Schoenberg Messiaen Ravel

Francesco Piemontesi

Jonathan Nott

ORCHESTRE DE LA SUISSE ROMANDE

Cover image:
Hartweich (Hard Soft), No. 390, Wassily Kandinsky (1930).

	Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)	
	Piano Concerto in G Major (1932)	
1	I. Allegramente	8. 27
2	II. Adagio assai	8. 45
3	III. Presto	4. 14
	Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)	
4	Oiseaux exotiques (1956)	15. 05
	Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)	
	Piano Concerto, Op. 42 (1942)	
5	I. Andante	4. 38
6	II. Molto allegro	2. 31
7	III. Adagio	6. 55
8	IV. Giocoso. Moderato	6. 31
	Total playing time:	57. 11

Francesco Piemontesi, piano

Orchestre de la Suisse Romande
conducted by **Jonathan Nott**

American connections

This album includes three works for piano and orchestra from the middle years of the twentieth century. Though stylistically very different, all three have American connections: Ravel's Concerto in G Major (1932) was his most successful attempt to integrate elements of American jazz into his own musical language; Schoenberg's Piano Concerto (1942) was composed in Los Angeles, where Schoenberg was exiled after fleeing Europe; and Messiaen's *Oiseaux exotiques* (1956) took as its main source of inspiration a series of gramophone records of American birdsong.

Ravel struggled with his Piano Concerto for more than two years. Some of it was composed at the same time as the Concerto for Left Hand (written for Paul Wittgenstein), but while that darkly adventurous work came relatively easily to Ravel, he found it much more difficult

to capture the G Major Concerto's more playful spirit — he briefly considered calling it a 'Divertissement'. In the biographical sketch he published in 1928, Ravel announced that his future plans included 'a Concerto for piano and orchestra, and a large-scale operatic work based on Jean Delteil's novel *Jeanne d'Arc*.' The opera on Joan of Arc was abandoned, but the Piano Concerto took up much of his time in 1929–31. Ravel wrote that he wanted to compose a concerto 'in the spirit of Mozart and Saint-Saëns', but as the Ravel scholar Arbie Ornstein observed, 'passages in this concerto recall the work of Stravinsky and Gershwin, together with elements of Basque and Spanish music.' In the last movement, particularly, the sounds of Stravinsky's *Petrushka* and Gershwin's Concerto in F (composed in 1925) are never far away, while the Basque element is present from the start of the first movement: the opening theme strongly suggests a Basque folk tune. The music in much of the first movement, marked *Allegramente*, is brilliant and brittle, though there are exquisite moments of repose too. Scored for a relatively small orchestra, the instrumentation is astonishingly inventive and the harmonic language includes 'blue' notes, slides and urgent syncopations borrowed from jazz. While the slow movement (*Adagio assai*) is where Ravel was consciously trying to evoke the ghost of Mozart, not everyone heard it that way at the time. In an interview with José Bruyr published in 1933, the young Olivier Messiaen declared that 'it is possible to be a humourist and a great musician at the same time. Ravel is like that. I think it's inconceivable that Ravel could really have taken the Largo [i.e. Adagio] of his new concerto seriously, this Largo which turns a phrase reminiscent of Fauré on a bad day into Massenet. A return to classicism? Always that same old refrain? But *Le Tombeau de Couperin* returned there already, and at least that is a masterpiece.' The finale, marked Presto, is a bustling *moto perpetuo*, an

explosion of energy and vigour which brings the concerto to a thrilling close. The first performance was given at the Salle Pleyel in Paris on 14 January 1932. The soloist was Marguerite Long (to whom Ravel dedicated the concerto) with the Lamoureux Orchestra conducted by Ravel himself. Immediately afterwards, Long and Ravel embarked on a European tour, playing the new concerto in 17 concerts between January and April 1932, including performances in London, Vienna, Prague, Warsaw, Berlin, Amsterdam and Budapest. While some musicians were lukewarm about the concerto (particularly the slow movement), Florent Schmitt described it as 'delightful and charming', judging it entirely worthy of the composer of *Daphnis et Chloé*, *Gaspard de la nuit* and the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*. And thanks to the European tour, few twentieth-century concert works became so widely known across the continent in such a short space of time.

