

## ***Oiseaux Exotiques* – Oliver Messiaen**

In this resource the children will parallel some of Messiaen's composing process: listening and transcribing bird song for musical instruments; varying and orchestrating them in different ways; learning and using Greek and Hindu rhythmic patterns; and, thinking about how to structure the different musical materials generated.

### **Page 1 – Programme Note**

Composer Olivier Messiaen became seriously interested in birdsong in 1952. One of his first works, *Réveil des oiseaux* composed in 1953, depicted a dawn chorus of French birds. When composing *Oiseaux Exotiques* he listened to gramophone recordings of American birds. At first he was going to use only American birds but on a visit to a French bird market he heard songs of birds from all over the world. He was so enthralled by them that he visited the market for many days to try to transcribe their songs. The piece is fifteen minutes long and is for piano solo, woodwind, brass and percussion. It includes the songs of forty-eight birds from China, India, Malaysia, North America and the Canary Islands. In the preface to the piece Messiaen describes in words some of the many birdsongs and explains that he has brought together birds from many different places that usually would not be heard together. As well as bird song, Messiaen also uses ancient Greek and Hindu rhythms in the piece. On Page 4 is a list of the forty-eight birds Messiaen uses in the piece. Many of them can be heard here.

### **Page 2 – Introduction**

In this resource the children will parallel some of Messiaen's composing process: listening and transcribing bird song for musical instruments; varying and orchestrating them in different ways; learning and using Greek and Hindu rhythmic patterns; and, thinking about how to structure the different musical materials generated.

#### Learning objectives

- To be able to transform extra-musical ideas into musical ideas
- To be able to graphically notate musical ideas
- To be able to create variations of musical ideas using a range of techniques
- To understand how the same musical material (birdsongs) can be used compositionally in a range of ways – as a cadenza, as a texture, with other rhythmic material etc.
- To be able to structure different kinds of musical material into a longer piece

Please listen to *Oiseaux Exotiques* and read the Music Maze Guidance before you begin.

#### **Resources needed**



- Tuned percussion and/or children's own instruments
- Bells/gongs/triangles (metal), woodblocks/log drums/claves/temple blocks (wood) and drums (skins)
- Bird, variation, rhythm and orchestration sheets

## Page 3 – Learning some Messiaen Birdsongs from *Oiseaux*

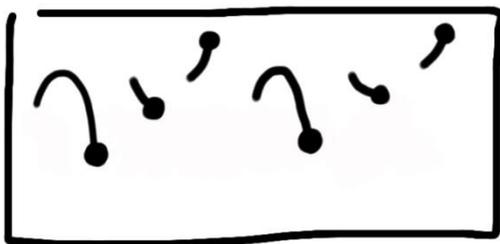
### *Exotiques*

Listen to the following bird calls played by BCMG musicians or perform them yourself to the children. Alternatively, choose your own three bird calls from the piece.

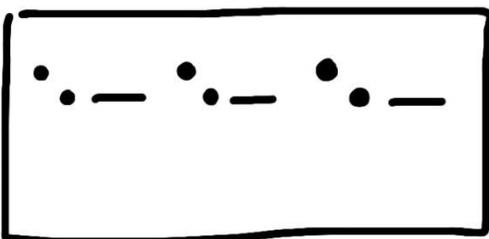
Ask the children to copy the bird calls using tuned percussion or their own instrument. It is not important for them to use exactly the same notes. However encourage them to listen to how high or low the pitches are and achieve the overall contour. Collectively create some graphic images to describe each bird call. Use this as an opportunity to discuss how pitch, speed, duration, silences, repetition....etc. and how they might be represented graphically.

Some or all of these bird calls, played by the whole group, can be used in the final piece.

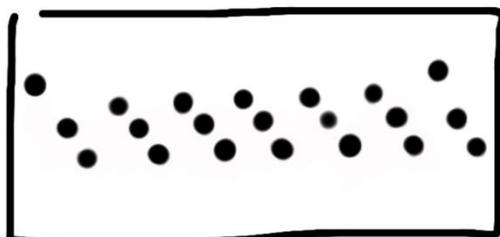
#### Troupiale de Baltimore



#### Garrulaxe à Huppe Blanche



#### Dindon Sauvage





## Page 4 - The 48 birds to be heard in *Oiseaux Exotiques*

Canary	Scarlet tanager
Vesper sparrow	Gambel's quail
California quail	Mockingbird
White-throated sparrow	Himalayan laughing thrush
Wild turkey	Red billed mesia
Meadowlark	Wood thrush
Catbird	Indian minah
Boblink	Veery
Western tanager	
Carolina wren	Lesser green leafbird
Red-eyed vireo	Baltimore oriole
Horned lark	Yellow-shouldered blackbird
Brown thrasher	California thrasher
Purple finch	Virginia cardinal
Warbling vireo	Prairie chicken
Yellow throated vireo	Orchard oriole
	Red-whiskered bulbul
Lazuli bunting	Olive-backed thrush
Blue-headed vireo	Barred owl
Orange-winged amazon	Indigo bunting
Fox sparrow	American robin
Black-headed grosbeak	Rose-breasted grosbeak
Whip-poor-will	Hermit thrush
Summer tanager	White-crowned sparrow
Song sparrow	Indian sharma

## Page 5 – Listening To and Creating Birdsong Shapes

When composing *Oiseaux Exotiques*, Messiaen used recordings of bird song as well as listening to the birds in the French market.

Listen and watch Messiaen describing and demonstrating how he moves from the actual sound of the bird to an instrument, in this case, the piano.

In pairs, with headphones, ask the children to listen to and draw the shapes of 6-12 bird songs on the selection below using the website <http://macaulaylibrary.org/search>. This could be done in a computer lab.

