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## Performing Le Merle Nair: An investigation into the performance issues in the music of Olivier Messiaen

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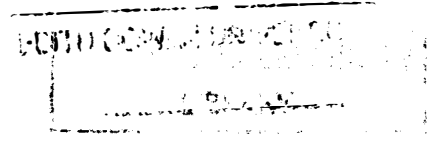
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Performing *Le Merle Noir*: An Investigation into the Performance Issues in the  
Music of Olivier Messiaen

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Academic Paper in Partial Fulfilment for the Degree of B.Mus Honours

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The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

## Abstract

This paper investigates certain performance issues associated with Messiaen's 1951 chamber work, *Le Merle Noir*. This paper can be seen as a practical guide to performers wishing to gain a deeper perspective on the interpretational issues associated with performing this work. It is written from the vantage point of a performer and should be seen to complement a number of already existing analytical studies of this piece. The paper can also be read as an exemplar of the research a performer makes when developing a coherent and truthful interpretation of a music work.

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I would like to thank

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Mum and Dad, for a lifetime of support, I cannot thank you enough

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My wonderful Jimbo, for seeing what I sometimes can't

And everyone who has helped supported and nurtured me through this process

Thank you

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## Introduction

This paper is the companion to the lecture recital presented at Edith Cowan University on Friday 31st October 2008. The paper deals with certain performance issues associated with Messiaen's seminal twentieth-century flute and piano chamber work, *Le Merle Noir*. This paper can be seen as a practical guide to performers wishing to gain a deeper perspective on the interpretational issues associated with performing this work. It is written from the vantage point of a performer and should be seen to complement a number of already existing analytical studies of this work. The paper can also be read as an exemplar of the research a performer makes when developing a coherent and truthful interpretation of a musical work.

The paper divides broadly into two parts. Part one contextualises *Le Merle Noir* by first placing it in its historical setting as a product of the *concours de flute* at the Paris Conservatoire. In addition, the work is further contextualised by relating it to Messiaen's output around the time of its composition. Part two deals with issues of performance and interpretation. This part opens with a discussion of general issues relating to the performance of Messiaen's music and closes with an in-depth exploration of performance and interpretational issues associated with *Le Merle Noir*. Three recordings of the work were studied and critically evaluated in the light of Messiaen's own precepts for performance. An appendix presents, in tabular format, the data from the critical evaluations of the recordings.

Part One: *Le Merle Noir in Context*

- i. The *concours de flute* at the Paris Conservatoire
- ii. *Le Merle Noir* in the Context of Messiaen's music

The *concours de flute* at the Paris Conservatoire

Established in 1795, the Paris Conservatoire or Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique was a fusion of two pre-existing schools, the *Ecole Royale de Chant et de Déclamation*, which had Francois Joseph Gossec as administrator, and *La Musique de la Garde Nationale Parisienne*, which was under the direction of Bernard Sarette. One of the great traditions of the system – which, as we will see, dates from its inception – were the so called *concours*. This system is still in effect today and has evolved into a curriculum for every instrument including voice. At the heart of Conservatoire are the final year test pieces (the *concours*) which are traditionally written by composers associated with the Conservatoire.

The history of this institution, and in particular the *concours* system, has been told in a recent book by Kristine Klopenstein Fletcher.<sup>1</sup> The first *concours* were held on October 24th, 1797 and consisted of the distribution of laurel branches to their principal 'lauréats' who also gave a prize winners concert. In addition the ceremony was punctuated with speeches and the distribution of prizes for excellence in applied music and in scholarship.<sup>2</sup>

Claude Delvincourt was appointed as director in 1941, during the German occupation of Paris, two years after the beginning of World War II. Amongst his many positive changes and developments as his time as head of the *Conservatoire*, two are of particular relevance: during this period he founded the *Orchestre des Cadets* and chorus, which prevented students from being evacuated to Germany; and

<sup>1</sup> Kristine Klopenstein Fletcher. *The Paris Conservatoire and the contest solos for Bassoon* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.. 8

in 1947 he had the vision to hire a brilliant young radical musician, Olivier Messiaen.