If the neo-Classicism in Ravel's Piano Concerto is decidedly French in character, Schoenberg's Piano Concerto, written in 1942, has unmistakable resonances of his Viennese roots, particularly his admiration for Brahms. Schoenberg's former pupil, Oscar Levant, originally offered to commission a piano concerto, but they could not agree terms and it was another former pupil, Henry Clay Shriver, who commissioned the concerto which Schoenberg then dedicated to him. It is a work with a strongly autobiographical background. On his sketches Schoenberg gave titles to each of the four linked sections, though he did not allow these to be used on the published score. In terms of references to traditional classical structures, the four sections can be characterised as a waltz, a scherzo, an adagio and a rondo — and the music for all of them is based on thematic material presented at the start. In his sketch, the first section is headed 'Life was so easy', and has a distinctly Viennese feeling, with

the opening theme suggesting the lilt of a stylised waltz. Even so, the mood of the music suggests that if Schoenberg's life was 'easy', it was also intensely serious. This busy, animated section is an impressive example of Schoenberg's ability to present a compelling musical argument using quite strict twelve-tone techniques as a means of musical and dramatic expression (not as some kind of technical exercise): this is music of real emotional power. The second section is headed 'Suddenly hatred broke out' in the sketch, and the score is marked *Molto allegro*. It is a sinister, scherzo-like movement with a broader passage at its centre, and an ingeniously orchestrated closing section in which the music appears almost to disintegrate before reaching a moment of crisis. After a brief silence, the third section, *Adagio*, is introduced by a dialogue between the bass trombone and the violas, the instrumental colours now darker and more subdued. In Schoenberg's sketch, the movement is marked 'A grave situation was created'. The main theme is a plangent idea introduced by solo oboe. Following the entry of the piano, the sound world evolves quickly from an accompaniment of hushed and unearthly strings to insistent brass interjections which lead to a piano cadenza. A dramatic episode, starting with anxious punctuations by *col legno* lower strings, gives way to a short second cadenza for the piano which in turn leads into the fourth movement. Headed 'Life goes on' in Schoenberg's sketch, the tempo is marked *Giocoso (moderato)*. While there certainly are witty elements here, it's a distinctly sardonic kind of humour, and the many changes of mood turn, in places, to bitterness and anger. A final stretto brings the concerto to an urgent and exciting close. The first performance was given by Eduard Steuermann with the NBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Leopold Stokowski on 6 February 1944. Steuermann had a long association with Schoenberg: he played in the first

performance of *Pierrot lunaire* and was the pianist for Schoenberg's Society for Private Musical Performance [*Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen*] in Vienna just after World War One. Steuermann's pupils included Menachem Pressler and Alfred Brendel (who became a noted exponent of this concerto himself).

Olivier Messiaen was a composer who constantly reinvigorated his musical language. His most surprising reinvention came after the *Turangalîla-Symphonie* (1949) when he turned away from post-Romantic excess to a period of experimentation. *Oiseaux exotiques*, written in 1955–6, shows the evolution of his experimental style into something more poetic and more personal, combining the brilliance and boldness of his earlier music with the fruits of his innovative works from the early 1950s. In short, it is a dazzlingly fresh synthesis of the various components of Messiaen's musical language. It was almost certainly during his visits to the United States in 1949 (to teach at Tanglewood and for the premiere of *Turangalîla*) that Messiaen acquired a set of records entitled *American Bird Songs,* recorded for the Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell University and published in 1942. His transcriptions of these recordings took a central part in the musical material for *Oiseaux exotiques*, but the score is also populated by birds from elsewhere in the world, such as the Indian minah and the Himalayan laughing thrush. In many of his pieces based on birdsong, Messiaen aimed to present a unified time and place, but *Oiseaux exotiques* takes a much freer approach, mingling birdsong from different continents to produce a coherent musical whole. *Oiseaux exotiques* was composed for Pierre Boulez's Domaine musical concerts. The first performance, conducted by Rudolf Albert, was given in the Petit Marigny Theatre on the Champs-Élysées in Paris on

