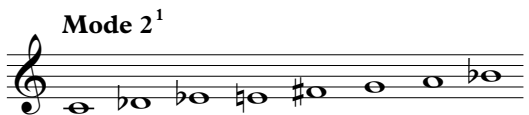
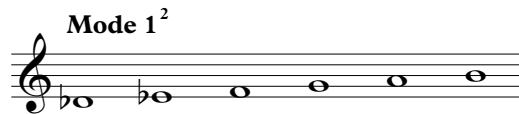
¹⁴ Messiaen, *Technique*, p. 43.

As Messiaen describes his harmonic procedures in *Technique*, we can conclude that they are more decorative than functional. Tonality becomes absorbed into a broad conception of modality. As we will see in detail during our analysis of the *Préludes*, functional harmony is not completely absent, but rather slowed down and, in many times, weakened through different processes in a similar way to Debussy's music. Functional harmony is often related to the formal structure of the piece. For example, the first prelude, *La colombe*, is divided into two 5-bar sections in a ABAB' Coda form. The A sections are in the tonic E major and the B sections are in the dominant B major. To these two main keys, Messiaen combines several notes from Mode 2 and other scales. Another example is prelude no. 6, *Cloches d'angoisse et l'armes d'adieu*, where the transition into the second section, in B minor, is made through a large dominant pedal (F#) spread over several measures, to which, once again, Messiaen adds coloristic notes from his Modes.

The slow harmonic movement gives Messiaen's music a static rather than dynamic quality. The overall mood is often of timelessness. As Robert Johnson points out, "the suspension of psychological time in his music is particularly apt for the works which involve religious symbolism."¹⁵ Even though the *Préludes* are not associated with religion they have this static quality, where time seems to have stopped, in particular nos. 2, 4 and 6.

¹⁵ Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, p. 13.

LIST OF MESSIAEN'S MODES OF LIMITED TRANSPOSITIONS



Mode 5¹

Mode 5²

Mode 5³

Mode 5⁴

Mode 5⁵

Mode 5⁶

Mode 6¹

Mode 6²

Mode 6³

Mode 6⁴

Mode 6⁵

Mode 6⁶

Mode 7¹

Mode 7²

Mode 7³

Mode 7⁴

Mode 7⁵

Mode 7⁶

1.3. The colors in the preludes

Musicians often use the term “color” when talking about music. In the case of pianists, for example, we use several different techniques to change the “color” of a given sound. The word is obviously used in a figurative way to express variety in sound production in a performance. However, when Messiaen speaks about colors in his music, he is using the literal meaning of the word. He was able to involuntarily see colors and complexes of colors when exposed to music. This phenomenon is called synesthesia, a condition in which stimulation in one of the senses produces automatic and involuntary experiences in another one. In the case of Messiaen, sounds would trigger an experience of colors. This particular type of synesthesia is also known as chromesthesia. His ability to associate colors with music has an important role in the composition of the *Préludes*.

It was not until later in his career, however, that Messiaen started speaking about the role of visual colors in his music. In *Technique* (1943), he associates colors to sounds only once. He describes a passage from the second movement of his *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* as being a cascade of blue-orange chords. In *Traité*, as the title already says (treatise of rhythm, *color* and ornithology), he discusses this subject much more in depth. It does not mean he kept his synesthesia a secret until the posthumous publication of his treatise. There are several testimonies from his students that the composer often spoke about sound-color in the classes he taught at the Paris Conservatory. The reason for almost not mentioning colors in *Technique* is most likely from fear of not being taken seriously. He admitted that telling people

about his color hearing was one of the greatest dramas in his life. We know from Messiaen's own words that he was already sensitive to colors when he composed the *Préludes*:

“I was already a sound-color musician (...) I was able to oppose [in the *Préludes*] disks of colors, to interlace rainbows, to find complementary colors in music. The titles of the *Préludes* hide etudes of colors.”¹⁶

Messiaen was not the first major composer to associate colors to sounds. For instance, before him, both Scriabin and Rimsky-Korsakov had already manifested their sensibility to color hearing. However, no other composer described with such detail the different color combinations associated to music as Messiaen did. When exposed to music – listening, reading a music score or hearing music in his mind – Messiaen was capable of seeing colors “with the spirit's eye.”¹⁷ The colors in his mind, as he described, would turn, move and combine together according to the way the musical sounds would also turn, move and combine together.

Even though the way he described the images was very detailed, Messiaen was always consistent in his descriptions. The same chord, played the same way, would always stimulate the same colors in his “spirit's eye.” However, several factors influenced the way he perceived colors. For instance, the same chord played in different registers would have a different tone: shaded towards white, which is to say lighter, in higher registers and toned down by black, meaning darker, when played in lower registers. Also, the colored images would change depending on the

¹⁶ Anik Lesure and Claude Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen, le livre du centenaire*. Paris: Symétrie, 2008, p. 157.

¹⁷ Lesure and Samuel, *Livre du centenaire*, p. 157.

inversion of the chord. Transpositions of the same music also changed the way Messiaen perceived colors. For instance, the way he describes the colors of the two versions of the second theme in the last prelude (see table 1), which are the exact same music in different transpositions, evidences this fact. This means he was not only sensitive to combinations of sounds but also to absolute pitch, which played an important role in his color-hearing world. Finally, instrumentation and combinations of instruments would also determine the colors Messiaen saw. In the case of the *Préludes*, since they are all written for piano, considerations of instrumentation are irrelevant.

The Modes of limited transposition are also very important in the expression of colors in Messiaen's music. He said it was through his Modes that he achieved so much variety in colors in the *Préludes*. In one of the interviews with Claude Samuel he revealed how he *saw* some of the Modes:

“The first transposition of Mode 2 is defined like this: blue-violet rocks speckled with little gray cubes, cobalt blue, deep Prussian blue, highlighted by a bit of violet-purple, gold, red, ruby and stars of mauve, black and white. Blue-violet is dominant. The same mode in its second transposition is totally different: gold and silver spirals against a background of brown and ruby-red vertical stripes. Gold and brown are dominant. And here is the third transposition: light green and prairie-green foliage, with specks of blue, silver and reddish orange. Dominant is green.”¹⁸

His favorite Mode, regarding the colors it produced, was the third in its second transposition. He described it as “horizontally layered stripes: from bottom

¹⁸ Messiaen, *Music and Color*, p. 64.

to top, dark gray, mauve, light gray, and white with mauve and pale yellow highlights, with flaming gold letters of an unknown script, and a quantity of little red or blue arcs that are very thin, very fine, hardly visible”.¹⁹ The dominant colors were gray and mauve. From Messiaen’s descriptions, it is evident that more than seeing colors, he was also able to see different shapes.

Table 1 shows the colors associated to each one of the *Préludes* in the way Messiaen described them.

Prelude	Color
1. <i>La Colombe</i>	Orange, with violet veins.
2. <i>Chant d’extase dans un paysage triste</i>	Gray, mauve, Prussian blue, for the beginning and the end; the middle section is diamond and silver.
3. <i>Le nombre léger</i>	Orange, with violet veins.
4. <i>Instants défunts</i>	Velvety gray, reflections of mauve and green.
5. <i>Les sons impalpables du rêve...</i>	Polymodal, superimposing a blue-orange mode in ostinato of cascades of chords to a violet-purple mode treated in a timbre like a brass instrument.
6. <i>Cloches d’angoisse et larmes d’adieu</i>	The bells combine several modes; the “hum” (bass note), and all the upper harmonies of the bells sound like luminous vibrations; the farewell is purple, orange, violet.
7. <i>Plainte calme</i>	Velvety gray, reflections of mauve and green.
8. <i>Un reflet dans le vent...</i>	The small storm that opens and concludes the piece alternates orange with green veins and some black stains; the central development is more luminous; the second theme, very melodic, wrapped in sinuous arpeggios, is blue-orange for the first time and green-orange for the second one.

Table 1: The colors in the *Préludes*.

The relationship between sound and color, so important to Messiaen, gives rise to a few important questions. We know that a very small portion of the

¹⁹ Messiaen, *Music and color*, p. 64.

population is affected by synesthesia, which means very few people will be able to see colors when listening to his music. Also, the way each synaesthete²⁰ experiences color hearing is different and very personal. For instance, the color schemes described by Scriabin and Rimsky-Korsakov in regards to the various keys of tonal music are very different. The very few points of agreement between them are mere coincidence. We can thus conclude that no one else can genuinely see the same colors Messiaen was able to, even if they can see colors. Therefore, is it important to understand the way Messiaen perceived colors in his music? Does it change how we should approach it? Is a person unable to associate colors to sounds capable of appreciating his music?

A deeper understanding of a work of art always has an impact on how we perceive it. Some works can only be fully appreciated or understood with some prior knowledge or if an explanation is available. For instance, what would Marcel Duchamp's 1917 "*Fontaine*" be without the reflection it arouses? Or what would a typical painting by Kandinsky be if the observer were looking for an authentic representation of reality? He or she would be missing the point.

We are not trying to affirm that Messiaen's music needs anything more than itself, but understanding what his music is about can definitely change the way we listen to it. Most of the time, Messiaen's harmonic language, combining tonality with his own Modes, is meant to please the senses rather than the mind. The composer admittedly said his listeners would undergo an experience, despite their own will, leading them to a "theological rainbow." Many of the sonorities created by

²⁰ A person affected by synesthesia.

Messiaen's complex chords and unorthodox harmonies are very much influenced by the color-hearing phenomenon he experienced. In an interview with Claude Samuel the composer said:

I try to convey colors through the music; certain combinations of tones and certain sonorities are bound to certain color combinations, and I employ them to this end.²¹

This is one of the main attributes of the *Préludes*. If most people are unable to see colors *involuntarily*, like Messiaen, perhaps they can *voluntarily* create their own associations of sound-color if they know what to listen for. The same way the titles of the *Préludes* induce the listener to an imaginative, in some instances almost programmatic, listening experience, the awareness of what Messiaen was trying to achieve in regards to color can also shape how we listen to his music. In that case, it does not matter if the listener is imagining the same colors Messiaen had in mind. This is especially true when we think that different synaesthetes diverge in sound-color association. What is important is that listeners can choose to orient their listening strategy to a similar way the composer imagined his music.

²¹ Messiaen, *Music and color*, p. 61.

1.4. The Influence of Debussy

The most commonly accepted characteristic of the *Préludes* among scholars is that they are influenced by Debussy's music, particularly his sets of preludes. As a matter of fact, anyone familiar with impressionistic music can recognize similar sonorities in Messiaen's *Préludes*. In this chapter, we will first discuss the importance of Debussy in Messiaen's development as a composer. Later, we will search for points in common between the music of the two Frenchmen and pair them with elements in which they diverge.

Measuring the influence from Debussy in Messiaen's *Préludes*, or in his music in general, is not an easy task because it manifests at different levels. Messiaen was interested in the music of his compatriot since very early in life. As he often commented in his publications and interviews, the music to which he had access in his childhood had a major influence in his development as a musician. For that reason, the years of discovery and autodidacticism in Grenoble may have oriented his future interests in life. The work that had undoubtedly the greatest impact on Messiaen as a 10-year-old boy was the gift from his harmony teacher in Nantes: Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. As Anothony Pople points out, "to say that this work was a great influence on Messiaen would be something of an understatement: (...) it remained a musical talisman for him throughout his life."²²

Carla Bell brings to the discussion that, at the beginning of the 20th century, there was "no universal technique, no so-called schools existed. The diversity in

²² Peter Hill, *The Messiaen Companion*. Portland, Ore: Amadeus Press, 1995, p. 18.

techniques corresponded to diversity in personal style.”²³ However, she identifies two major trends in European music: one represented by atonalism, dodecaphonism, later serialism, of the Second Viennese School, and the other represented by Debussy and Stravinsky, in France. Messiaen showed interest in serialism only much later in life, and just for a short period. As a matter of fact, his etude for piano, *Modes de valeurs et d'intensités*, is considered to be the first composition that is totally serialized.

Although Messiaen was familiar with the works of Schoenberg, his interests as a young composer at the Conservatoire were closer to the second trend identified above. They were very much oriented towards experimentations with non-Western modes. Even though the music of Debussy is often based on modal harmonies and exotic scales, such as the Chinese pentatonic or the whole-tone scale, experimentation with modal writing was commonplace in French music of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was also a center of interest in the music of other composers with a wide range of styles such as Fauré, Satie, Dukas or Maurice Emmanuel. Non-diatonic modes were also relevant for Scriabin, Stravinsky and Mussorgsky.

As Messiaen mentions: “I stay loyal to my childhood loved ones: Debussy, Mozart, Berlioz, Wagner.”²⁴ It is very likely that the impact of Debussy was the strongest influence on the direction Messiaen took as a composer. The first type of influence we have identified is thus of a broad nature, rather than specific. However, the works and lessons with Paul Dukas and Maurice Emmanuel as well as the

²³ Carla Bell, *Olivier Messiaen*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984, p. 13.

²⁴ “Je reste fidèle à mes amours d'enfance” in Lesure and Samuel, *Livre du centenaire*, p. 15.

context of early 20th century France were also of decisive importance. One must keep in mind though that Messiaen was always aware that a composer must have a unique voice. So, without neglecting his apprenticeship and his “childhood loved ones,” he strove to find his own voice since the beginning and has never tried to mimic the style of another composer.

Messiaen studied extensively the music of Debussy throughout his life. The music of his compatriot was also of central importance in the classes he taught at the Conservatoire. The sixth volume of *Traité*, a compilation of these classes, is entirely dedicated to the analysis of Debussy’s music. It starts with an overview of the principal aspects of Debussy’s musical language and is followed by analysis of many of his works, including several preludes. The study of Messiaen’s *Traité* reveals that he was not only fascinated by Debussy’s harmonic thoughts, but also by his innovatory rhythmic procedures. Carla Bell points out that Debussy, “by various subdivisions of the beat between duple and triple, and frequent ties over the bar line, destroyed any regular metric grouping.”²⁵ As we will see in our detailed analysis of the *Préludes*, there are examples where Messiaen seems to ignore the key signature and inserts rhythms that are unrelated to the meter, in a similar way to Debussy. Examples of this procedure are found in preludes nos. 1 and 4, p. 55 (ex. 18) and p. 83 (ex. 32), respectively.

Debussy wrote his two books of preludes towards the end of his life. The first volume was published in 1910 and the second in 1914, just four years before his death. The last large collections of piano works written by Debussy are the two sets

²⁵ Bell, *Olivier Messiaen*, p. 15.

of etudes, composed in only six weeks in the summer of 1915. Debussy's preludes are a work of maturity, a compendium of his mature style. Messiaen composed the eight *Préludes* for piano in 1929, at the start of his career as a composer, while he was still a student at the Paris Conservatoire. They are his very first published composition and represent, contrarily to his compatriot, a point of departure.

There are several points in common between the two sets. The most obvious one is that Messiaen chose the same medium of expression: preludes for piano with evocative titles. The diversity of styles and forms already explored by many other composers under the umbrella of the genre "prelude" represented a comfortable starting point for the young Messiaen. It allowed him to search for his own voice as a composer without the restraints of a rigid genre. At the same time, it also offered him the convenience and safety of a well-established genre.

Most composers who wrote sets of preludes for piano did not add a title and simply adopted the generic term "prelude." Messiaen took from Debussy the idea of adding titles with similar characteristics. In both composers, they all have a descriptive quality, stimulating an imaginative listening attitude. For example, *Un reflet dans le vent...* creates a connection with Debussy's *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest* or *Le vent dans la plaine*; or *Les sons impalpables du rêve* is similar to Debussy's *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*. The main difference is that Messiaen places the titles on top of the score. Debussy puts them at the end of each prelude because he did not consider them as real titles, but merely suggestions of the particular mood or impression the music conveys. Another important difference is that Debussy refers in his titles to existing sources. For instance, *La Danse de Puck* makes

reference to Shakespeare's character from "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir* is the title of a poem extracted from Baudelaire's *Fleur du mal*. On the other hand, the only connection the titles of Messiaen's *Préludes* have with an existing artwork is that with preludes by Debussy.

Another important common point between the two sets is the use of similar harmonic processes. Messiaen inherited from his compatriot the coloristic rather than directional conception of harmony, which had been traditional in tonal music. For both composers, harmony is more decorative than functional. This gives their music a static rather than dynamic quality, where the harmonic movement is still present but in a much slower pace than in traditional tonal music. An excellent example of this procedure in Debussy is his prelude *Voiles*, mostly based on the whole-tone scale, alternating between two augmented triads. As Robert Johnson points out, there is a "sense of movement only within an absolutely static framework."²⁶ Messiaen achieves a similar effect in some of the *Préludes*, but he avoids the whole-tone scale. For example, in *Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste*, the section portraying the "sad landscape" is mostly in Mode 2 and avoids directional harmonic movement. We will see in more detail how Messiaen achieves the "static framework" in our detailed analysis of this prelude (p. 59).