Delvincourt's predecessor was the somewhat conservative Henri Rabaud, and almost immediately after the former's appointment, both insiders and outsiders felt the winds of change. Above all Delvincourt was a modernist and he strove to create an atmosphere that was up to date and cutting edge. The most far-reaching changes took place in regards to the composers from whom he sought out to write the end of course pieces. Specific to the flute syllabus, in his first three years Delvincourt commissioned Eugene Bozza's *Agrestide* (1942), Henri Dutilleux's *Sonatine* (1943) and Andre Jolivet's *Chant de Linos* (1944). These works mark a significant departure from previous test pieces and not only test the students' technique in a more far-reaching way, but also challenge their sympathies in relation to avant-garde musical ideas, "...from which the run of French musical life under the Nazi occupation was isolating them almost completely".<sup>3</sup>

The *concours* were not the only facet of the Conservatoire to be altered by Delvincourt's direction. Messiaen was hired to teach analysis in 1947, along with new classes for aesthetics and musicology, taken by Marcel Beaufils and Norbert Dufourcq respectively. In 1951, the Prix de Rome was altered to allow for post-tonality, as well as allowing for a wider variety of genres.<sup>4</sup>

Delvincourt's goal "...to bring some fresh air into the stuffy classrooms of the rue de Madrid"<sup>5</sup> did not end with the war. Despite Delvincourt hiring Messiaen four years prior, his commission of the composer in 1951 for the *concours* was seen as a bold move, as the controversial *Turangalila Symphony* had been performed the previous summer at the Aix Festival, and the "...shockwaves were still reverberating around France".<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Roger Nichols, "Messiaen's 'Le Merle Noir': The Case of a Blackbird in a Historical Pie". *The Musical Times*, 129, No. 1750: (1988) 648-650

<sup>4</sup> Grove music online "Paris Entry, After 1870" <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>, accessed 30/10/2008)

<sup>5</sup> Roger Nichols, "Messiaen's 'Le Merle Noir': The Case of a Blackbird in a Historical Pie" *Literature The Musical Times* 129, no. 1750 (1988): 648-650

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*,

### *Le Merle Noir* in Context of Messiaen's Music

*Le Merle Noir* didn't just indicate a change of direction for the *Conservatoire* flute syllabus, it marked the beginning of a new chapter in Messiaen's compositional style.

Peter Hill has recently written that the years between 1945 and 1951 were for Messiaen marked by "radical experiment".<sup>7</sup> The chronology of compositions from this time is as follows:

*Cantéyodjayâ*, piano (1949)

*Messe de la Pentecôte*, organ (1949–50)

*Quatre études de rythme*, piano (1949–50)

*Île de feu 1*

*Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*

*Neumes rythmiques*

*Île de feu 2*

*Le Merle Noir*, flute and piano (1952)

*Livre d'orgue*, organ (1951–2)

Hill further describes this period as one in which "for the first and only time his music became a central influence on his younger contemporaries; yet for Messiaen the works of these years represented a cul-de-sac, a temporary aberration which he later came to dislike and disavow."<sup>8</sup>

The epitome of this so-called "cul-de-sac" can clearly be seen in much of the cold acerbic writing of his *Livre d'orgue*. In many of the pieces of this set Messiaen's

<sup>7</sup> Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone. *Messiaen*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005: 199

<sup>8</sup> Peter Hill. *The Messiaen Companion* Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995: 8

experiments in techniques such as total serialism, give the aural impression of a composer not entirely comfortable with these means of composition.<sup>9</sup> At any rate, these departures into the mainstream avant-garde were relatively short-lived. One tangent, which was to prove exceptionally fruitful to his music from then on, was the adoption of birdsong as an integral element of the composition.<sup>10</sup>

The commission from Delvincourt coincided with Messiaen's need for a new compositional direction. After the experimental period, and with no desire to pursue electronic music or musique concrete, Messiaen turned to nature and began using birdsong as a compositional device. Whether this served as a retreat from the avant-garde musical world he was surrounded by, or was a natural development considering his lifelong fascination with birdsong, *Le Merle Noir* is the perfect example of a transitional work from the experimental period to the years which followed.