10 March 1956 and repeated the next day. The soloist (and the work's dedicatee) was Yvonne Loriod. She had given the premieres of all Messiaen's piano works from 1943 onwards and the piano part of Oiseaux exotiques was written with the particular characteristics of her playing in mind, including her virtuoso control of velocity and pianistic colour. Along with the solo piano, the instrumentation is unusual, comprising piccolo, flute, oboe, E-flat clarinet, 2 clarinets in B-flat, bass clarinet, bassoon, 2 horns, trumpet, xylophone and glockenspiel, three temple blocks, three tuned gongs, tam-tam, wood block and side drum (without snares). While some of Messiaen's works from earlier in the 1950s, including *Réveil des oiseaux* and the *Livre d'orgue* had been bold experiments at integrating birdsong into an uncompromisingly modern musical idiom, it was in *Oiseaux exotiques* that Messiaen found a way of doing this that was not only intellectually satisfying but musically rewarding. The reaction to the premiere was generally enthusiastic. Rollo Myers in the *Musical Times* (May 1956) wrote that the work was 'extremely skilfully scored', and that 'ornithology aside, the work has definite musical interest and can be listened to with pleasure.' Myers welcomed the clean, dry textures, noting that 'the general effect is that of a fresco in sharp, clear colours, a musical arabesque … that has a life and lively line of its own.' What this review does not convey is Messiaen's acute musical characterisation of the birds; there is even a rare instance of Messiaen using humour with his portrayal of the Prairie chicken ('tétras cupidon'), in particular the mysterious gurgling sounds of the air sacs on either side of the bird's neck. Described by Messiaen in his note for the published score as 'almost a piano concerto', the form of Oiseaux exotiques is unorthodox: passages for the full ensemble including dazzling medleys of birdsongs, intercut by cadenzas and interludes for the solo pianist, ranging

from radiant poetry (the wood thrush solo during the first piano cadenza, its song marked ‘éclatant, ensoleillé’ — ‘brilliant, sun-drenched’) to the vertiginous songs of the shamas near the end of the work. The result is a small masterpiece: one of Messiaen’s most compact and imaginative structures, its music celebrating nature with unquenchable energy and exuberance.

Nigel Simeone

Acknowledgements

PRODUCTION TEAM
Executive producer **Renaud Loranger**
Recording producer, Balance engineer & Editing **Erdo Groot** (Polyhymnia International B.V.)
Recording engineers **Carl Schuurbiers** (November 2020), **Jean-Marie Geijsen** (December 2020) **& Lauran Jurrius** (February 2021) (both Polyhymnia International B.V.)

Liner notes **Nigel Simeone**
Photography, unless stated differently **Niels Ackermann / Lundi13**
Cover design **Lucia Ghielmi**
Product management & Design **Kasper van Kooten**

This album was recorded in Victoria Hall, Geneva Switzerland, in November 2020 (Ravel), December 2020 (Messiaen) and February 2021 (Schoenberg).

ORCHESTRE DE LA SUISSE ROMANDE

RTS ESPACE 2

PENTATONE TEAM
Vice President A&R **Renaud Loranger** | Managing Director **Sean Hickey**
A&R Manager **Kate Rockett** | Head of Catalogue, Product & Curation **Kasper van Kooten**
Head of Marketing, PR & Sales **Silvia Pietrosanti**

Also available on PENTATONE

PTC5186846

PTC5186742

PTC5186782

PTC5186721

Sit back and enjoy