Another characteristic of Messiaen's harmony attributed to Debussy is the use of *notes ajoutées*, especially the added sixth and the augmented fourth. We also find in Messiaen's *Préludes* several non-resolving seventh, ninth and eleventh chords, which are used for coloristic purposes. Debussy did not invent these types of

²⁶ Johnson, *Messiaen*, p. 14.

chords, but Messiaen used them in his music in a similar way, combining them with non goal-oriented harmonic progressions. When explaining his use of *notes ajoutées* in *Technique*, Messiaen attributes them to Debussy.

As previously mentioned, Messiaen generally avoids the whole-tone scale, but we can find some passages in his *Préludes* where he uses scales typical of Debussy. These passages are not very common, but when they are present, the connection with Debussy is evident. For example, in section B of *La colombe*, Messiaen uses the pentatonic scale (with one added note) and the melodic shape is strikingly similar to Debussy's *Pagodes* (ex. 14). *Un reflet dans le vent* has short passages using the whole-tone scale and several chords typical of Debussy (p. 125, ex. 56).

The image displays two musical excerpts side-by-side for comparison. The top excerpt is from Debussy's *Pagodes*, marked 'a Tempo'. It features a treble and bass clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The melody in the treble clef consists of a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. The bass clef accompaniment provides a harmonic foundation with chords and moving lines. The bottom excerpt is from Messiaen's *La colombe*, marked 'pp' and 'expressif'. It uses the same key signature and clefs. The treble clef melody is: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. The bass clef accompaniment is more active, with a melodic line that mirrors the upper voice's contour. Both excerpts illustrate a similar pentatonic melodic shape with an added note.

Example 14: Above, Debussy's *Pagodes*. Below, *La colombe*.

Messiaen also inherited from Debussy the use of parallel chords, which are used to emphasize melodic lines. For example, in *Chant d'estase dans un paysage triste*, Messiaen uses a sequence of major triads to emphasize the melodic contour typical from Mode 4 (first bar of ex. 15).

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece. It consists of three staves: a treble clef staff at the top, a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) in the middle, and a bass clef staff at the bottom. The music is in a key with three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The score is divided into two sections by a vertical line. The first section is marked 'rall.' and features a sequence of parallel major triads in the treble staff, with corresponding chords in the grand staff. The second section is marked 'Tempo' and features a melodic line in the treble staff, with a triplet of eighth notes in the grand staff and a triplet of eighth notes in the bass staff. The number '3' is written below the triplet in the bass staff.

Example 15: *Chant d'estase dans un paysage triste*, parallel chords.

In this example, we also see an abrupt change of register, which is also a common device used by Debussy in his own preludes. It often comes after the end of a phrase serving as a comment or an echo, but also leading into a new phrase. The use of texture is a common point between the two composers, creating a similar articulation of musical space. They both create juxtapositions of different sound layers, where the sustain pedal has an important role. In a common passage with different layers, the melodic line is often in the middle register and is surrounded by others in softer dynamics.

The last type of influence from Debussy in Messiaen's *Préludes* has to do with a process of borrowing musical ideas. Messiaen often takes short passages from other composers, not only Debussy, and alters them to his own style. These

borrowed passages represent a source of inspiration to which Messiaen adds his own flavors. We will see in our detailed analysis of the *Préludes* that the composer uses material from *Pelléas et Mélisande* more than once and also a passage from Grieg's *Peer Gynt*. Another type of borrowing of ideas from Debussy manifests in Messiaen through the use of similar pianistic gestures. In *Le nombre léger*, we can find the use of a very similar figure (p. 72, ex. 23). Also, in *Un reflet dans le vent...* the similarities in the piano writing with Debussy's *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest* are striking (p. 128, ex. 60 and p. 130, ex. 62).

Despite being a strong common point between Messiaen and Debussy, harmony is also one of the main elements that set them apart. Both composers cultivated modal harmonies, but Messiaen created his own modes of limited transposition. This is probably the main difference between their harmonic approaches. Messiaen's Modes have a unique sonority, making his music easily recognizable. Also, there are examples in Messiaen's *Préludes* of polymodality with the juxtaposition of two and even three Modes. The result is a much more dissonant music, with sonorities unique to Messiaen. Finally, Debussy usually moves towards distant tonal centers, while Messiaen is more concerned with exploring the possibilities of his Modes, usually staying closer to the tonal center established at the beginning.

Despite of the common points identified in this chapter, Peter Hill believes that "remarkable is how little it [*Préludes*] owes to Debussy."²⁷ Besides the different sonorities, especially associated with the modes of limited transposition, Messiaen's

²⁷ Hill, *The Messiaen Companion*, p. 72.

Préludes differ in the treatment of musical forms. The composer himself identifies the differences: “we find in the *Préludes* what we have never seen in Debussy: a sonata form, a “forme à milieu,” where all the phrases are ternary and a prelude constructed as those of Bach.”²⁸ Debussy avoids pre-existing forms, letting the needs of the musical content dictate the musical form.

²⁸ Lesure and Samuel, *Livre du centenaire*, p. 15.

Chapter 2. Formal Analysis of the *Préludes*

2.1. *La Colombe*

2.2. *Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste*

2.3. *Le nombre léger*

2.4. *Instants défunts*

2.5. *Les sons impalpables du rêve...*

2.6. *Cloches d'angoisse et l'armes d'adieu*

2.7. *Plainte calme*

2.8. *Un reflet dans le vent...*

2.9. The *Préludes* as a cycle

Formal analysis of the *Préludes*

In this chapter we will provide a thorough analysis of each one of the eight *Préludes*. We took into consideration several elements in Messiaen's music, such as similarities with the music of Debussy and other composers, use of the modes of limited transposition and their relationship with tonality, formal structure, the relationship between title and musical content, and the use of the instrument, among others. We also gave special attention to elements of Messiaen's mature language that appear in the *Préludes* in embryonic stage. Depending on the nature of each particular piece, we focused more on some elements than in others.

The existing literature on the *Préludes*, as we already mentioned, is not as extensive as it is in the case of Messiaen's mature works. There are a few publications offering detailed analysis of some of the *Préludes*, but none of the entire cycle. The composer himself mentions the *Préludes* a few times as examples of his musical language in both *Technique* and *Traité*, but he also tends to focus on later works. Michèle Reverdy published a short book where she briefly discusses all Messiaen's solo piano works.²⁹ Her analyses of the *Préludes* rarely exceed one page each. Melody Chan's doctoral dissertation offers a thorough analysis of preludes no. 2, 6 and 8.³⁰ However, her main focus is on formal structure, influence from Debussy and especially performance practice. Other authors, such as Robert Johnson, Peter Hill and Gareth Healey offer some interesting insights, but they all focus more on

²⁹ Reverdy, *L'oeuvre pour piano*.

³⁰ Melody Chan, "A Study of Influence, Structure and Performance in Messiaen's Preludes (1928-1929)." University of Toronto, Doctoral Thesis, 2015.

Messiaen's later works and only discuss the *Préludes* briefly. Several other articles published in different journals were helpful in our analysis, and we will cite them when pertinent.

The influence of the impressionistic style in the *Préludes*, especially of Claude Debussy, is largely accepted among scholars. As a matter of fact, it does not take more than simply listening to them to hear some of the impressionistic sonorities. However, most authors point out that Messiaen's own style is already present through the use of his modes of limited transposition. They also all agree that Messiaen's conception of formal structure is dramatically different from Debussy in his preludes. Some authors have criticized Messiaen's *Préludes* because of the use of sectional forms and because of a certain lack of development in the musical material, often reiterated with no alteration. The other general criticism is in regards to the nature of the writing for piano, considered unidiomatic in several instances. Peter Hill has the harshest comment: "the one passage which does attempt a Debussian virtuosity sounds uncharacteristically insipid. Elsewhere the writing appears modest, at times like organ music transferred to the piano."³¹ He later praises Messiaen's understanding of the effects of fading piano tone.

In any case, the focus of our analysis will differ from most of the existing scholarly research, because we are interested in pointing out elements of Messiaen's later musical language that appear in an embryonic stage in the *Préludes*. Our goal is also to provide a thorough analysis of each one of them, thus fulfilling the lack of such study in the musical literature. Finally, we can argue that there are hints in the

³¹ Hill, *The Messiaen Companion*, p. 72.

music suggesting that Messiaen conceptualized the *Préludes* as a cycle and intended them to be performed as such.

When discussing the relationship between tonality and the use of the modes of limited transposition, we used some of Messiaen's own terminology. Most of the time the writing is focused in modality, rather than tonality. For that reason, Messiaen usually does not analyze his music as being in a certain key, but rather in the "atmosphere" of that key. The combination of a Mode with a given tonality often adds several notes that do not belong to the diatonic scale of that key.

2.1. *La colombe* (The dove)

The first prelude of the cycle is a miniature, the shortest of all with only 23 measures in total. It can be considered as a prelude for the rest of the cycle, the opening curtain of a long story. The formal structure is very clear: two contrasting sections (A and B) of the same length (5 bars) alternated twice and followed by a short 3-bar Coda.

Section	Bars	Tonal center / Mode	Details
A	1-5	E major / Mode 2 ²	Three distinct sound layers: main melody in E major using tritone F-B in the middle register, accompaniment in the lower register and birdsong using Mode 2 ² in the higher register.
B	6-10	B major / Pentatonic and Mode 2 ²	Melodic pattern of one measure transposed and contracted.
A	11-15	E major / Mode 2 ²	Exact repetition of A.
B'	16-20	B major / Pentatonic and Mode 2 ²	Similar to B, but leading to a longer dominant pedal.
Coda	21-23	E major	E major chord with added 6 th and 9 th in root position for the first time. Melodic fragment from B with <i>effet de résonance</i> .

Table 2. Prelude No. 1: *La colombe*.

The A section opens with Messiaen's favorite interval: the tritone (F-B). The first two measures are written in three staves to better show the three different sound layers. The middle voice contains the main melody played in octaves, marked *p*. The lower voice is a simple accompaniment figure, marked *ppp*. In the upper register, a quietly moving line in 32nd notes gives meaning to the title of the prelude: the dove. Messiaen portrays the image of a bird, the first appearance of a birdsong in

his music. It is in the high register and with fast notes, also marked *ppp*, to symbolize a dove flying in high altitudes in a distant sky. The texture quickly dissipates in bar 3 and only the melodic line remains, now played by both hands.

Lent, expressif, d'une sonorité très enveloppée

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece. The top part is a piano score for the first two measures of 'La colombe'. It features three staves: the upper staff has a dense, high-register melodic line marked *ppp*; the middle staff has a melodic line marked *p*; and the lower staff has a bass line marked *ppp*. The tempo and mood are indicated as 'Lent, expressif, d'une sonorité très enveloppée'. Below this is a single staff titled 'Mode 2²' showing a sequence of notes: G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G#.

Example 16: Above: *La colombe*, (mm. 1-2). Below: Mode 2, second transposition.

The overall tonal atmosphere of this section is E major, based on the fact that the accompaniment line repeats the E major triad in first inversion. However, all the notes in section A belong to Mode 2 in its second transposition. The feeling of the main tonality is blurred by the presence of notes not belonging to the diatonic scale of E major, especially the F \sharp in the melody. Other notes such as G, A \sharp or D, also absent in E major, are heard in softer dynamics in the high register. The chords intended to represent the dove are an alternation of minor and major triads, a typical use of Mode 2 in Messiaen's music. The remainder of the melody, in bars 3-5, has a stronger modal feeling for the absence of a harmony underneath it, but the

atmosphere of E major is still in the memory of the listener. Not all of the notes of Mode 2² are present here; G and A# are missing.

Example 17: *La Colombe* (mm. 3-9)

Measures 3-5 are of interest in our analysis for their rhythmic construction. At first, two things come to our attention: a certain avoidance of strong beats (second beats in bar 3 and 4 and the down beat in bar 5) and the way Messiaen writes bar 3, connecting all notes and avoiding to subdivide the E into two 16th notes connected by a tie. He also indicates that the first beat in bar 4 should be played with some rhythmic liberty by the word *rubato* (the only instance of *rubato* in the *Préludes*). Finally, he marks an accent on the last 16th note in bar 4. All these elements together have an impact on how we perceive the rhythm in this passage. The pulse, well established in the first two bars, becomes unclear.

In Chapter VII of *Technique*, the composer describes the four types of rhythmic notation he utilizes in his music. The first type, as he explains it, is the

most convenient for the composer. He simply notates the exact rhythms with no indication of time signature. The bar divisions are only used to subdivide phrases and cancel sharps and flats. The second and third types are used in more complex settings, such as orchestra or large ensembles. In the second type, the composer changes the time signature as often as the musical material needs; as in Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. In the third type, when the rhythmic patterns do not enter in a regular time signature, the composer subdivides the music in short units and indicates the number of beats at the beginning of each bar. The fourth type, as Messiaen comments in *Technique*, is the most convenient for performers. In this type of rhythmic notation, the composer fits the rhythm, often using syncopation, into a normal time signature, even if the patterns created do not have anything to do with it.

It seems to us that in bars 3-5 in this prelude, Messiaen is using the fourth type of notation. Through the use of syncopations, he fits a rhythm into a time signature (2/4) it is not really related to. Taking into consideration all the rhythmic elements we analyzed in these three bars, we propose a different way to notate the passage, shown in example 18. Our idea is to rewrite the rhythm in a similar way to Messiaen's mature style. In the new notation, there are no syncopations and the same rhythmic values clearly have an irregular pulse. Notice that the low B is written as an 8th note tied to a dotted 8th, using the technique of *valeur ajoutée*. The F also seems to utilize the same technique, since it is an 8th note and not a 16th, resulting in an irregular pulse.



Example 18.

We are not suggesting that the performer should necessarily play this passage with our new notation in mind. Our analysis of this passage is meant to show that Messiaen's interest in irregular rhythmic patterns already appears in the *Préludes*, even though they are still in an embryonic stage. Most of the time, the *Préludes* have a regular pulse. As we mentioned before, the composer had already started studying ancient Greek and Indian meter during his studies at the Paris Conservatoire. Irregular rhythm manifests in the *Préludes* in just a few occasions, and it is much subtler compared to his mature works.

Section B (mm. 6-10) changes the harmonic area to B major, the dominant of the home key. It uses a fragment of the melody in A (mm. 3-4), with some adjustments to fit the new harmony. The minor 2nd (C#-D) and augmented 4th (D-G#), from A, become a major 2nd (F#-G#) and a perfect 5th (G#-C#), respectively. Messiaen moves away from his Mode, using instead an altered version of the pentatonic scale, with an added A in the middle voice, thus increasing the dominant sonority of B major. As we mentioned in the section on the influence of Debussy, both harmony and melodic shape remind the listener of Debussy's *Pagodes* (see p. 43, ex. 14). The second measure in section B is an exact transposition, a minor third

above, of the first. Because it is an exact transposition, this new measure does not sound like a harmonic movement *per se*, but rather creates an increase in tension due to its abruptness.

The first beat of the following measure in section B also moves up a major third, presenting a contracted version of the material in the two previous measures. The expressive accent in the second beat of bars 1 and 2 of section B is now dislocated to the middle of the beat. The second beat of this measure (m. 8) is an exact transposition of the first, a minor third higher, following a similar pattern to the previous 2 bars. Following the bass line of this section until the end of its third bar, we have a B minor 7th chord, spelled over three bars, assuring tonal coherence.

In the following two bars of section B, the material is contracted even more, now every half of a beat. Also, Mode 2² comes back for one and a half beat in the 4th bar of B, transitioning back to the harmonic area of A. The tension created by this progressive acceleration in the way the material is contracted, combined with the transpositions, each time higher, is accentuated by a crescendo starting in the third bar of B. The tension quickly dissipates with the arrival on a B-Major chord with 7th and 9th.

The following eight measures (11-18), the entire A section and the first 3 measures of the B' section, are an exact reproduction of the first eight measures of the prelude. However, the last two bars of B' change considerably. First, Messiaen adds a long dominant pedal in the bass, absent in section B, for the entire remainder of B', increasing even more the feeling of a dominant. Moreover, the register is much higher and the chords are totally different, even though all of the notes in the first

beat and a half also belong to Mode 2² (similarly to what happens in B). Finally, the texture in the last two bars of B' reminds us of organ music.

In the Coda, the music finally arrives in E major with added 6th and 9th. The tonic is still somewhat weakened by the avoidance of the root position of the chord, a feature that Messiaen explores constantly in the *Préludes*. The E is only heard in the bass at the end of the first bar of the Coda. At the very end, the bass is repeated twice to conclude the piece.

The most striking feature of the Coda is the use of what Messiaen called *effets de résonance*, or resonance effects. Gareth Healey preferred to translate it as “resonance of timbre,” because of the coloristic effect it creates.³² In this technique, Messiaen adds single notes or chords in a different register, higher or lower, to the main melodic line, giving it a totally different color. In *La colombe*, this effect is used by combining the melodic fragment from B, in the middle register, to the same fragment a minor second lower, but in the extreme high register and in *ppp* dynamics. Obviously, these added notes do not have any harmonic function, nor do they belong to the same Mode. They are simply used to create a coloristic effect. Surprisingly, in that context, the succession of minor seconds does not sound dissonant, because of the separation of registers. Moreover, they do not sound like a different layer of sound due to the parallelism in their construction. They create a new sonority by the effect of resonance, a new timbre. The effect is repeated in the second bar of the Coda, in an even smaller fragment. The last measure is just a final statement of the tonic E, under the resonance of the preceding bars held by the

³² Healey, *Messiaen's Musical Techniques*, p. 91.

pedal, for the first time in a strong beat. At this point, however, the meter is not very clear, weakening the effect of the strong beat.