After *Le Merle Noir*, Messiaen embarked on a decade of composition which focused almost exclusively on bird song with compositions such as "Reveil des oiseaux" (1953), "Oiseaux exotiques" (1956) and "Catalogue d'oiseaux" (1956-8).

<sup>9</sup> Messiaen may have seen these years as a "cul-de-sac", yet... "he is often cited as a crucial influence in the establishment of 'total serialism' in Europe." (Messiaen Companion, *Messiaen's Musical Language: an Introduction*, by Anthony Pople.)

<sup>10</sup> Although Messiaen had always been interested in birdsong, and had begun notating it when he was 15 years old in 1923, it wasn't until 1941 that he used it as an integral part of his composition: this was to be the first movement of the *Quator pour la fin du temps*, 'Liturgie de cristal'. This... "provides us with the first named use of birdsong in Messiaen's music..." (The Messiaen Companion, Chapter on Birdsong by Robert Sherlaw Johnson, ed. by Peter Hill: 251.) *Le Merle Noir* was his first work to be based so entirely on bird song, and can be seen as a miniature version of the works to follow such as "Reveil des oiseaux" (1953), "Oiseaux exotiques" (1956) and "Catalogue d'oiseaux" (1956-8).

Part Two: Performing Messiaen

- i. General issues in performing Messiaen's music
- ii. Performance issues associated with *Le Merle Noir*

i. General issues in performing Messiaen's music

The following section of this paper explores issues associated with the performance and interpretation of the music of Olivier Messiaen. After isolating some general trends, the discussion becomes more specific and focuses on performance considerations of particular pertinence to *Le Merle Noir*.

Information on performing Messiaen's music can be gleaned from a variety of sources. As would be assumed, the scores themselves are of fundamental importance. We also are fortunate to possess many of Messiaen's own interpretations on record (particularly of the early organ works), which – confusingly – often depart from the score in significant ways. In addition we have the testimony of Messiaen himself via a number of published interviews.<sup>11</sup> Finally, we have the published insights from a number of leading interpreters of his works, many of whom studied with the composer.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For example, Bernard Gavoty 'Who Are You Olivier Messiaen?' *Tempo, New Series* 58 (1961): 33-36 and Harriet Watts "Canyons, Colours and Birds: An Interview with Oliver Messiaen" *Tempo, New Series* 128 (1979): 2-8.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Hill. *The Messiaen Companion*. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995 and Hill, Peter. "For the Birds" *The Musical Times* 135, No. 181 (1994): 552-555  
Gillian Weir (Peter Hill *Organ Music II* in *The Messiaen Companion*. (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995): 360) and c 30/10/2008)  
Yvonne Loriod (Peter Hill *Interview with Yvonne Loriod* in *The Messiaen Companion*. (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995): 291 )

While Gillian Weir was preparing the *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité*, the composer presented her with a recording which led to confusion, as the performance, although “...commanding and magisterial...”<sup>13</sup> was often different from the printed text. Weir states,

In discussion it became clear that the text was what mattered, not any deviations from it that might have appeared when he played it. Not that this meant he wanted a dry, machine-like reproduction of the score; rather that he did not expect his interpretations to be copied blindly either.<sup>14</sup>

Yvonne Loriod response was similar when asked what the biggest issues are when approaching Messiaen’s music. “I would say that complete fidelity to Messiaen’s text is vital.”<sup>15</sup>

This advice does not translate to Messiaen wanting a dry performance, lacking in musicality. The use of subtle rubato is necessary to “...enliven and personalise the music as in any other score.”<sup>16</sup>

The performer should use their intuition to perform the music with the appropriate expression. Peter Hill speaks of Messiaen’s concern that when he performed his works he should, above all, “...communicate the spirit of his music.” Hill says

In performance nothing does [Messiaen’s] music a greater disservice than an approach which achieves accuracy (in the literal sense) at the expense of imagination that fails to explore music in terms of its meaning and atmosphere, through those nuances rhythm and sonority which bring the notes on the page to life.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Peter Hill. *Organ Music II in The Messiaen Companion*. (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995): 360