The video below is of a Music Maze participant showing his drawings of birdsong.



Then ask the children to choose one birdsong each and using their memory and the graphic image, imitate it using tuned percussion or their own instrument. Encourage them to get as close as possible to the original, to use extended techniques etc.

Create a dawn chorus by:

- pointing to individual children to play their birdsong
- asking the children to listen and wait for a space to play (maybe limiting number of times played)
- asking the children to count slowly to 10 between each rendition of their birdsong – encouraging them to start at different times

Depending on the number of children in the group you may need to modify these instructions to create the full effect of a dawn chorus.

## Page 6 – Organising the Different Birdsongs

In larger groups, of say four children, ask them to learn to play each other's birdsongs in unison. Encourage them to make them as bold, distinctive and characterful as possible. Once they have done this, ask the group to try out different ways of using their birdsongs from ideas below or from the *structures guide resource sheet* from the links at the bottom of the page. Once they have done this ask them to choose one or two of the ideas to develop their birdsongs into a short piece. All these compositional ideas are taken from *Oiseaux Exotiques*. If the groups have extra time they can try out more than ideas and arrange them into a longer piece.

<p><b>Unison</b></p> <p>All play the same birdsong at the same time but not necessarily with the same notes.</p>	<p><b>Orchestrate</b></p> <p>Divide up one bird song and decide which instrument(s) plays which bit of the shape/melody.</p>	<p><b>Sequence</b></p> <p>Using some or all of your bird songs, order them to make a sequence. You can repeat them and have more than one person playing each shape.</p>
<p><b>X + 1</b></p> <p>X number of children play one birdsong together and one child plays a different one. Both bird songs can be repeated.</p>	<p><b>Heterophonic</b></p> <p>Everyone plays the same bird song at the same time but each creates and plays a different variation of it.</p>	<p><b>Polyphonic</b></p> <p>Everyone plays a different birdsong at different times to create a texture. The birdsong can be repeated as many times as desired.</p>



## Page 7 – Solo Birdsong Cadenzas (optional)

In *Oiseaux Exotiques* there are six solo piano cadenzas. A cadenza is an extended solo improvised or written-out ornamental passage which is usually rhythmically free. It is an opportunity for displaying virtuosity and for playing around with musical material from the rest of the piece. This could be an activity for those children who need extending or you could have some of the group doing this whilst others complete the next activity.

Ask the children to use their original bird song as the basis for an improvisational cadenza. Messiaen makes a big point about the colours of the birds he has chosen. Maybe this could be something the children think about in their improvisations.

To support the children creating their improvisations ask them to think about these possibilities:

- Stretching (make longer) or squashing (make shorter) some or all of the durations
- Playing around with the dynamics
- Stretching or squashing the pitch contours (make the intervals between notes bigger or smaller)
- Faster and slower versions or getting faster/getting slower versions
- Repeating some of the pattern two or more times
- Changing the articulation
- Making it more 'red, green, azure, yellow' etc. (whatever this might mean to the children!)

## Page 8 – Greek and Hindu Rhythms

Messiaen uses ancient Greek and Hindu rhythms in *Oiseaux Exotiques*. These provide a stable rhythmic framework which contrast with the free rhythms of the birdsong. Messiaen learnt about these rhythms from books, not from any direct experience, and as a result does not follow any 'rules' about their authentic use. Instead he uses them as ostinatos, augments and diminishes them and, uses them in canon and retrograde.

Messiaen's percussion list for *Oiseaux Exotiques* consists of a glockenspiel, 3 gongs, a snare drum, a tam-tam, temple blocks, a woodblock and a xylophone. Using similar instruments - bells/gongs/triangles (metal), woodblocks/log drums/claves/temple blocks (wood) and drums (skins).

Teach the children the three rhythms on the next page (and as a download sheet), all of which appear in the piece.

There is no need for the children to understand music notation, they just need to count the number of beats indicated. It would be a helpful if you conduct the beats to support the children's counting.



Practice playing the rhythms at different speeds (mimicking augmentation and diminution). Divide the group into three (make sure that children from the small group activity are still in the same groups) metal, wood and skin. Allot a different rhythm to each group and nominate a conductor for each one. Allow time for each group to practice at different speeds with the conductor deciding on the speed, counting the group in and keeping the pulse. You could ask them to try playing the rhythms backwards as well.

Now as a whole group but still divided into three, try:

- Sequencing the rhythms in different orders decided by the children. NB the rhythms can appear more than once
- Layering the rhythms with the rhythms as repeating ostinatos
- Create a canon of the three rhythms with each rhythm repeating as an ostinato

The children can choose to use the fast or slow versions and the forwards or backwards versions.

## Page 9: Hindu Greek Rhythms Sheet

Asclepiad

2 2 2 1 1 2 2 1 1 2 1 2 1 1

NIḤŚAÑKAḶĪLA

4 4 3 3 2 1 1

Dactyloepitrite

2 1 1 2 2 1 2 1 1



## Page 10 – Putting it all together

The group now has lots of different kinds of musical material (don't worry if you don't have all these):

1. Three whole group birdsongs from *Oiseaux Exotiques*
2. Individual birdsongs in their original form (dawn chorus)
3. Solo birdsong cadenzas
4. Small group birdsong pieces
5. Three rhythmic patterns inspired by Greek and Hindu Rhythms

Ask each child or pair of children to plan a longer piece or plan as a whole group on large pieces of paper or mini white boards. Make sure you discuss this first, asking the children to think about:

- Beginnings and endings
- Contrast and overall shape
- The direction/journey of the music

Try out some of the children's ideas and discuss as a group. If there is time, refine them based on the discussion or ask the children to refine. If the different bits of musical material are recorded as you go along, the children could use the software Audacity to realise their composition.

Listen to the versions created by children at Music Maze.