Example 19: *La Colombe* (coda).

The apparent harmonic complexity of this prelude is achieved by the combination of chords extracted from Mode 2 with basic tonality. However, it hides an underlying traditional and rather simple treatment of harmony. A theoretical simplification of the harmonic progressions, in the style of Schenker, reveals basically two major triads: E major, in section A and B major, in section B. As we will see in the other preludes, this simple underlying harmonic structure is a common feature in the cycle.

In its short length, the first prelude, *La Colombe*, presents many important elements of Messiaen's musical style. It introduces Mode 2 combined with basic tonality. It displays some Debussy sonorities because of the use of the pentatonic scale and the major chord with added 6th and 9th. It shows Messiaen's early interest in complex rhythmic patterns, as evidenced by ex. 18. Finally, it introduces the *effet de resonance*. All these elements will be developed in the remainder of the cycle.

2.2. *Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste* (Song of ecstasy in a sad landscape)

The title of the second prelude is consistent with the overall mood of the piece. The two components of the title, “song of ecstasy” and “sad landscape,” are portrayed in the two very contrasting sections of the prelude. It differs from Debussy’s titles because it has a touch of surrealism. If Debussy was a great admirer of symbolist poets such as Mallarmé or Verlaine, Messiaen preferred the works of Pierre Reverdy and Paul Eluard, associated with surrealism. The juxtaposition of two contrasting ideas is a recurrent theme among the surrealists. The form is again very clear: ABA – CDC – ABA. It is a compound ternary form, consisting of shorter ternary structures within the larger sections. The outer sections (ABA) portray the sad landscape and the central section (CDC) portrays the song of ecstasy. As the title says, the song of ecstasy is *in* a sad landscape; therefore it makes sense that the former is inserted between the two sections representing the latter. As we will see later in this chapter, this prelude is not the only one where the title suggests more than just the mood or the story behind the music. It also influences the form of the piece. The same thing happens in *Cloches d'angoisse et l'armes d'adieu*, where the two elements in the title originate the two main sections of the piece.

The prelude starts in Mode 2¹, used in such a way to create the tonal atmosphere of F# minor, but preserving its modal flavor. The feeling of the tonal center is not as strong as in *La colombe*, because of the absence of a clear harmonic support reinforcing F# minor. Also, the constant presence of notes outside the

diatonic scale of F# minor, in both melodic and accompaniment lines, weakens its tonal feeling.

Section	Bars	Tonal center / Mode	Details
A	1-11	F# minor / Mode 2 ¹	Main melody, divided in two phrases of 4 bars, portraying a sad landscape in a simple texture.
B	12-16	C minor, C major, C# minor, E minor and C# major	Mainly in Mode 2 ¹ with notes borrowed from different transpositions, it is in the atmosphere of different keys, without polymodality. Use of fragments of the main melody.
A'	17-24	F# minor / Mode 2 ¹	Main melody returns in a chordal texture.
C	25-32	F# major	Three different sound layers. Added notes. Typical melodic contour of Mode 4 and 5.
D	33-40	Undefined	Canon to the octave, separated by a dotted quarter note. Fragments of the melodic contour of C in a chordal texture.
C	41-48	F# major	Exact repetition of C.
A''	49-59	F# minor / Mode 2 ¹	Main melody in chordal texture with one moving line in 16 th notes.
B	60-64	C minor, C major, C# minor, E minor and C# major	Exact repetition of B.
A'''	65-74	F# minor / Mode 2 ¹	Main melody. First phrase both hands playing melody and accompaniment. Second phrase, main melody in the lower register. Two extra bars to end the piece with fragments of the main melody in chords.

Table 3. Prelude No. 2: *Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste*.

Section A opens with a slow tempo and simple texture: an accompaniment line in constant 8th notes with a feeling of ostinato, and a melodic line. The first 8 measures are constructed following the model of a parallel period divided into

antecedent and consequent. There are two 4-bar phrases, divided into two each. Both phrases start with the exact same material for two measures and go to different directions in the remainder of the phrase. There are no clear harmonic cadences at the end of each phrase, but the first one is definitely weaker in defining the main key because it first seems to move away from F#. The second phrase, however, ends on an F#, in a melodic cadence, and in the harmony, we hear a full F# minor chord.

The thematic material is developed by means of recurrent motives. Example 20 illustrates these elements. Fragments marked with an X show the tritone, the interval that opens and ends the phrases. The chromatic contour in Y generates fragment Y'. Messiaen simply changes the directions of all intervals composing Y: a descending major 2nd becomes an ascending major second in Y' and so on. The expressive motive consisting of a 16th note followed by a dotted 8th, repeated twice, is marked with a Z. Its notes are also extracted from motive Y. Motif T will be used in the following section. The slow tempo of the music, combined with the prolongation of F# in the harmony, and a certain insistence of the melody to always return to the same note, gives the music the static, almost hypnotic, quality expected in the unchangeable nature of a landscape.

Example 20: *Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste* (mm. 1-8).

In bar 9, we hear the first chord in the piece, an E \flat major with added 7th and 9th. At first it seems to be unrelated to the previous music because of its dramatic change of texture and register. However, the two notes composing the sound frame of this chord (E \flat and D \flat) are still in the auditory memory of the listener, because they were used in the ostinato figure in the first two measures of each of the previous phrases.

The harmonies in bar 9 definitely remind the listener of Debussy because of their addition of notes to pure harmonies for coloristic purposes. As Messiaen mentions in *Technique*, “[these notes] without any preparation or resolution (...) change its color [of the chord], giving it a spice, a new perfume.”³³ Almost all the notes in the sequence of chords shown in example 21 belong to the same Mode 2¹ from the previous phrases, except for B and F, which belong to Mode 2². This is a process commonly used by Messiaen, where he makes a Mode borrow notes from

³³ Messiaen, *Technique*, p. 40.

itself in a different transposition. Here, the two notes borrowed from Mode 2² present the interval of a tritone a half-step lower from fragment X in example 20.

The image shows a musical score for Example 21, consisting of a piano part (left hand and right hand) and an alto voice part. The piano part is in the key of F# minor and features a melodic line with a 16th note followed by a dotted 8th note, labeled 'Z'. The alto voice part is in the key of C# minor and features a melodic line with a tritone interval, labeled 'X'. The piano part also features a melodic line with a tritone interval, labeled 'Y'. The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp*, *ppp*, and *p*, and a performance instruction 'Presser Rall.'. The score is annotated with various musical symbols and brackets, including a dashed line labeled '8' above the piano part and a bracket labeled '6' below the alto voice part.

Example 21: *Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste*, (mm.9-11).

The example above also shows the use of fragments from the main melody. In Z, we have the expressive figure of a 16th note followed by a dotted 8th, now harmonized in a different way. Fragment Y' is also present, now in the extreme high register. In bar 11, the music moves from F# to C# minor, which is a tonic-dominant relationship.

The three last measures of A bring contrast with the previous music and also serve as a transition to the new texture in section B. Section B starts in m. 12, with a C minor chord in the left hand, a tritone above F#. This interval, so important in the melodic line in A, becomes also structurally significant for the tonal relationship it creates between the two sections. Motifs from A are used with different harmonization. The main line, marked *mf*, in the alto voice, is derived from motif T, shown in example 20. The expressive motive X is also present in bar 13, and Y' appears in bar 14, in the high register with a new harmonization.

The harmonic aspects of section B need some consideration. Using notes borrowed from all transpositions of Mode 2, the sequence of chords in this passage

is C minor, C major, C# minor, E minor and finally C# major, the dominant of F#. All of these chords appear with added notes. It is interesting to notice that Messiaen does not modulate to any of these keys, but instead moves freely from one chord to another. This is an excellent example of what Messiaen meant about his modes being in the “atmosphere of several tonalities, without polytonality, the composer being free to give predominance to one of the tonalities or to leave the tonal impression floating.”³⁴ He also mentions that the predominance of a certain key can be given by the constant return to it or by the use of its dominant 7th chord. In section B, the tonal impression is unsettled, being in the atmosphere of several different keys, but staying in Mode 2 in its different transpositions. Before the return of section A, we hear, in bar 16, C# major with 7th and 9th alternating with a G major chord with added 7th, 9th and major 11th, preparing the return of F# minor. Messiaen constantly weakens the harmonic movement of dominant-tonic by alternating the dominant chord with other harmonies, avoiding the use of the dominant chord in root position or eliminating one or more notes of the dominant chord. These were techniques he picked up from Debussy.

The return of A, in bar 17, varies the theme by doubling the melody an octave higher and by adding a chordal texture. Another variation is given by reversing the order of the ostinato D#-C# to C#-D# in both middle voice in the right hand and high voice in the left. Also, Messiaen constantly uses the chord F# minor with added 6th, one of his favorite chords.

³⁴ Messiaen, *Technique*, p. 51.

Section C, at *un peu plus vif*, representing the “song of ecstasy,” the second section in the larger ternary form of the piece, provides great contrast to the previous music. It is in a faster tempo, employing faster note values, and it is in the parallel key of F# major. Even though this section is clearly in F# major because of its constant return and the frequent use of its dominant chord, we never hear a tonic chord in root position.

The modulation to a parallel key in the music of Messiaen has an important meaning. He explains in *Traité* that all types of modulation have a strong effect in his color-hearing world. For example, the modulation from a major key to its relative minor does not have an important color change, because both scales share the same notes. For Messiaen, minor keys are simply a modal aspect of major keys. However, the modulation from F# minor (whose relative is A major) to F# major creates a dramatic color change. The further away the new key is, following the circle of fifths, the more significant the change is. The color becomes brighter when the modulation goes upwards in the circle of fifths (C-G-D...) and darker when it goes downwards (C-F-B \flat ...). The distance between A major and F# major in the circle of fifths is considerable (A-E-B-F#). Since the direction goes upwards, the color becomes considerably brighter. This is an opportunity for the performer to search for a more brilliant sound in this section C, enhancing the contrasting character between the “sad landscape” and “song of ecstasy” sections.

Once more, the music is written in three staves to show the three sound layers. Messiaen is very specific when indicating the dynamics for the different layers: main melody in the middle line is marked *mf*, the accompaniment in the left

hand is *pp*, and the high register voice, like a distant echo, is *ppp*. More than following strictly the composer's dynamic indications, the performer must use them as a guide to identify which sonorities receive priority in Messiaen's conception. The constant repetition of D# and C# in the high register and the trill on C# in the melody are reminiscent of the ostinato figure in section A.

Carla Bell, in her brief analysis of this prelude, considers this section C to be written in Mode 2¹, with added notes.³⁵ However, the high number of added notes weakens the modal feeling. Interestingly, every transposition of Mode 2 allows the coexistence of a major chord and its parallel minor. For instance, Mode 2¹ contains four major chords (C, E ♭, F# and A) and all of their parallel minor chords in its composition. It is not possible to create any other major or minor chord from Mode 2¹ without borrowing notes from other transpositions. Therefore, it is logical to consider this section, in F# major, to be in the same Mode as the previous one, in F# minor. However, we must take into consideration the frequent use of added notes; two of them, B and G#, belonging to the diatonic scale of F# major, thus reinforcing the tonal feeling of the passage.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Messiaen's harmonic thought in the *Préludes* is not limited to his Modes. Many of his harmonic progressions shown in *Technique* and *Traité* do not belong to a particular Mode. The composer mentions the first five bars of section C in *Technique*, bringing our attention to the added notes. For him, the concept of added notes is more significant in the local context of a chord. For instance, in measure 27, he marks the C# as an added note to the D⁷

³⁵ Bell, *Olivier Messiaen*, p. 35.

chord underneath it. Also, in measure 28, he considers the A# as the added 6th to the dominant chord with 7th and 9th. Messiaen only assigns Mode 2¹ to the sequence of chords in the two last beats of measure 28, where all the notes belong to that Mode.

The melodic contour in this section, shown in example 22, is also of interest because it appears in several of Messiaen's mature works; most notably in the 7th movement of his *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*. It is composed of two tritones, one at the beginning and another one at the end, and a reversed chromatic formula, as he calls it, in the middle. This melodic contour is also typical of Mode 5, one of the Modes Messiaen rarely uses in the *Préludes*. Finally, in this harmonic context, the composer calls this fragment a *groupe de passage* (passage group), since several of the notes do not belong to the chord underneath them.



Example 22: *Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste*, melodic contour in section C.

The phrase is repeated a second time, changing the last measure to transition into section D. Here, a new melody is introduced in canon at the octave, separated by a dotted quarter note. This compositional device (canon) appears in almost all the *Préludes*, with the exception of the first and last. Another important aspect of this section is the presence of a non-retrogradable rhythmic pattern in the accompaniment line. It is still in its embryonic stage: a simple 16th note followed by two 8th notes and another 16th note. This pattern is also an early form of what

Messiaen calls a rhythmic pedal: “rhythm that repeats itself untiringly, in ostinato, without taking into consideration the rhythms around it.”³⁶

A fragment of the melodic contour typical of Mode 5 from the previous section is used at the end of the phrase in canon. More interestingly, in measure 36, the full melodic contour appears in its reversed form, with all intervals going in the opposite direction. It is repeated twice in a cascade of major triads in second inversion. The music modulates a step up and the canon is repeated. Mode 2¹ comes back in the last measure of this section (m. 40), transitioning back to section D.

Measures 41 to 48 are an exact reproduction of section D, with a small change in the last beat. The return of the “sad landscape” (m. 49) is varied by the addition of a moving line in 16th notes to the chordal texture of its last appearance. Section B follows with no change. The last return of section A, in bar 65, is also a return to the initial texture of the piece. The first 4-bar phrase is doubled an octave lower, but in the remainder of the parallel period (mm. 69-72), the melody and accompaniment are transported to the low register only. The Coda is only two measures long. It uses fragments of the melody, harmonized with notes from Mode 2¹. The piece ends on a F# minor chord with added sixth, one of Messiaen’s favorite chords.

As Robert Johnson points out, the constant variation of the A sections in *Chant d’extase dans un paysage triste* gives the prelude a sense of growth and asymmetry in a cumulative way “towards a point of climax at the beginning of its

³⁶ Messiaen, *Technique*, p. 18.

fourth appearance about two-thirds of the way through the piece.”³⁷ The feeling of variation is achieved by a progressive increase in textural complexity. The effect is even more interesting because in the last return of A, the texture is less charged than the previous one, and in its second half it becomes even simpler, just as it was in the beginning but an octave lower. This process reinforces the non-retrogradable aspect of the formal architecture of the prelude (ABACDCABA), where the outer A sections are simpler than the other two.

Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste is very important in the cycle because it shows that many of the fundamentals of Messiaen's language were already present in their embryonic stage. We have a two-part canon, non-retrogradable rhythms, rhythmic pedal, added notes, use of foreign notes such as the passing group, use of Mode 5 and the use of a mode of limited transposition combined with basic tonality.

³⁷ Johnson, *Messiaen*, p. 26.

2.3. *Le nombre léger* (The light number)

The title of prelude no. 3, “The light number,” is rather enigmatic. It probably makes reference to the overall character provided by the rapid accompaniment figurations underneath the eloquent melody in the soprano. It is the only prelude in the whole cycle with a fast tempo marking (*Vif et léger*). Both *Les sons impalpables du rêve* and *Un reflet dans le vent*, numbers 5 and 8 respectively, are marked *Modéré* (moderately), even though they sound rather fast because of the predominance of short note values.

The formal structure of this prelude allows different interpretations. Robert Johnson considers it to be a binary form (ABAB and Coda).³⁸ He criticizes this prelude from suffering of “sterility of overformalization.” For him, the lack of variety in the second appearance of the main theme, simply transposed to a different key, is rather unconvincing. Michèle Reverdy classifies it as a ternary form (ABA’), where A and B are divided into two contrasting sections.³⁹ Gareth Healey acknowledges that the form in *Le nombre léger* allows different interpretations. He classifies it as having “two strongly identifiable elements juxtaposed,” but does not specify which elements.⁴⁰

In our opinion, Robert Johnson’s classification of binary form fails for not taking into account the proportions of each section. Under his theory, the Coda is the largest section, comprising one third of the piece. Moreover, he ignores the fact that

³⁸ Johnson, *Messiaen*, p. 27.

³⁹ Reverdy, *L’oeuvre pour piano*, p. 16.

⁴⁰ Healey, *Messiaen’s Musical Techniques*, pp. 118-119.

this prelude is clearly divided into three large key areas of similar proportions. The last section, returning to the tonic, brings back the initial melody in a long canon, offering great contrast to the previous material.

Table 4 shows that our interpretation of the form in *Le nombre léger* is similar to Michèle Reverdy's analysis. There are three large sections using the same theme. The first two sections, A and A', are also divided into two contrasting parts.

Section	Bars	Tonal center / Mode	Details
A(a)	1-12	E major / Mode 2 ²	Melody in Mode 2 ² , in the atmosphere of E major, emphasizing G#. Three phrases of 4 bars each.
A(b)	13-17	C# minor / Mode 2 ² and 2 ¹	"Accompaniment figures" combining different transpositions of the same Mode.
A'(a)	18-25	B major / Mode 2 ³	Shortened version of A, transposed to B-Major, using a different transposition of Mode 2.
A'(b)	26-36	G# minor / Mode 2 ² and 2 ³	"Accompaniment figures" combining different transpositions of the same Mode. Ends in a dominant chord, repeated for 3 bars.
A''	37-52	E major / Mode 2 ²	Main theme in canon to the octave, separated by a quarter note. Ends in E major with added sixth.

Table 4. Prelude no. 3: *Le nombre léger*.

The A(a) section is in the atmosphere of E major and only uses notes from Mode 2². It is written in toccata style, where the hands are constantly alternating an accompaniment pattern. The melody is very characteristic of Messiaen because of the constant use of his reversed chromatic formula and the abundance of tritones. Here, the tritone is typically used at the end of phrases. Once more, Messiaen specifies the dynamics to differentiate the sound layers. The melody is marked *mf*

and the accompaniment is *pp*. The performer must be very careful in constructing the two layers of sound because the toccata-like texture, with very charged accompaniment, can easily overpower the melody.

The entire A(a) section constitutes one musical phrase of 12 bars divided into three 4-bar parts. As Messiaen points out in both *Technique* and *Traité*, the tonal center is often defined by the constant return to a certain key. Here, it is clearly E major, though never in root position; first inversion is preferred, it seems. The first four measures stay around E major, which is surrounded by harmonies only possible in Mode 2. In measure 5, there is a feeling of harmonic movement, because Messiaen abandons the E major chord until the return of the initial idea in measure 9. The last four bars of this section repeat the first three with a small change in the melody to conclude the phrase. In bar 12, there is a typical sequence of chords from Mode 2 in contrary motion.

Section A(b) is somewhat enigmatic. It is still in toccata style, with different and more varied patterns, but no melody. The tonal center is mostly undefined, but the recurrent pattern shown in the first measure of example 23 implies C# minor, the relative of the home key. It appears three times in this short 5-bar section. Messiaen mentions the first measure shown in the example in *Technique* and calls it a *formule d'accompagnement* (accompaniment formula). It is even more enigmatic because the composer says it “calls” for a melody above or under it.



Example 23: *Le nombre léger*, (mm. 13-14).

What Messiaen does not mention in any of his publications is that this accompaniment formula hides a rearrangement of a harmonic progression extracted from Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, act 3, scene one. As we saw in the previous chapter, one of Messiaen's compositional techniques is to rearrange parts of other composers' works by changing intervals, harmonies, rhythms, adding notes, etc. Example 24, extracted from *Technique*, shows how Messiaen rearranged Debussy's harmonic progression.⁴¹ Fragment A, from Debussy's opera, has basically two chords: A minor with added 9th and D major with added 6th, both in root position. In Fragment B, first and third beats, we have the same two chords, transposed a step up: B minor with added 9th, in root position, and E major with added 6th, now in second inversion. In the second and fourth beats of the same fragment, Messiaen writes the same two chords in reversed order and transposed once again: G major with added 6th, in second inversion, and D minor with added 9th, in root position. Then, he transforms them into a chordal texture, shown in fragment C, adding one note per chord.

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Debussy
Pelléas et Mélisande
 Acte III, Scène I

Doux et calme

A)

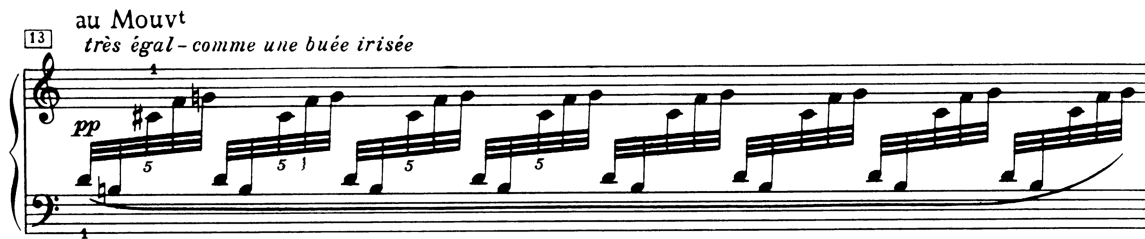
B)

C)

Example 24: Messiaen's rearrangement of an excerpt from *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

⁴¹ Messiaen, *Technique*, p. 34.

In measure 13 of *Le nombre léger* (ex. 23, first measure), the chords from fragment C (ex. 24) are spelled in a different way, transposed a full step higher. The fact that Messiaen transposed this excerpt to fit the harmonic area of the prelude reinforces our idea that this section is mostly in C# minor. Finally, the piano writing in this measure, a quintuplet shared between the two hands, is also derived from Debussy. We find it in *Cloches à travers les feuilles*, from the second book of *Images*:



Example 25: Debussy, *Cloches à travers les feuilles*.

The remainder of example 23, first half of bar 14, also appears in *Technique*, even though Messiaen does not make a direct connection between the example from his book with this prelude. The composer calls this fragment, shown in example 26, *litanies harmoniques* (harmonic litanies) and defines it as a “melodic fragment of two or more notes repeated with a different harmonization”.⁴² The same fragment appears in a more complex form in the last prelude, *Un reflet dans le vent*.



Example 26: *Litanies harmoniques*, example 246 from *Technique*.

It is unclear why Messiaen puts these two contrasting motives side by side, with very different origins, in *Le nombre léger*. However, it may reveal one of his

⁴² Messiaen, *Technique*, p. 46.

early compositional practices. The *litanies harmoniques* fragment is most likely a short excerpt he notated as a student for future use. So, the fragment probably existed long before the composition of this prelude, revealing that Messiaen put together ideas he collected in different contexts. The remainder of section A(b) is based on the alternation of the two ideas mentioned above. Aware of the contrast between the two motives, the performer must find a different character for each one of them. The first one calls for more use of the pedal and a darker color; the second is more extroverted, light and dry.

Section A' (mm. 18-36) is very similar to section A, with some changes. The first idea comes back transposed to the dominant B major, and using Mode 2³. The central 4-bar phrase from section A is omitted here and the ending of the section is also altered: the sequence of chords in contrary motion now wedges in rather than out. The second half of section A', however, is longer than its equivalent in section A. The motive derived from the *litanies harmoniques* is developed until it is propelled into a long dominant pedal (example 27), extended for three bars. The same toccata-like texture from section A, with the alternation of hands, is used.

The image shows a musical score for Example 27, consisting of two staves. The top staff is for the right hand and the bottom staff is for the left hand. The key signature is B major (three sharps) and the time signature is 3/4. The score begins with a *cresc.* marking. The right hand plays a series of chords, with a *cresc. molto* marking above the middle section. The left hand plays a descending sequence of chords, with a *fff* marking below the final section. The piece concludes with a *court* marking above a final chord.

Example 27: *Le nombre léger* (mm. 33-34).

Messiaen mentions the harmonic sequence above in his *Technique*. It appears in Chapter XIV of his book, where he presents a list of special chords and sequences

of chords, containing almost one hundred examples. For some of them, the composer provides an explanation, but not in this case. Many of these examples reach back to his years at the conservatoire, when he would keep notes of musical fragments that attracted his attention for future use. Here it is as shown in *Technique*:



Example 28: Messiaen's *Technique*, example 255.

Section A'' (mm. 35-52) is in the atmosphere of the home key, E major, using only notes from Mode 2². The initial melody is now presented in canon, two octaves apart, separated by a quarter note. The accompaniment is an ostinato in 16th notes played by both hands. The harmonies resulting from the accompaniment are slightly different from the first section, adjusting to the new texture. It is the longest canon in the whole cycle. The tempo marking is slower to give the listener more time to absorb the two lines combined together. As Michèle Reverdy points out, the canon is an exaltation of the melody in Messiaen's language.⁴³ Towards the end, in bar 47, there is an *accelerando*, and the music goes to the extreme high register of the piano. The piece ends with a percussive effect, imitating the sound of xylophone, in an E major chord with added 6th. As in *La colombe*, we only hear the tonic chord in root position at the end; here, at the very last note.

⁴³ Reverdy, *L'oeuvre pour piano*, p. 16.

2.4. *Instants défunts* (Dead instants)

After the rather light character of *Le nombre léger*, here we have a very serious and introverted prelude. The overall character of *Instants défunts* (Dead instants) is very well illustrated by its title. As we saw in the previous chapter, Messiaen was very well aware of the different facets of time and their implications in music. In particular his considerations on “true duration” and “structured time,” in *Traité*, are of interest here. More than any other prelude in the cycle, this one seems to hold time still. The slow tempo, marked *Lent, ému, d’une sonorité douce et lointaine* (slow, touched, with a sweet and distant sonority), the use of the Modes of limited transposition with some atonal flavors, and rhythmic devices change the way we perceive time in this piece.

Once more, the formal structure has generated different opinions among scholars. Michèle Reverdy considers it to be in Rondo form where each return of the initial theme is shortened.⁴⁴ She considers the musical material in the non-refrain sections to be varied enough to constitute different episodes. Gareth Healey classifies it as an “alternate form,” which he defines as having “two or more sections (...) alternated, usually with slight variants.”⁴⁵ Robert Johnson praises the form of this prelude because it anticipates a type of structure the composer used in his later music. He calls it a “Strophe, Antistrophe and Epode.”⁴⁶ The Strophe and the Antistrophe present contrasting ideas and are alternated during the piece. The

⁴⁴ Reverdy, *L’oeuvre pour piano*, p. 27.

⁴⁵ Healey, *Messiaen’s Musical Techniques*, p. 117.

⁴⁶ Johnson, *Messiaen*, p. 27.

Epode, like the *Epodos* in Greek poetry, comes at the end with new material and solves the conflict between the previous sections. His interpretation of the formal structure of *Instant défunts* seems to be the most valid because it also takes into consideration the function of the musical content within the different sections. We will see during our analysis what creates conflict and how it is solved at the end.

Section	Bars	Tonal center / Mode	Details
A	1-8	Unsettled D minor / Mode 4	Main theme in the left hand, emphasizing the tritone. Two phrases of 4 bars. Non-retrogradable rhythm
B	9-18	D minor	Melody using a harmonic sequence from <i>Pelléas et Mélisande</i> . Use of <i>valeur ajoutée</i> .
A'	19-22	D minor / Mode 4	Shortened version of A, just the second phrase.
B''	23-35	D minor / Mode 6	Expanded version of B. Canon to the octave in Mode 6.
A''	36-38	D minor / Mode 4	Shortest version of A.
C	39-46	D major	New material, ends in F# major with added augmented 4 th . Emphasizes the tritone.

Table 5. Prelude No. 4: *Instant défunts*.

Section A has two 4-bar phrases: antecedent, with a cadence on the dominant (A major), and a consequent, with a cadence on the tonic major (D major). The tonal atmosphere is very unsettled, as the first two measures of each phrase do not define any tonal center. Regarding the use of the Modes of limited transposition, it is impossible to assign a single Mode to the entire first section, since Messiaen uses all notes of the chromatic scale. Robert Johnson assumes that this section is based on

Mode 7 because it is the Mode with the largest number of notes.⁴⁷ However, the melodic pattern of the left hand is typical of Modes 4 and 5. Most of the notes in the first measure are found in Mode 4¹, with the exception of the E-flat. The second chord in the right hand is a transposition of the first, a half-step higher. The two notes from the melody in the second beat are also a transposition of the notes from the beats surrounding it, a half-step higher as well. Finally, all the notes in the first two measures can be extracted from Modes 4¹ and 4². We believe Messiaen uses a similar process to that, found in the second prelude, where he borrows notes from the same Mode in a different transposition.



Example 29: *Instants défunts*, (m. 1).

The melody in the left hand, shown in the example above, is of interest. More than in any other prelude, it is mostly constructed on Messiaen's favorite interval, the tritone, and minor seconds. Most importantly, it is written in a non-retrogradable rhythm, one of the main features of his mature works. These first two measures also display some qualities of atonal music, a style that Messiaen also used later in his life. The remainder of the phrase (mm. 3-4) presents a rather simple harmonic progression that does not exist in any Mode of limited transposition: VI_b⁷

⁴⁷ Johnson, *Messiaen*, p. 28.

- V/V - V - I, in A major. The second phrase (mm. 5-8) is very similar to the first. The first two measures are repeated with just the last note being altered a half-step down. The harmonic progression that follows is the same from the first phrase, but transposed a 5th lower (VI^{b7} - V/V - V - I, in D Major). The alternation between modal/atonal and tonal harmonies, which seem to coexist peacefully in this section, creates the conflict in the next one.

Section B has the same phrase structure as A: two 4-bar phrases divided in two with contrasting ideas. It presents a new melody under another harmonic progression Messiaen extracted from Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* and rearranged to his style. The first fragment in example 30 shows the original excerpt from Debussy followed by Messiaen's transformation of it. These two fragments appear in *Technique*:

The image contains three musical excerpts. The top left excerpt, labeled 'A', is from Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. It features a piano accompaniment with a treble clef and a bass clef. The treble clef part starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic and is marked *expressif*. The bass clef part starts with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The top right excerpt, labeled 'B', is Messiaen's rearrangement of the same material. The bottom excerpt is from *Instantes défunts* (mm. 9-10), marked 'Modéré' and 'mf'. It shows a piano accompaniment with a treble clef and a bass clef, featuring complex chordal textures and rhythmic patterns.

Example 30: above A) excerpt from *Pelléas et Mélisande* and B) Rearrangement of A by Messiaen. Below *Instantes défunts* (mm. 9-10).

All the notes from the melody in bar 9 can be found in Mode 4³, reinforcing our idea that Messiaen intentionally used this Mode in the first section. Its transposition in the following bar is a minor third lower, using Mode 4⁶. The strong presence of a full D minor chord in root position in the left hand at the beginning of this section creates the atmosphere of D minor. However, the tritone A \flat -D at the end of the phrase weakens its tonal force, creating a conflict. In the chapter about the relationship between the Modes of limited transposition and tonality in *Technique*, Messiaen comments that his Modes can be in the atmosphere of several keys but that they can also be used in opposition to them. Surprisingly, he was not interested in giving examples of this process.

As we saw in the previous chapter, one of the main rhythmic devices Messiaen used to transform regular patterns is the alteration of the duration of one or several notes. He could do it by adding dots, rests, other notes, etc. His goal was to create irregular rhythmic patterns, which he considered to be more interesting. In the excerpt from *Instants défunts* shown in example 30, he creates an irregular or, as Messiaen often called it, irrational meter by prolonging the D using a tie, which is similar to using a dotted rhythm. This is another example of an important element of Messiaen's musical language in its embryonic stage. It is powerful in this excerpt because it emphasizes the tritone, the interval that creates the conflict with the tonality of D-minor.

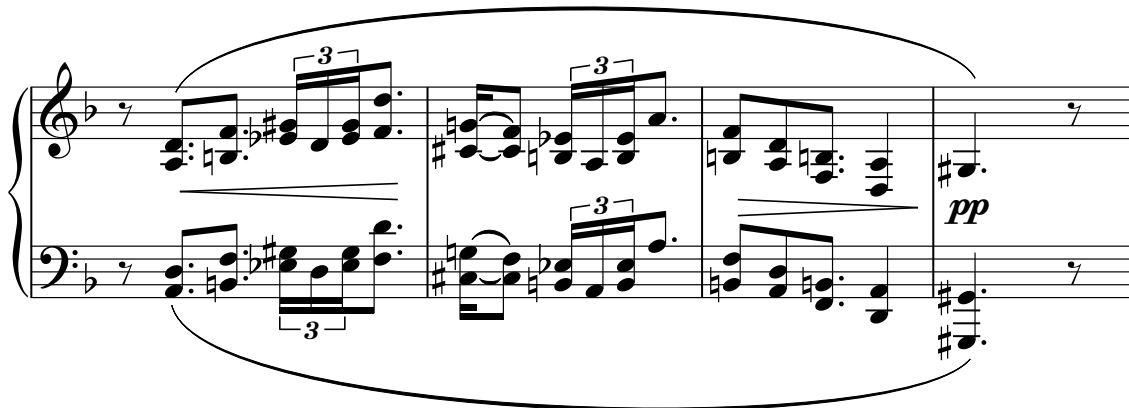
The following two measures (mm. 11-12) are less tonally defined, even though they still remind the listener of D minor at first. Melodically, Messiaen emphasizes the tritone once again. As the melody goes up, it seems to move further

away from D minor. The first two bars of this section are repeated and the remainder of the second phrase is similar, also moving away from the main key and finding rest on a G# (m. 18), a tritone apart from D. What is most interesting in this passage is the rhythmic notation. As we saw in the first prelude, *La colombe*, Messiaen mentions in *Technique* four types of rhythmic notations. Here again, the composer uses the fourth type, which is more convenient for the performer. Once more, through the use of syncopations and ties, he fits an irregular rhythmic pattern into traditional time signatures that do not seem to be related to it.



Example 31: *Instants Défunts* (mm. 15-18).

In the example below, we show a different rhythmic notation for the passage above. We changed the bar lines and eliminated the ties, in a similar way to how Messiaen notates some of his mature works. Notice the constant use of the rhythmic technique *valeur ajoutée*. Most importantly, the result is an irregular pulse composed of two and three 16th note beats.



Example 32

The return of section A is fragmented; only the second phrase, which cadences to D major, is presented. A very different version of section B follows (mm. 23-35). Here the same melody is transposed a step lower and harmonized with notes from Mode 6. It is the first time in the *Préludes*, and in any other work, that Messiaen uses this Mode. The left hand plays the same melody in a reversed canon separated by an 8th note. We should observe that, even transposed and using a different Mode, the first chord is again D minor:



Example 33: *Instants Défunts* (m. 23).

The remainder of the phrase presents a similar melody to its equivalent part in the previous section B, with a different accompaniment (mm. 25-26). It leads to

the extension of this section with new material (mm. 27-29). Here, Messiaen combines the interval of the tritone with major triads. The first note of the tritone is attacked as a dissonance, being a minor second from the root of the chord; the second note is a consonance because it belongs to the chord. This section ends with the same melody as its counterpart, but starting with a long tonic pedal underneath it (mm. 32-33).

The last return of section A brings back the initial measure. The material is repeated twice, each time transposed to a higher key. Each new transposition is shortened by cutting off one beat. The effect of slowly fading away is reinforced by the dynamics; each time softer.

As we commented before, the last section (m. 39-end) brings new material. It has a chordal texture in D major with a mysterious but peaceful character. What is most interesting here is the combination of major triads with the tritone. Differently from the previous sections, it has found a state of relaxation. Messiaen insisted in both *Technique* and *Traité* that a sensitive ear is capable of hearing the harmonic F# resulting from a low C. Later in his career, he invented the *accord de la résonance* (chord of the resonance), which is composed of all harmonics from its root. In the early works, this chord does not exist yet, but its origins are already present. The example below shows the last 6 measures of the piece:

Example 34: *Instants Défunts* (m. 41-end).

In the second beat of the first measure, we see the first melodic tritone (D-G#) in the right hand combined with a D major triad in 2nd inversion. The melody in bare octaves on the soprano line is in Mode 4², reminiscent of the first section. The first phrase of this last section is repeated in m. 43 and in the last bar, the major triad combined with the tritone is transposed twice, each time a step higher. The interval that generated conflict in the previous sections first finds a state of relaxation on the tonic of the piece and then moves on. The last chord of the piece (F# major with added augmented 4th) belongs to both Modes used at the beginning of the following prelude of the cycle, *Les sons impalpables du rêve...* Also, the added note in that chord, a C^b, can be considered as a leading tone to the C#, first note in the next prelude. This connection between these two preludes suggests that they are intended to be played in sequence.

As we saw in our analysis, this prelude shows several features of Messiaen's language in their embryonic stage. The most interesting are the use of non-

retrogradable rhythms, *valeur ajoutée* (added values) to create irrational meter and the use of irregular rhythmic patterns adapted to a usual time signature. The formal structure (strophe, antistrophe and epode) is also used in later works. The prelude displays Messiaen's compositional technique of borrowing ideas from other composers and transforming them to his style. It also introduces Mode 6, heard here for the first time.

2.5. *Les sons impalpables du rêve...* (The impalpable sounds of the dream...)

The title of the present prelude, *Les sons impalpables du rêve...* (The impalpable sounds of the dream...) is another example of the influence of surrealism. As an expression of the unconscious, the dream was a recurrent theme among surrealists. Curiously, the formal structure here is similar to the other prelude with a similar influence, *Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste*. Both are written in a non-retrogradable pattern. The main difference from the second prelude is that the form here, a rondo ABACABA and Coda, is not a perfect palindrome, due to the 4-bar Coda. The non-retrogradable form is the application of a small-scale technique to the structural domain. It is an important device that Messiaen developed throughout his career, especially in the works for piano. There are three examples of non-retrogradable forms in *Visions de l'amen* for two pianos (1943) and five in *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus* (1944). The most literal interpretation of this form appears in the 6th *Regard*, "*Par Lui tout a été fait*," where the entire exposition is repeated in palindrome, creating perfect symmetry. Other composers such as Schoenberg (in *Pierrot Lunaire*) and Hindemith (in *Ludus Tonalis*) also used the same technique.

In *Les sons impalpables du rêve...*, differently from the second prelude in the cycle, the returns of the initial material are always presented without any alteration. Robert Johnson criticizes this prelude because it "remains sterile as there is no attempt to break the symmetry [of the form]."⁴⁸ On the other hand, Michèle Reverdy

⁴⁸ Johnson, *Messiaen*, p. 27.

thinks it is one of the most successful preludes in the cycle because the “delicacy of the harmonies, the balance between the different sections, the sureness of the developments contribute to touch the listener.”⁴⁹ The composer himself, in an interview with Claude Samuel, affirmed that this was his favorite prelude in the cycle. Robert Johnson’s criticism is related to the symmetrical form of this prelude, but he does not take into account the original, and definitely convincing, sonorities Messiaen achieved here. He also ignored the fact that the central section (C) uses material from the outer sections of the piece, compensating for the lack of variety in the letters.

Section	Bars	Tonal center / Mode	Details
A	1-6	A major / Polymodal: Modes 3 ³ and 2 ¹	Rhythmic pedal in the right hand using Mode 3 ³ . Melody in Mode 2 ² in the left hand (<i>cuivré</i>).
B	7-16	Mode 2 and Mode 6 ¹	Melodic fragment from A. Rhythmic figures in the left hand.
A	17-21	A major / Polymodal: Modes 3 ³ and 2 ¹	Exact repetition of A.
C(a)	22-32	A minor but very unsettled / Mode 6 ⁵	Canon by inversion between hands, separated by an 8 th note. Accompaniment line in the middle register. All in Mode 6 ⁵ .
C(b)	33-43	Mode 2 and Mode 6	Development of section B.
A	44-48	A major / Polymodal: Modes 3 ³ and 2 ¹	Exact repetition of A.
B	49-58	Mode 2 and Mode 6 ¹	Exact repetition of B.
A	59-64	A major / Polymodal: Modes 3 ³ and 2 ¹	Exact repetition of A.
Coda	65-68	A major / Mode 2	Much slower using material derived from B. Ends in a polymodal chord emphasizing A major.

Table 6. Prelude No. 5: *Les sons impalpables du rêve...*

⁴⁹ Reverdy, *L'oeuvre pour piano*, p. 17.

Section A starts with the accompaniment line in the high register. It consists of a sequence of several types of triads in Mode 3³ with an irregular descending pattern (4-3-2) followed by a regular ascending pattern (4-4). This accompaniment figure of one measure is repeated and remains unchanged throughout the entire section. Messiaen calls it a *groupe-pedale* (pedal-group) and defines it in *Technique as*:

Instead of a sustained note, strange to the chords around it, we have repeated music (repeated and sustained are equivalent), strange to another music situated above or below it; these components of the music will have their own rhythm, melody and harmony.⁵⁰

The left hand has indeed its own melody, rhythm and harmony, entirely written in Mode 2¹, in a homophonic texture. There seems to be no attempt of alignment between the rhythm in the left hand and the patterns in the pedal-group, described above. He marks "*cuivrez la partie supérieure*" (give a brass instrument quality to the high note), meaning he wants the performer to highlight the melody and make it stand out in the texture.

⁵⁰ Messiaen, *Technique*, p. 48.

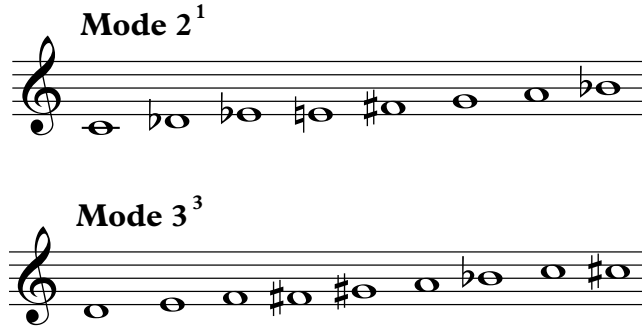
Modéré
8

*
Ped. Ped. Ped. *

Example 35: *Les sons impalpables du rêve...* (mm. 1-3).

The superposition of Mode 3³ from the pedal-group with Mode 2¹ in the left hand creates the first example of polymodality in the *Préludes*. We have seen other examples before where Messiaen borrows notes from different transpositions of the same Mode. All the notes in this passage belong to the Modes indicated, and he does not borrow from other transpositions or mix two Modes in the same line. However, the composer chooses carefully which transposition of each Mode to combine together. Mode 2¹ and 3³ have several notes in common; six of the eight pitch classes in Mode 2¹ are also present in Mode 3³. Most importantly, both Modes have the chord of A major with added 6th in their composition. The two modes are combined in a way to create the atmosphere of A major, to which Messiaen always adds the F#. Interestingly, even though there are many notes that do not belong to the diatonic

scale of A major in the accompaniment line, the overall tonal feeling is not weakened. The extra notes simply create a different color, one typical of Messiaen.



Example 36: Modes 2¹ and 3³ used in polymodality.

Section B is less stable tonally. It starts in the atmosphere of A major, reminiscent from the previous section, but it is now in Mode 2¹ only. The melody in octaves is also derived from bar 5 in the previous section, with similar rhythm. The second bar of B is a repetition of the first, transposed a whole step lower, in Mode 2². This procedure of repeating musical material, transposed to a different key or Mode, immediately after it was presented seems to be a recurrent compositional tool in the *Préludes*. We have seen similar examples in preludes no. 1 and 4 already, but there will be many more in the rest of the cycle. In the third measure of B, Messiaen goes a step further with this technique. He takes just the small fragment extracted from the last beat of the previous measures and repeats it twice, each time transposed a whole step lower. The harmony resulting from these fragments are typical of Messiaen, for they use almost all notes of Mode 2, except one, at the same time.

Example 37: *Les sons impalpables du rêve...* (m. 7-9).

The remainder of section B (mm. 10-16) brings new and contrasting material. It has a more active rhythmic quality because of the syncopations in the left hand. It is not written in any of the Modes of limited transposition, but seems to be in the atmosphere of the E dominant 7th chord, for three measures. The last bar of the section is entirely written in Mode 6¹. Once again, Messiaen seems to have chosen carefully which transposition of the mode to use. He takes into consideration the tonal implications of his choice. The first transposition of Mode 6 is the only one that contains an E major chord. It is used as a transition to the return of section A, in the tonic A major. Another interesting aspect of Mode 6 is that each transposition contains only two major chords and they are separated by a tritone. In the case of its first transposition, E major is paired with B \flat major. In this prelude, Messiaen employs Mode 6 in his typical sequence of chords in contrary motion. We have seen

a similar chordal passage in the third prelude and this type of sequence is also very common in Messiaen's later works.

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The music consists of dense, complex chordal textures. A 'p' dynamic marking is present in the first measure of the top staff. A 'Rall.' (Ritardando) marking is placed above the top staff in the middle section. A dashed line with the number '8' above it spans across the top staff, indicating an 8th note interval. The bottom staff has several 'ped.' (pedal) markings under the notes.

Example 38: *Les sons impalpables du rêve...* (m. 16).

Section A is repeated with no alteration (mm. 17-21). The central section C is divided into two parts. The first one (mm. 22-32) consists of a two-part canon by inversion, separated by an 8th note (ex. 39). The accompaniment line, in the middle voice, is a rhythmic ostinato of dyads composed of seconds and thirds. All the notes in this section belong to Mode 6⁵. The melodic intervals in the left hand are not an exact inversion of the right hand. Messiaen alters them so he does not need to borrow notes from other transpositions of Mode 6. This shows that his musical priority here is to preserve the integrity of the modal writing.

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The music consists of a two-part canon by inversion. The top staff has a 'mf expressif' dynamic marking. The bottom staff has a 'ppp' dynamic marking and an 'mf' dynamic marking. The music is characterized by complex chordal textures and a rhythmic ostinato of dyads composed of seconds and thirds. The bottom staff has several 'ped.' (pedal) markings under the notes.

Example 39: *Les sons impalpables du rêve* (mm. 22-24). Canon by inversion.

The overall tonal atmosphere is rather unsettled, even though the beginning of the phrase suggests A minor, as the two voices in the canon spell an A minor chord. The rest of the phrase seems to move away from the main key. As we saw in several occasions, the main key is established by the constant return of its triad. Here, the initial phrase is repeated in bar 29, confirming A minor as the main key in the passage. Also, as is often the case in the *Préludes*, the key signature indicates the main key.

The second part of section C (mm. 33-42) is based on material derived from section B. This time, the syncopated figure is in the upper register. Bars 33 and 36 are reminiscent of the first part of section C, since the accompaniment in the left hand is still in Mode 6, even though in different transpositions. The right hand in both of these two measures has a new *legato* melody that contrasts to the *staccati* figures that prevail in this section. Bars 36-38 are a simple transposition of the previous three bars, another example of this recurrent compositional tool in the *Préludes*. Whenever the transposition is to a higher register, it builds up intensity, which Messiaen makes use of here. The motif in thirds from section B leads to a big climax on a dominant pedal (mm. 41-43).

Example 40: *Les sons impalpables du rêve...* (mm. 41-43).

As we mentioned at the beginning of our analysis, this prelude has been criticized as being formally sterile, since the main subject A remains unaltered. However, the development of the material from section B in the central part of the prelude compensates for the lack of variety in A. If we take into consideration the length of the main sections of this prelude, section C (22 measures) is of similar length to ABA combined (21 measures). This gives this prelude a well-balanced division into three main parts: ABA-C-ABA. Messiaen saves the development of material for the central section of the piece; it serves like a development in sonata form.

The Coda is also based on material derived from section B. It repeats the melody from the first measure of B, but in a single-note melody and in a thinner texture. The dominant chord in the second bar of example 41 is a slightly different version of the chord that typically ends the phrase in B. It is still in Mode 2, but a simple transposition of the chord would have a G, instead of an F. This change reinforces the dominant-tonic relationship. The last chord of the piece is very illustrative of Messiaen's early harmonic style. All the notes from Mode 3³ are used at the same time superposed on a tonic chord, A major, with added 6th.

Très lent, ému **Rall.** **Encore plus lent**

p *pp* *m.g.*

Assez lent *glissando* *f*

ped. *p* *8^{va.}* *

Example 41: *Les sons impalpables du rêve...*, Coda.

2.6. *Cloches d'angoisse et l'armes d'adieu* (Bells of anguish and tears of farewell)

As we mentioned in our analysis of *Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste*, the title of the present prelude, *Cloches d'angoisse et l'armes d'adieu* (Bells of anguish and tears of farewell) generates the main formal structure of the piece, divided into two very contrasting sections. Each large section is in ternary form (ABA'). The first part, "bells of anguish," has a profound feeling of despair in its extremely slow and sorrowful march. The second half of the prelude, "tears of farewell," is contemplative and expresses resignation.

Larger sections	Sections	Bars	Tonal Center / Mode	Details
1 "Bells of anguish"	A	1-13	C minor / Mode 3 ² and Polymodal: Modes 2 and 6 combined	Bells in the bass line. Polymodality to create <i>effets de résonance</i> .
	B	14-20	D major / Mode 2 ³	Two part canon and accompaniment.
	A'	21-38	E ♭ minor / Mode 3 ⁴ and Polymodal: Modes 2 and 6 combined G minor / Mode 3 ⁴	Longer version of A, transposed twice. First phrase is a minor third higher. Second phrase is extended 4 bars and transposed a fifth higher.
2 "Tears of farewell"	C	39-48	B minor/major Mode 2	Melodic contour similar to bar 12.
	D	49-54	Mode 2	New material.
	C'	55-62	B minor/major Mode 2	Almost exact repetition of C.
	Coda	63-74	B minor	Return of the bells. "Adieu."

Table 7. Prelude No. 6: *Cloches d'angoisse et l'armes d'adieu*.

The bass line, a dominant pedal, repeating the same note as an ostinato throughout most of section A, reminds one of Ravel's "*Le Gibet*." As we saw in the

previous chapter, Messiaen often talks about the major works that fascinated him as a young child. The cycle *Gaspard de la nuit*, of which *Le Gibet* is the second movement, is one of them. Ravel wrote his three-movement suite based on poems by Aloysius Bertrand. The poet claimed that the devil himself dictated the poems to him at midnight. *Le gibet* portrays a grotesque image of a dead corpse hanging on a gibbet, reddened by the sun. At the scene, we hear the bells, a repeated B ♭, from a distant town, reinforcing the moribund atmosphere. Messiaen wrote this prelude soon after the death of his mother. With the connection he makes with Ravel's *Le Gibet* combined with the programmatic nature of the title, we can assume he wrote it in response to her loss.

The formal structure is once more the subject of disagreement. Robert Johnson classifies it as “development-exposition” form. Messiaen has a chapter in *Technique* where he explains some of the musical forms he used in his works.⁵¹ For him, the recapitulation in the sonata form had become old and lost its interest; therefore, he avoids the simple repetition of previous material. In his development-exposition form, the first section preserves the qualities typical of a development in a sonata form. The main theme is presented only in the second half, establishing the main key of the piece. As Johnson points out, in *Cloches d'angoisse et l'armes d'adieu*, the first large section 1 has a “sense of intensification, characteristic of classical development sections, achieved (...) by means of the simple device of contracted repetitions of the same material in successively higher keys.”⁵² Gareth Healey classifies the formal structure of this prelude as theme and variations, which he

⁵¹ Messiaen, *Technique*, p. 33.

⁵² Johnson, *Messiaen*, p. 27.

defines as “a fairly loose interpretation of theme and variation form, as themes are not always varied in the established sense.”⁵³ Michèle Reverdy avoids labeling the formal structure of this prelude, but she divides it into five sections: first phrase (1-13), first development of the theme (14-20), repetition of first phrase transposed twice (21-38), second development of the theme (39-62) and Coda (63-end).

We think that any attempt to describe the form of *Cloches d'angoisse et l'armes d'adieu*, needs to take into consideration the division into two large sections according to their meaning, given by the title. Proportionally, both sections are about the same length. Most importantly, they contrast in character and in almost every musical parameter, especially texture and harmony. Some authors, such as Michèle Reverdy, Gareth Healey and Melody Chan (in her doctoral dissertation) have suggested connections between the musical material from the two large sections. For them, the musical content in “tears of farewell” is derived from “bells of anguish.” Michèle Reverdy praises this prelude for its economy of materials, asserting that everything originates from the first five measures. For her, the interval of the tritone, present both harmonically and melodically at the beginning, is the “generating cell” of the whole prelude. We believe that the interval of the tritone is indeed very important in this prelude, but we must keep in mind that it is Messiaen’s favorite interval, having an important role in all of his pieces and not only in this prelude.

In our opinion, the most relevant finding in both Reverdy and Chan’s arguments is that they believe the melodic contour of section 2 is derived from bar

⁵³ Healey, *Messiaen’s compositional techniques*, p. 117.

12 in section 1. Example 42 shows bar 12 and the first bar in section 2. Even though the melodic intervals have changed in the second fragment, the resemblance between them is clear. Also, this melodic contour is not an isolated event in section 1, it reappears several times in bars 32-38, transposed and re-harmonized. Finally, we agree that there are similar features between the two main sections of the prelude, especially the melodic contour mentioned above. However, even though these similarities assure motivic connection between the sections, the dramatic contrast in character, texture and harmony between sections, is too great to claim that the second is derived from the first.

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece, divided into two sections. The left section is in 7/16 time and the right section is in 6/8 time. The score is written for piano with treble and bass staves. The right section includes dynamic markings like pppp, p, and ppp.

Example 42: *Cloches d'angoisse et l'armes d'adieu*. Melodic connection between sections 1 and 2.

Section A is pretty straightforward in its formal construction. There are two phrases, the second (mm. 6-13) being a developed version of the first (mm. 1-5). The tonal center is defined by the repetition of the dominant in the rhythmic pedal representing the bells and by the reiteration of the C minor chord in the right hand. However, the main key is mixed with several other notes from Mode 3². Some of the chords in measures 3 and 4 contain almost all the notes from this Mode played at the same time. The resulting chords are indeed full of dissonant intervals.

Interestingly, in bars 3 and 4, Messiaen writes an accent on the second chord of the measure, indicating that the following chord is a resolution from the previous one.

Example 43: Opening measures of *Cloches d'angoisse et l'armes d'adieu*: dominant pedal symbolizing the bells, C-minor harmony combined with Mode 3² and accent on the chord with more dissonant intervals.

A set-class analysis reveals to be pertinent here. If we compare the interval vector of the set-classes formed by chords 2 and 3 in the third bar, we will notice that the accented chord has more dissonances than its resolution. This evidences Messiaen's concern in creating the effect of tension and relaxation in a local context. The two chords belong to set-classes 7-30, with interval vector [343542], and 6-34, with interval vector [142422], respectively. The first one is more dissonant because it has a larger number of minor seconds in its composition.

Section A is also characterized by constant changes in time signature with the alternation of what the composer calls "irrational meter." This is relevant because rhythmic variety is one of the main characteristics of Messiaen's mature language. However, in this prelude, because the tempo is extremely slow and the pulse is constantly in 16th notes, the listener does not really feel the irregular meter. The changes in time signature are used to group the musical material, which constantly varies in length, into logical units. If the pulse is regular, the contractions and

extensions in the periodicity in which the motives are repeated are irregular, and clearly noticeable by the listener.

One of the most interesting features of the section representing the “bells of anguish” is the variety of new chords achieved by Messiaen. Many of the resulting sonorities are completely original, not heard anywhere else in the cycle of the *Préludes*. As Allen Forte points out, Messiaen was always searching for new sonorities and his music stands out for its large repertoire of unusual chords.⁵⁴ As we saw, the chords of the first four measures are formed by the juxtaposition of several notes from Mode 3. In measure 5, shown in example 44, the variety of chords is remarkable. The two chords indicated by the letter “A,” two triads a tritone apart, are in Mode 3. The middle register (C) is in Mode 2², and the upper register (B) is in Mode 6¹. The two chords in A belong to set-class 6-30. The six chords in the upper register, formed by the combination of B and C belong to set-classes 7-Z38, 7-29, 6-Z28, 6-Z50, 6-31, 7-29 and 6-Z19, respectively. Labeling the different chords according to their Forte name allows us to visualize how much variety there is in this sequence of chords.

⁵⁴ Allen Forte, “Messiaen’s Chords,” in *Messiaen: Music, Art, Literature*, ed. Christopher Dingle and Nigel Simeone (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

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Cloches d'angoisse
et larmes d'adieu

Très lent

B | 8

Piano

A

C

Example 44: *Cloches d'angoisse et l'armes d'adieu* (m. 5).

This is the first instance where Messiaen combines three different Modes at the same time. Here, the composer is creating once more what he calls *effets de résonance* (resonance effect), similar to the passage in the Coda of *La colombe*, but in a much more complex texture. He mentions in *Technique*, that it is an effect “of pure fantasy”; an analogy to the natural phenomenon of the natural resonance. Both sequences of chords marked in B and C are the “resonance” from the first two, labeled as A. Messiaen often spoke about the harmonic series, emphasizing that the harmonics are heard in sequence, one after the other, rather than simultaneously. According to Messiaen’s analogy, the first two chords in bar 5 are equivalent to the fundamental of the harmonic series, which is why they are played *f*. The chords in the high register represent the harmonics, *revealing* themselves to the trained ear, one by one and in a slow tempo. The performer must keep in mind how this natural phenomenon works and play the soft chords as if they were sounding from inside the first two.

We think it is worth mentioning the findings of Christoph Neidhöfer in regards to voice leading in the passage from bar 5. In his article “A theory of

harmony and voice leading for the music of Olivier Messiaen,” he found that several chordal passages in Messiaen’s music follow a logical pattern.⁵⁵ The sequence of chords marked C in example 44 is a perfect example. The reproduction of the graphic from Neidhöfer’s article below displays the logic behind Messiaen’s voice leading in terms of the counterpoint formed between the notes composing the chords. Line 1 alternates repeating the same note and going down a minor third. Line 2 always moves down, following the scalar pattern from Mode 2². Lines 3 and 4 follow a similar pattern as Line 1, but reversing the order in which they alternate.

Example 45: Voice leading in bar 5, extracted from “A theory of harmony and voice leading for the music of Olivier Messiaen”, by Christopher Neidhöfer.

Being aware of this process is extremely relevant for performers. We understand that it can be very challenging for the average pianist to memorize these types of harmonic sequences with such complex chords. Being familiarized with the logic behind how these chords are constructed will help with memorization. More

⁵⁵ Christoph Neidhöfer, “A Theory of Harmony and Voice Leading for the Music of Olivier Messiaen.” *Music Theory Spectrum*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Spring 2005): pp. 1-34.

than memorizing individual notes, the pianist can focus on memorizing patterns. For instance, knowing that Line 1, played by the thumb, moves every other note and spells a diminished chord throughout the passage can guide the movements of the hand. Also, Lines 3 and 4 move in parallel motion, always separated by the interval of the 4th, whenever Line 1 stays on the same note. This logic translates to the keyboard. After some practice, the hand gets naturally used to moving according to the pattern described.

The second phrase of section A repeats the first four measures of the prelude. In bar 10, a new chord is introduced, adding a melodic component, which is the source for the thematic development in all of section A. In bar 11, the same 3-chord motif is repeated, with a different harmonization and transposed. In bar 12, the motif grows to its final version as shown above, in the first fragment of example 42. As we mentioned before, the melodic contour created in bar 12 is similar to the melody in the second large section of the piece, with different harmonization and texture.

The image shows a musical score for three staves. The top staff is in treble clef, the middle staff is in a middle clef (likely alto or soprano), and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The music is in B-flat major and 18/8 time. It features complex chordal textures with many accidentals. Dynamic markings include *ppp* and *p*. There are also articulation marks such as accents and slurs. The score is divided into measures 10, 11, and 12, with measure numbers 10, 16, and 17 indicated at the end of each line.

Example 46: *Cloches d'angoisse et l'armes d'adieu* (mm. 10-11).

Section B (mm. 14-20) is in the atmosphere of D major combined with Mode 2³. It presents a two-part canon at the octave, separated by a quarter note, played by the right hand. The left hand plays an accompaniment. The character of this section is very contrasting to the previous. It is more contemplative and less anguished, closer in mood to the section representing the “tears of farewell,” establishing an emotional connection with it. Bars 19-20 bring back Mode 3 in its 4th transposition and serve as a transition to the return of the initial idea.



Example 47: Section B. Canon to the octave (mm. 14-16).

Section A' is an extended version of A with two modulations to higher registers. The first phrase is a minor third higher, in E ♭ minor and Mode 3¹. It is also marked *un peu plus vif qu'au début* (a little faster than the beginning), intensifying the tension. The fifth measure of the phrase is slightly shortened and interrupted abruptly by the 4-chord motive introduced in bar 12. It modulates once more in bar 27, this time a major third higher, to G minor but still in Mode 3¹. Since Mode 3 allows four different transpositions, any modulation four half steps higher or lower will always repeat the same transposition of this Mode. The tempo also changes to *encore plus vif* (even livelier), exacerbating the feeling of urgency.

The second phrase of A' is four bars longer than the second phrase in A. The extra bars are entirely based on the 4-chord motive. At first, they are still separated

by the *effet de resonance*, but later they are repeated in an obsessive manner. The *crescendo* throughout the whole passage and the large *rallentando* in the last bar builds up the tension to an unbearable level. This entire passage is also constructed over a long dominant pedal (F#), leading to the tonic B in section 2.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for piano. The first system contains three measures. The first two measures feature a dominant pedal point (F#) in the bass line, with chords in the upper registers. A 'cresc.' marking is placed under the first measure. The third measure shows a shift in the bass line towards the tonic (B). The second system also contains three measures. The first measure is marked 'Rall. molto'. The second measure has a 'cresc. molto' marking, and the third measure is marked 'fff'. The notation includes treble and bass staves with various chords and melodic fragments.

Example 48: *Cloches d'angoisse et l'armes d'adieu* (mm. 35-38).

The second large section of the piece, representing the “tears of farewell” is in the atmosphere of B minor/major and uses Mode 2 in its third and second transposition, alternating. As we saw before, Mode 2 allows the coexistence of a major chord and its parallel minor. It also allows the simultaneous presence of a key and its relative. In Messiaen’s synesthetic world, the alternation between a key and its relative does not produce a significant change. However, the relationship between a key and its parallel has a dramatic effect in color. The phrase in section C starts in B minor but in the second measure, it shifts to B major. For Messiaen, it means that the color becomes considerably brighter. With this in mind, the performer can achieve different sound colors in his or her playing according to the

alternation of major and minor chords. It is possible to achieve these types of effect by managing the *una corda* pedal, by different types of touch, voicing, etc.

Section C (first part of “tears of farewell”) has two phrases of five measures each. The second is a repetition of the first in softer dynamics. Once more, there are three layers of sound and the melody is in the middle register. Here, one more challenge to the performer is that Messiaen wants the lower voice of the octave to be projected more than the top voice. The harmonic progression is rather simple, especially if compared with the first section of the piece. The progression is basically a B minor chord with 7th and later added 6th in the first bar, B major with added augmented 4th in the second, C# diminished chord over a tonic pedal in the third, a G# diminished chord over a dominant pedal in the fourth and B major with augmented 4th in the last bar.

Section D (mm. 49-54) has three phrases. The first one (mm. 49-50) is basically in B minor with modal flavors from Mode 2³, thus in the same harmonic area of C. It has a similar melodic contour to the previous section, but with different intervals. The second phrase (mm. 51-52) is a repetition of the first, transposed to A minor. These two phrases offer great contrast to the previous section because of the tempo changes indicated by Messiaen. In just two measures, he marks five different tempi: *rubato*, *pressez*, *au mouvement*, *pressez* and *pressez beaucoup* (rubato, accelerate, in tempo, accelerate and accelerate a lot). The agitation created by the variations in tempi contrasts to the timeless suspension of the previous section (C). Differently from section 1, representing the “bells of anguish,” where the central section offers a relief of tension, here the central section (D) brings agitation. The

remaining two measures of section D (mm. 53-54) are very unexpected because they present completely new material. It is marked *très lent avec une grande émotion* (very slow, with great emotion).

The return of section C is similar to its original version. The only difference in the first 5-bar phrase is that Messiaen adds a short measure to bring back the bells motif, this time in the tonic B. The second phrase is shortened, only two bars, abruptly interrupted by the bells motif and transitioning to the Coda.

The Coda combines material from sections 1 and 2. It also presents the tritone (B-E#-B) harmonized in several different ways. Example 49 shows the last two bars of section C' transitioning into the Coda and four bars of the latter. We can see the ostinato figure representing the bells, from section 1, in the middle register and both accompaniment and melody characteristic of section 2 in the high register. The three chords in measure 65 are also characteristic of the first section.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for Example 49. Each system consists of three staves: a top staff with a treble clef, a middle staff with a middle clef (C-clef), and a bottom staff with a bass clef. The music is in a key with three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 9/16 time signature. The first system covers measures 62-65, and the second system covers measures 66-67. Dynamics include *ppp*, *p*, and *mf*. There are various articulations such as accents, slurs, and fermatas. The notation includes complex rhythmic patterns and chordal structures.

Example 49: Cloches d'angoisse et l'armes d'adieu (mm. 62-67).

The last measure of the piece has a very symbolic meaning. It consists of simply three notes forming the interval of tritone (B-E#-B), each one indicated with a fermata. The composer also writes above these notes the word in French “*adieu*” (goodbye or farewell). We already saw that the tritone is Messiaen’s favorite interval, but it also has an extra-musical meaning. In *Traité*, the composer talks about the “melody of the planets,” which he used in his *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité*. In this melody, there is a note attributed to each planet, to the sun and two other notes symbolizing the asteroids. He explains that Saturn, represented by the note C in the melody, was the God of time in ancient Greece. Uranus, represented by the note F#, personified the sky. For Messiaen, the sky is also symbol of eternity. He explains that the concept of time cuts eternity into two equal parts, before and after it, since it is impossible to measure eternity. The analogy with music is that a C in the middle of two F#’s separated by an octave creates two equal intervals: a diminished 5th and an augmented 4th. In the last measure of *Cloches d’angoisse et l’armes d’adieu*, the F#-C-F# is transposed to B-F-B. The word “*adieu*” becomes even more powerful when we understand the symbolic meaning of those three simple notes. Messiaen is saying goodbye to his mother.



Example 50: *Cloches d’angoisse et l’armes d’adieu*, last bar.

As we saw in our analysis, *Cloches d’angoisse et l’armes d’adieu*, is one of the most important preludes in the cycle. The sonorities achieved by Messiaen in the

first section, with the combination of different Modes and also the addition of notes from his Modes to traditional chords, clearly set him apart from the impressionists. The detailed study of his chords also reveals an underlying traditional treatment of harmony, where the notion of dominant and tonic are still present.

2.7. *Plainte calme* (Calm plaint)

Similarly to the first prelude in the set, *Plainte calme* (Calm plaint) is a miniature, with only 32 measures in total. After the strong and dark emotions evoked in the previous prelude, *Cloches d'angoisse et l'armes d'adieu*, the present one is much lighter in character. Once again, as happened twice before in the cycle, Messiaen pairs together two contrasting preludes, compensating the heaviness of feeling of one prelude with the lightness of the following one. *Plainte calme* sounds like a relief from the tension created in *Cloches*, a time to digest the tragic events in preparation for the exuberance of the last prelude. *Plainte calme* has a much thinner texture, fewer dissonant chords and is much more melodic than *Cloches*. Despite its short length, this prelude has a very interesting harmonic structure.

The formal architecture is a simple ternary form ABA', as shown in Table 8. We provide the full score for this prelude at the end of this section, to make it easier to follow our analysis.

Section	Bars	Tonal Center / Mode	Details
A	1-14	A ♭ major / Mode 2 ³	Very melodic. Several dominant seventh chords, but especially A ♭ ⁷ and D ⁷ , separated by a tritone.
B	16-24	Mode 3	Simple canon. Chordal sequence using all transpositions of Mode 3.
A'	26-32	A ♭ major / Mode 2 ³	Shorter version of A.

Table 8. Prelude No. 7: *Plainte calme*.

Section A (mm. 1-14) has two phrases subdivided into two subphrases. A single melodic line (mm. 7-8) connects the two phrases, serving as a transition. Throughout the section, the texture is composed of a main melodic line in the soprano, a counter-melody in the middle voice and a chordal texture in the low voice. The tonal atmosphere is rather unsettled because of the predominance of dominant seventh chords. As a matter of fact, in the entire prelude, there is not a single major or minor chord without added notes. Here, Messiaen does not help the analyst by indicating a key signature (the only instance of this in this cycle). However, the music seems to gravitate around A ♭ major. This chord starts and ends the outer sections, but always with added minor seventh and is never in root position.

More interestingly, the first phrase ends on a D⁷ chord in first inversion. The two chords mentioned above are connected by two common notes forming the interval of tritone: C and G ♭ /F#. Also, the two chords are separated by the same interval (A ♭ -D). Notice in the score below, bar 5, the G ♭ in the soprano goes to the low bass in the following measure as an F# with no harmonization at first and only an 8th note later we hear the D⁷ chord. Peter Hill points out that this prelude “is built round one of those musical paradoxes which hold fascination for Messiaen (...) harmonically at opposite poles, their connection [A ♭ ⁷ and D⁷] is through the notes which they have in common.”⁵⁶ The relationship between these two chords is explored once more at the end of the second phrase (mm. 13-14). Here, the order of the two chords is reversed. Notice that the chord that precedes the harmonic

⁵⁶ Hill, *The Messiaen Companion*, p. 76.

progression $A \flat^7$ - D^7 or D^7 - $A \flat^7$ in both phrases (second half of the first beat in mm. 5 and 13) does not favor any of the opposite pole chords. The reason is that the chord is composed of the two notes $A \flat^7$ and D^7 have in common, plus the root of both chords. The ambiguity of this chord leaves the composer free to choose the direction of the harmonic progression.

Another interesting harmonic feature of section A is that it is written in Mode 2³ with one extra note, the E^{\natural} . It is first introduced as a passing note in the first measure, but in measure 3, it becomes the root of a dominant chord. Anthony Pople points out that the extra note, moving away from a pure use of Mode 2, is used to preserve the predominance of the dominant chord sonority, which he considers to be a musical priority in this prelude.⁵⁷ It is worth mentioning that Mode 2 allows the existence of two pairs of dominant seventh chords separated by a tritone. As we saw above, in *Plainte calme* the composer uses the two opposite pole chords $A \flat^7$ and D^7 , but in the same transposition of Mode 2, the pair F^7 and B^7 is also available.

There seems to be a sense of resolution and relaxation in the $A \flat^7/C$ chord ending the first subphrase in bar 2, even though the chord has the interval of the tritone in its composition. The way Messiaen achieves it is by creating even more dissonant harmonies before resolving on this chord. Notice that the chord is first reached with a D in the bass, creating a minor second with the $E \flat$ and only an 8th note later it descends to a C. This procedure reminds one of the harmonic progression in the opening of Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*. In both cases, the

⁵⁷ Hill, *The Messiaen companion*, p. 28.

feeling of relaxation on the seventh chord is achieved by preparing its arrival with even more dissonant sonorities. Also, voice leading plays an important role in the two examples. Notice how the final chord in both passages is the result of one voice moving to a weak part of the beat: in Wagner through a half step up (A#-B) and in Messiaen, through a step down (D-C). In both cases, the chord on the downbeat is achieved by a half step downwards in the middle voice. In the example below, we can see Tristan's leitmotif. The notorious Tristan chord is on the downbeat of the second measure. The chord itself is a half diminished chord spelled with the third on the soprano. In *Plainte calme*, a transposition of the same chord appears in the first measure, beat 3, also marked with an accent, but spelled differently, with the root A \flat on the middle voice.

Langsam und schmachtend

Example 51: Tristan's leitmotif.

The sonorities in Messiaen's prelude, however, are very different from Wagner's *Tristan* because of the use of Mode 2. The melodic intervals are characteristic of Messiaen's style, giving the prelude its modal flavor. However, as Anthony Pople points out, the prevalence of dominant-seventh chords in the

harmony is also typical in Russian music based on the octatonic scale (equivalent to Mode 2).⁵⁸ That is why *Plainte calme* reminds one at times of Scriabin or even Stravinsky.

Section B starts with a simple diatonic melody on the soprano, suggesting G minor, followed by a canonic imitation in the bass line. The melodic contour is derived from bars 3-4. The harmonies in the middle register are rather unusual in the *Préludes*. They do not seem to belong to any of the Modes. Instead of his typical chord with augmented fourth, here we have a minor triad with a perfect fourth, spelled in a way to reinforce the quartal sonority. Bar 15 is repeated, transposed a step downwards, as is typical in the *Préludes*. Interestingly, the notes in the transposed melody already appear in bar 15 in the second minor chord with added 4th, reinforcing their connection.

The next three bars (17-19) bring some agitation to the music, because of the fluctuations in tempo and dynamics. Bar 18 is a transposition of bar 17, but contrarily to the short canon, it goes a step upwards, contributing to the increase of tension. In these two measures, Messiaen uses all transpositions of Mode 3, changing every dotted quarter note in the following order: 3², 3¹, 3⁴ and 3³. In bar 19, the tension is calmed, the harmonies redirect the music to G minor, and the section is repeated almost without alteration. The pick up to the reprise of section A, last three 8th notes in bar 24, is now harmonized with notes from Mode 2³. The first chord is a half diminished chord, spelled exactly like in Tristan's leitmotif; the second one is a D⁷, which is the chord that creates the musical paradox as Peter Hill

⁵⁸ Hill, *The Messiaen companion*, p. 28.

mentioned; and the last is a B⁷, the remaining major seventh chord from Mode 2³ which Messiaen had not used yet in this prelude.

Section A' reiterates the second phrase from the first section. The three last bars are a small coda in which Messiaen alternates the two opposite pole chords: A b⁷ and D⁷. The piece ends unsettled with the A b⁷ chord in first inversion. The texture is typical of Messiaen, using the extreme registers of the instrument.

Lent

pp *expressif*

(marquez le chant et la voix intérieure)

This system contains the first two staves of a musical score. The upper staff is in treble clef and the lower staff is in bass clef. The music is marked 'Lent' and 'pp expressif'. A large slur covers the first two measures of the upper staff. Below the staves, the instruction '(marquez le chant et la voix intérieure)' is written.

This system contains the next two staves of the musical score. It features a triplet of eighth notes in the lower staff of the first measure and a sharp sign in the lower staff of the second measure. The music continues with various rhythmic patterns and accidentals.

This system contains the next two staves of the musical score. It features a large slur covering the first two measures of the upper staff and a change in time signature to 3/4 in the lower staff of the second measure.

This system contains the final two staves of the musical score. It features a quintuplet of eighth notes in the lower staff of the first measure and a dynamic marking of 'p' in the upper staff of the second measure. The system concludes with a double bar line.

Pressez

cresc.

Rall.

a tempo

f *p*

Pressez

cresc. *f*

Rall. *Rall. molto*

a tempo

pp expressif

dim. *pppp*

Example 52: *Plainte calme*, full score.

2.8. *Un reflet dans le vent...* (A reflection in the wind...)

The last prelude in the cycle is probably the most popular in recital programs as a stand-alone piece. It also contrasts in character with most of the other preludes in the set. Without a doubt it is the most extroverted and virtuosic among the *Préludes*. One of the main critiques of Messiaen's early piano works is that he was not yet comfortable with the intricacies of virtuoso writing. Some of his mature compositions for piano, such as several of the *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus*, composed some 15 years later, already display total mastery of the instrument. Although the *Préludes* show many signs of maturity, such as the use of Modes of limited transposition in a quite developed stage, they are among his very first compositions, finished while he was still a student at the Paris Conservatoire. He was at the same time experimenting and learning in the compositional process of the *Préludes*. In *Un reflet dans le vent*, the composer was becoming more comfortable with virtuoso writing, but in many instances he had to rely on a type of writing very close to Debussy. To name a few technical challenges the performer faces in this piece, there are broken octaves, double thirds, fast arpeggios and fast figurations in general. These figurations are also common in two preludes by Debussy with similar titles: *Le vent dans la plaine* (The wind in the plain), but especially *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest* (What the West wind has seen). More than similar titles, these pieces have several other elements in common, such as active accompaniment figures to evoke the image of wind gusts, and introductions consisting of repeated arpeggios and broken octaves.

One element that sets this prelude apart from any in Debussy's sets is the formal architecture, here a sonata form. The different sections are clearly separated by double bars or changes in key signature. The first thematic group in the exposition (mm. 1-32) is in the tonic and the second thematic group (mm. 33-64) modulates to the dominant. The development section (mm. 75-108), as is typical in a sonata form, is tonally unstable and modulates several times. It uses mostly fragments of the first theme. In the recapitulation (mm. 109-190), both first and second thematic groups return in the tonic.

Section	Bars	Tonal Center / Mode	Details
Exposition	1-74	D minor/major Mode 3 ⁴ A major (ambiguous) / Mode 3 ³	1 st thematic group (mm. 1-32): composed of three elements. 2 nd thematic group: lyrical, inspired by Grieg's Solveig's song. Ternary form: A (mm. 33-44) B (mm. 45-60) A' (mm. 61-74).
Development	75-108	Several	Typical sonata form development. Tonal instability, modulatory. Mostly based on fragments derived from the 1 st thematic group combined with the "wind" figuration.
Recapitulation	109- 190	D minor / Mode 3 ⁴ D major (ambiguous) / Mode 3 ⁴	Similar to exposition. 2 nd thematic group returns in the tonic.
Coda	191-end	D minor/major Mode 3 ⁴	Mostly based on fragments from 1 st thematic group.

Table 9. Prelude No. 8: *Un reflet dans le vent...*

The first thematic group has three different elements. The first one (mm. 1-3) is a fast figuration in 32nd notes evoking the image of the wind and serving as an

introduction. The second element (mm. 5-8) is more solid, in octaves, with syncopated rhythms. The last element (mm. 9-10) is what Messiaen calls in *Technique litanies harmoniques* (harmonic litanies): a “melodic fragment of two or more notes repeated with a different harmonization.”⁵⁹ This fragment is first introduced in bar 4, where we come across an interesting use of the D major chord with added flatted 6th (first beat) and added 6th (second beat). The main subject is the theme in octaves for its stronger character and also because it is the main element used in both development and Coda. It is also one of the figures that engender most of the virtuoso display in this prelude, aside from the fast arpeggios.

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system (measures 1-4) is marked 'Modéré' and 'pp'. The second system (measures 5-8) is marked 'cresc. molto' and 'f'. The third system (measures 9-10) is marked 'ff' and 'fff'. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Example 53: *Un reflet dans le vent...* (mm. 1-10).

⁵⁹ Messiaen, *Technique*, p. 46.

It is of interest how Messiaen's Mode is related to tonality here. The first thematic group is entirely written in Mode 3⁴. Similarly to Mode 2, Mode 3 also allows the coexistence of two parallel chords without polymodality or borrowing notes from different transpositions of the same Mode. Also, very often Messiaen indicates the tonality of the prelude in the key signature, here D major. However, there are strong indications of both D major and D minor in the music. For example, the main subject in octaves has a feeling of D minor because of the B ♭, absent in D major. On the other hand, the *litanies harmoniques* is closer to D major for the strong presence of the F#. The first motif in 32nd notes does not seem to favor either of them. This shows that Messiaen was more concerned with writing music in his Mode, rather than thinking in terms of major or minor tonality. The tonal center is without a doubt the note D, but it is impossible to categorically state that it is D major or D minor. Example 54 shows Mode 3⁴. We can notice that it contains six notes of both major and harmonic minor scales of D; the same note, E[♯], being absent in both of them. Therefore, the Mode itself does not favor either of the major or minor scales.



Example 54: Mode 3⁴.

The first part of the first thematic group ends with a cadence on the dominant in measure 14. The three elements of this thematic group are then repeated and developed. The main subject in octaves is expanded in a broken octave

sequence using almost the entire keyboard. The *litanies harmoniques* motif is also varied and used as transitional material to the next thematic group. It is interesting how Messiaen modulates from Mode 3⁴ to Mode 3³ of the following section. As we can see in example 55, he combines notes belonging to both transpositions of Mode 3. In bar 29, both E and G# are only present in Mode 3³. In the following measure (m. 30), only the G does not belong to Mode 3³.

The image shows a musical score for piano, consisting of two staves. The music is in a key with two sharps (D major or F# minor) and a 3/4 time signature. The score spans four measures. The first measure shows a complex arpeggiated figure in both hands. The second measure continues this figure with some changes. The third measure is marked 'dim.' and shows a more sparse texture. The fourth measure is marked 'Rall.' and ends with a final chord. The notation includes various accidentals and dynamic markings.

Example 55: *Un reflet dans le vent...* (mm. 29-32).

The second theme (mm. 33-74) is lyrical and song-like, an excellent complement to the more rhythmic nature of the first. It is written in a ternary form ABA'. As we mentioned before, it is in Mode 3³ and in the atmosphere of A major. The accompaniment figure is reminiscent from the first three measures. This rapid figuration is present throughout this entire section. The different shapes and dynamics Messiaen gives to these arpeggios are meant to represent the variations in the unpredictable gusts of wind this prelude evokes.

Example 56: *Un reflet dans le vent...* (mm. 33-38).

Many of the harmonies in the second theme remind one of Debussy's music. For instance, notice the A major chord with added sixth in bar 34 or the B \flat major with 7th and 9th in the second beat of bar 35. Also, most of bar 36 (except the first half-beat) is written in a whole-tone scale arpeggio. Messiaen does not leave Mode 3³ but, by omitting a few notes from this Mode, he creates one of the typical sonorities associated with Debussy. This shows another interesting possibility of Mode 3. The first and third transpositions of this Mode contain in their composition Mode 1¹. By consequence, the second and fourth transpositions of Mode 3 contain Mode 1². As we commented in the previous chapter, Messiaen consciously avoided

Mode 1 because he believed Debussy and Paul Dukas had already exhausted its possibilities. Only in a few occasions, in short excerpts like this one or hidden within a thicker texture, can we find Mode 1 in Messiaen's music. Finally, the fluidity of the accompaniment with its waves of arpeggios, sometimes making the left hand cross over the melodic line, reminds us of Ravel's *Ondine* and also many other examples by Debussy, including *Reflets dans l'eau* and some of the preludes.

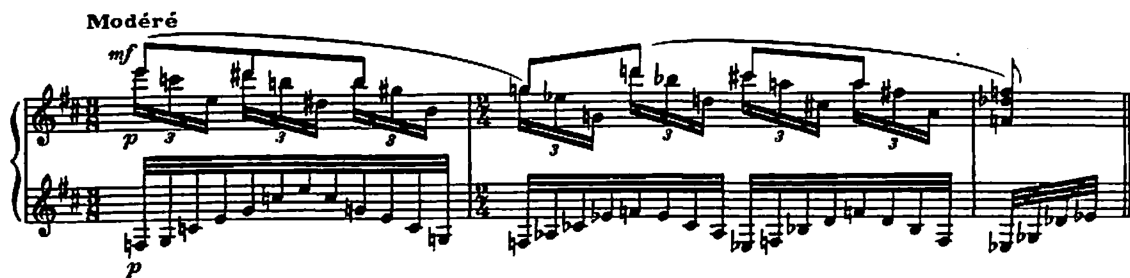
This melody in the second theme is another example of Messiaen borrowing ideas from other composers and transforming them to his own style. He mentions the first two measures of the second theme (first two measures of example 56) in *Technique*. It is inspired by Grieg's "Solveig's song" from *Peer Gynt*. Grieg's melody does not contain the tritone, so characteristic in Messiaen's phrase endings. Whilst there is some resemblance between the two melodies, most of the intervals that compose the two melodic contours do not actually match. For Messiaen, the inspiration that generates his own music in examples similar to this one is only a point of departure. His final product is often very distant from its origin.



Example 57: Grieg, Solveig's song from *Peer Gynt*.

The first phrase (mm. 33-38) is repeated but with a slightly different ending (mm. 39-44). The central section of the second thematic group (mm. 45-60) has a similar flow, provided by the accompaniment in 32nd notes. It uses fragments of the melody from the previous section and once again the predominant interval is the

tritone. Harmonically, it is less stable, passing through different transpositions of Mode 2 and Mode 3. This section contains another example of borrowing ideas from other composers. Example 58 shows bars 49-50. Messiaen mentions these two bars in *Technique* as a transformation of the harmonic progression based on a fragment from Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (see p. 78, ex. 30). As we saw before, he uses this same progression in the fourth prelude, *Instants défunts*. Once more, the original material is a point of departure in the construction of the new material. It is not for nothing that in *Technique*, Messiaen properly calls this process a *transformation*.



Example 58: *Un reflet dans le vent...* (mm. 49-50).

The first part of the second theme is repeated (mm. 61-74) with two extra bars at the end to finish the exposition. The development (mm. 75-108) starts with a new ostinato motif in the right hand alone for two bars. The main subject from the first theme in octaves comes back in the left hand. This idea is suddenly interrupted by a fast arpeggio (perhaps a strong wind gust?) starting in the middle register and going up quickly with a *crescendo* and coming back down. This cycle, main subject in octaves under an ostinato followed by a fast arpeggio, is repeated a half step up (mm. 81-84). As is typical, Messiaen repeats musical material transposed to a different key immediately after its first statement.

Example 59: *Un reflet dans le vent...* (mm. 76-84).

Harmonically, the first four bars of the development are in Mode 3³, reminiscent from the second thematic group, but the tonal center has shifted to B \flat minor. This time, there is no ambiguity between major and minor keys because, even though the third of the chord is absent, all the other notes in the passage belong to the harmonic scale of B \flat minor. The minor key is confirmed in the fast arpeggio figure, because the right hand spells a B \flat minor triad. However, this passage has switched to Mode 3⁴, which is the Mode used in the following statement of the theme in octaves. Another important characteristic of Mode 3 is that,

differently from Mode 2 – the other prevailing Mode in the *Préludes* – it allows the presence of the same triad in different transpositions. For example, a C major triad exists only in the first transposition of Mode 2, but it exists in both first and second transpositions of Mode 3. In the first arpeggio figuration of example 59, the only note that differentiates Mode 3³ and 3⁴ is the G[♮], which only belongs to Mode 3⁴. All the other notes in the passage are common between the two transpositions. As we mentioned, the restatement of the first 6 bars of the development is transposed a half step higher, thus to B minor. One last important characteristic of Mode 3 we would like to mention in our research is that any given major or minor triad contained in its composition has a half step neighbor. We just saw that Mode 3⁴ contains both B[♭] minor and B minor in its composition. But it is also possible to form E[♭] major and D major, as an example, and several other triads with similar relationships.

In the transitional sequence in bars 85-91, Messiaen uses the middle fragment of the theme in octaves to create a new figure in the right hand. Both melodic contour (leap of 5th followed by half step) and rhythm (three 16th notes with an accent on the second) are preserved. However, the harmony is now chordal, instead of bare octaves. The sequence of chords alternate Mode 3¹, 3³ and 3⁴. The trills in the left hand first alternate D, E and F[#], until it stays on F[#], pedal note on the tonic of the following section, for 3 bars. This transition builds up intensity until the arrival of the following section.

Example 60: *Un reflet dans le vent...* (mm. 92-97).

This part of the development (mm. 92-97) is glorious and full of ecstasy. It is in Mode 2¹ and in the atmosphere of F# major. The theme in octaves appears in the left hand harmonized and its intervals are slightly altered to fit the new key. The alteration consists of a D#, instead of a D \flat , and it produces one of Messiaen's favorite chords, with added 6th. The fast figurations in 32nd notes come back and stay until the end of the development. It is impossible not to find striking the similarity with Debussy's prelude *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest* (ex. 61), which uses the same pedal note in a similar figuration and also in a climactic moment. The main

difference between the two has to do with the harmony: Messiaen uses his Mode 2 and Debussy uses Mode 1 (the whole-tone scale).

The image shows a musical score for Debussy's 'Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest'. It features a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melodic line with sixteenth-note runs, each marked with a '6' and a slur. The left hand (bass clef) plays a bass line with chords and single notes, marked with 'f' and 'ff'. A dashed line above the staff indicates an octave. The score is in 3/4 time and the key signature has two sharps (F# and C#).

Example 61: Debussy, *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest*.

Messiaen adds a counter-melody in the right hand, starting in bar 94. It emphasizes the tritone and it is somewhat similar to the melody in the second theme. Most importantly, this counter-melody engenders a modulatory sequence in bar 97. Messiaen adds two notes (B and G#) that do not belong to Mode 2¹ to modulate to the new key area (E major, in Mode 2²) in the following measure. He then repeats the 6 bars of example 60 transposed a step lower. This time, the modulatory measure appears three times, each time transposed a half step higher, using all transpositions of Mode 2 (with two added notes). The transpositions are used here to create excitement, leading to a big virtuoso climax. Once again, the similarity in the piano writing with Debussy's *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest* is striking (example 62). Both composers use alternating hands where the left plays a single note and the right plays chords. In Messiaen's passage, it represents a return to Mode 3 and both hands spell the four notes from the introduction (A-C#-B ♭ -E ♭). This sequence of chords also alternates transpositions 3 and 4 of Mode 3, which are

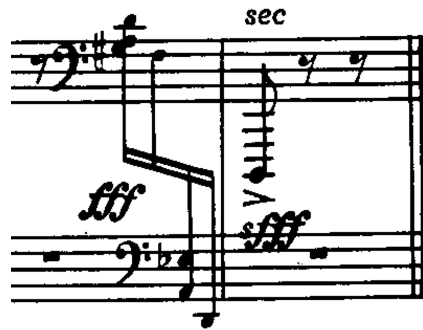
the two transpositions Messiaen used in the exposition (first and second themes, respectively).

The image contains two musical excerpts. The top excerpt is from Messiaen's *Un reflet dans le vent...* (mm. 106-108). It shows a piano part with a dominant pedal (Ped.) and a right hand with complex chords and a marked *fff*. The bottom excerpt is from Debussy's *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest*. It shows a piano part with a dominant pedal and a right hand with a marked *f cresc. molto* and a sequence of repeated octaves.

Example 62: above – Messiaen *Un reflet dans le vent...* (mm. 106-108). Below – Debussy, *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest*.

After an abrupt stop in the virtuoso passage, the recapitulation starts on a dominant pedal. The 32nd note figure does not appear until the 8th measure, instead there is a written *accelerando*, with increasingly short note values. The rest of the recapitulation is very similar to the exposition. The main difference is that the second theme is in the tonic D major and in Mode 3⁴, as it is the first theme. The Coda (m. 191-end) brings back the ostinato figure from the development, now in the tonic D minor. The theme in octaves comes back in the left hand, stated twice in its original form and leading to a sequence of repeated octaves. The piece ends with a virtuoso broken octave sequence using almost the entirety of the keyboard. It is

followed by a short arpeggio in Mode 3⁴ with added G#, leading to the lowest D on the keyboard played *sfff*.



Example 63: *Un reflet dans le vent...*, last bar.

2.9. The *Préludes* as a cycle

We do not know if Messiaen composed the *Préludes* in the exact order they appear in the cycle or if he organized them in this particular order on purpose. He also never said he intended them to be performed as a cycle. There is no recurrent thematic material throughout the work, as it is the case of other cycles he composed. For example, in *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus*, there are three main themes that appear in many different versions throughout the 20 pieces that compose the cycle. They are also connected by the same subject, a meditation on Christ's infancy.

Besides the work mentioned above, Messiaen also composed several other cycles, such as *Visions de l'Amen*, for two pianos, *Chant de terre et de ciel*, *Harawi: chants d'amour et de mort*, both for voice and piano, *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (also in eight movements), *Quatre études de rythme* and *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, both for piano. All of these works of maturity are intended to be played as a cycle, in the order they appear in the score. We believe that Messiaen's inclination to write long cycles with several movements was already a trend in the *Préludes*.

The order in which the *Préludes* are organized seems to have been carefully planned. For instance, every prelude with a more dramatic and intense character is followed by a prelude with lighter and livelier feeling. Messiaen provides the listener with some relief after the emotional weight of the previous prelude. We can identify three pairs that follow this logic: *Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste*, followed by *Le nombre léger*; *Instants défunts*, followed by *Les sons impalpables du*

rêve; and the most dramatic prelude, *Cloches d'angoisse et l'armes d'adieu*, followed by *Plainte calme*.

The second pair mentioned above is probably the most strongly connected of the three. As we saw in our analyses of the fourth prelude, even though the overall key is D minor (combined with several Modes), it ends on an F# major chord with added augmented fourth, after a short modulation from the main tonic. The chord where the music ends is contained in both Modes in which the following prelude starts. Moreover, the *note ajoutée* to the F# chord, a C \sharp , serves as a leading tone to the first note of the following prelude. Not only this procedure connects these two particular preludes, but it also connects the first and second halves of the cycle.

Another important element to consider is how Messiaen's use of the Modes evolves throughout the cycle. There is a sense of intensification and increasing harmonic complexity, as evidenced in Table 10. The first two preludes are essentially based on one transposition of Mode 2 and the third utilizes all transpositions of the same Mode. Prelude no. 4 introduces two new Modes: 4 and 6. These two Modes are used to create more dissonant and complex harmonic structures. In the fifth prelude, Messiaen introduces Mode 3, but most importantly, it is the first example of polymodality in the *Préludes*. The sixth prelude is the culmination point in regards to harmonic complexity. It utilizes all transpositions of Mode 3, which are often combined with Modes 2 and 6 in the *effet de résonance*, resulting in the juxtaposition of three Modes. This prelude also uses Modes 2 and 3 isolated, without polymodality. The last two preludes have less complex chords and are less dissonant. Prelude no. 7 is mostly based on Mode 2³ and uses all

transpositions of Mode 3 in a short passage. The last prelude is essentially in Mode 3⁴ and 3³.

Prelude	Modes
1. <i>La Colombe</i>	Mode 2 ² .
2. <i>Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste</i>	Mode 2 ¹ .
3. <i>Le nombre léger</i>	All transpositions of Mode 2.
4. <i>Instants défunts</i>	Mode 4 and Mode 6.
5. <i>Les sons impalpables du rêve...</i>	Polymodality. Modes 2 and 3 juxtaposed, Mode 6.
6. <i>Cloches d'angoisse et l'armes d'adieu</i>	Polymodality. All transpositions of Mode 3 combined with Mode 2 and 6 juxtaposed.
7. <i>Plainte Calme</i>	Mode 2 ³ and all transpositions of Mode 3.
8. <i>Un reflet dans le vent...</i>	Modes 3 ⁴ and 3 ³ . All transpositions of Mode 2.

Table 10: Use of Modes in the *Préludes*.

We have mentioned that six of the *Préludes* are organized in pairs according to their contrasting characters. The missing pair, first and last preludes, also have an important role in the cycle. The first one, as we mentioned in our analysis, is the shortest of all and can be considered as an introduction to the cycle; a prelude to the *Préludes*. Besides its short length, it introduces several important elements: Mode 2, relationship between tonality and the Modes, rhythmic innovations in an embryonic stage, layers of sounds, pentatonic scale, creating sonorities typical of Debussy and use of the *effet de résonance*. The last prelude is the most extroverted of all and it is the only one with virtuosic display. It is a good way to end the cycle, in a typical *grand finale*.

Conclusion

It is striking how many original ideas the 20-year old Messiaen was able to present in his first serious endeavor as a composer. Not only are the *Préludes* a rich introduction to his output, they also symbolize the emergence of a new voice in 20th century music. As a point of departure, he chose a similar medium of expression, preludes for piano with evocative titles, as did his favorite composer, Claude Debussy. However, even though we were able to identify several points of influence of Debussy and impressionism in general, Messiaen's own musical language was taking shape. His harmonic language, highly influenced by his color hearing world, is already defined in the use of the modes of limited transposition and their relationship with tonality. Other elements from his musical language, especially in the realm of rhythmic innovations and birdsongs, manifest in the *Préludes* in embryonic stage.

We have observed that Messiaen's harmonic language is influenced by Debussy in the sense that their harmonic thought is more decorative than functional. Through the use of similar harmonic processes, they produced dissimilar sonorities, as evidenced by Messiaen's original Modes. We have seen that the composer combines his Modes with tonality, sometimes supporting it and other times creating opposition to it. In many passages, the use of Modes is strict: all the notes used belong to the chosen Mode. In other passages, Messiaen is more flexible, making use of just a few notes from a Mode or even borrowing notes from other transpositions of the same Mode, depending on what his musical priority is. He also

achieved original sonorities through polymodality. We saw in the *Préludes* examples of two and even three Modes being juxtaposed.

We have also seen that elements from functional harmony are present, even though the harmonic movement is very slow most of the time (similar to Debussy), creating the effect of timelessness. Tonic-dominant relationships manifest in the larger structures of most of the *Préludes*. In *La colombe*, the two alternating sections A and B are in the atmosphere of E major and B major, respectively. The same happens in *Le nombre léger*, which is in the same key. In this prelude, there are also hints of the relative minor keys at the beginning of the contrasting sections. In *Les sons impalpables du rêve...* section A is in A major and section B implies the dominant E major. The central section, using only notes from Mode 6⁵, also implies the parallel key A minor. The last prelude, *Un reflet dans le vent*, uses typical key relationships for a traditional sonata form. Moreover, Messiaen often uses long dominant pedals. In *Cloches d'angoisse et l'armes d'adieu*, the transition to the second part of the piece, in B minor/major, is prepared by a long 5-bar F# pedal, which is exacerbated by the extremely slow tempo. Long dominant pedals are also used in *Le nombre léger* (mm. 32-34), transitioning to section A' and in *Les sons impalpables du rêve* (mm. 41-43), transitioning to the return of the large ABA section. With all these harmonic considerations, we can conclude that Messiaen's harmonic thought in the *Préludes* is a hybrid between traditional harmony and his own expanding language.

Even though the rhythmic patterns and birdsongs we have identified at an embryonic stage of Messiaen's mature language do not represent an innovation *per*

se, they reveal a composer already interested in these two elements. Birdsong appears in *La colombe* in the 32-note pattern in the high register. Rhythmic patterns suggesting an irregular pulse appear in *La colombe* and *Instantes défunts*, as evidenced by examples 18 and 32. In both cases, through the use of syncopations and ties, Messiaen fits irregular rhythmic patterns into a typical time signature, unrelated to the rhythm. We have also seen examples of non-retrogradable rhythms in both *Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste* and *Instantes défunts*. This rhythmic device is one of the most important in Messiaen's music because it is closely related to the modes of limited transposition. Their combination creates what Messiaen called the "charm of the impossibilities," which are meant to seduce listeners despite their own will. The impossibilities are manifested in the vertical in the Modes and in the horizontal in the non-retrogradable rhythms. We have also identified non-retrogradable forms in the *Préludes*, in both *Chant d'extase* and *Les sons impalpables du rêve...* This type of form is also typical of Messiaen's mature works.

We saw other musical devices original to Messiaen and also present in many works of his maturity: in both *La colombe* and *Cloches d'angoisse et larmes d'adieu*, the composer used the *effets de résonance*. In the first prelude, it appears in the Coda, giving a new timbre to the melodic fragment from section B. In *Cloches*, the device is used in most of part 1: Modes 2 and 6 are combined in the high register to create an analogy to the natural phenomena of resonance.

We were also able to identify in the *Préludes* a compositional technique based on borrowing material from other composers and transforming it into Messiaen's

personal style. In *Le nombre léger*, *Un reflet dans le vent...* and *Instants défunts*, Messiaen utilizes fragments from Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. In the last prelude he also transforms a melody from Grieg's *Peer Gynt*. As we saw in our analysis, the initial material is just a point of departure to which Messiaen adds notes, changes rhythms, adds a new melody, transposes, etc. The final product always has the flavor of Messiaen's music and is usually very distant from its origin. Another compositional technique he used, identified in *Le nombre léger* and *Un reflet dans le vent...* is the use of pre-notated material that attracted his attention for future use.

We have found elements that may suggest Messiaen conceived the *Préludes* as a cycle. The first prelude, the shortest one, is the open curtain of a long journey. It introduces several elements to which the listener will become accustomed throughout the cycle: preference for the melodic interval of the tritone, Mode 2 and its relationship with tonality, rhythmic patterns unrelated to the meter, birdsong, impressionistic sonorities and *effets de résonance*. In its short length, it presents several of the most important elements that are explored in the other pieces. As the cycle progresses, the use of Modes becomes more complex until it reaches its culmination point in *Cloches d'angoisse et larmes d'adieu*. We have also seen that six of the *Préludes* are paired together for their contrasting character. The last prelude is the most extroverted of all, with several elements of virtuoso display. The journey of the *Préludes* closes with a *grand finale*.

The *Préludes* are perhaps not as significant as Messiaen's most iconic works, but they represent a bridge between his early influences, especially Debussy and impressionism, and the language he would later develop. The study of this work of

youth is a key to understanding how his style evolved. In any case, the *Préludes* are more accessible pieces for performers not yet used to Messiaen's music. They represent an excellent introduction for pianists who wish to become familiar with his works. Our ultimate goal is to foment the inclusion of this early work in the standard concert repertoire, because above all, the *Préludes* are extraordinary pieces of music, creating a rich palette of colors and achieving a variety of moods and evoking powerful and meaningful visual images.

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