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*,

<sup>15</sup> Peter Hill. *Interview with Yvonne Loriod in The Messiaen Companion*. (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995): 291

<sup>16</sup> Gillian Weir. *Organ Music II in The Messiaen Companion*, edited by Peter Hill (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995): 360.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Hill. *For the Birds*. Peter Hill, Who Recently Finished Recording the Complete Piano Music of Messiaen, Talks About Performing the French Master’s Music *The Musical Times* 135. no. 1819 (1994): 552

A sense of momentum through seemingly static phrases should be aspired toward in the performance of Messiaen's music. For example, in organ works such as the *Livre d'orgue*, the long, slow phrases are almost impossible to perform at the notated tempo and many organists perform these passages in a lifeless, static manner. The best approach is to create a sense of forward movement throughout those passages that appear as 'outside of time'. Messiaen's own performances, although not entirely accurate in terms of note durations, contain this organic element. Messiaen's own statement on the *Livre d'Orgue* is interesting "Here I utilized the different moving lines, not only melodically, but rhythmically, which permitted me like the hero of Wells's time machine, to remount the stream of time and also to detach from it."<sup>18</sup> In reference to the *Livre d'Orgue*, Weir talks about the idea that the piece is a living being and that through the long phrases there should be stillness, with an inner life. She refers to the image of the Bhagavad-Gita; it is "like a lamp in a windless place, that does not flicker."<sup>19</sup> Weir states "This last image is exactly right for Messiaen's music when it appears static in that there is no overt movement but is in fact alive, vital, breathing."<sup>20</sup>

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## ii. Performance issues associated with *Le Merle Noir*

This following section focuses on the interpretational possibilities inherent in *Le Merle Noir*. Through focusing on performance practice in Messiaen's works in general, and then on specific issues generated by this piece *Le Merle Noir*, the author offers insights that may be useful for performers of this work.

A number of issues present themselves to performers of *Le Merle Noir*, such as the representation of the blackbird, tone quality; rhythmic fidelity to the score, coherence between sections, and tempo.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Hill. *Organ Music II* in *The Messiaen Companion*. (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995: 367

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.,



The following discussion explores these issues through a critical analysis of three lauded recordings of the work. Karlheinz Zoller and Aloys Kontarsky's recording from 1971<sup>21</sup>, Jonathan Snowden and Andrew Litton from 1989<sup>22</sup>, and Daniel Pailthorpe and Stephen Pledge from 2004.<sup>23</sup> (Appendix one presents the data from this close analysis of the three recordings. For convenience, the data is presented in two tables: the first collates observations regarding tone and dynamics and the second collates observations regarding rhythm and rubato).

### *The representation of the blackbird*

Messiaen's musical representation of birdsong is notorious for not being recognised by professional ornithologists - despite his claims he notated the song as closely to nature as possible. The blackbird song is interesting as each blackbird's song is different. All are born mimics and typically each blackbird begins the season with a few motifs, which are then improvised upon and developed. Because the blackbird can imitate the songs of other birds, his song is always changing and developing.<sup>24</sup>

Messiaen said that the most difficult element regarding the representation of bird song was "the faithful reproduction of timbre [as] no musical instrument is able to reproduce exactly the quality..."<sup>25</sup> The performances analysed herein represent three different ideas on the presentation of bird song.

<sup>21</sup> Karlheinz Zoller is a German flautist who trained at the Musikhochschule in Frankfurt and at the Northwest German Music Academy in Detmold. He worked as solo flautist for the Berlin PO from 1960 to 1969 and rejoined in 1977 after teaching at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Snowden is a British flautist who, at age 21, was named Principal Flute of the English National Opera North Orchestra. He was appointed as Principal Flute with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra and the Philharmonia Orchestra. He has also performed as a soloist with the The Royal Philharmonic, The London Philharmonic (Royal Festival Hall in London), the Bournemouth Symphony under Andrew Litton, the BBC National Orchestra. Jonathan Snowden Flute "About" <http://www.jonathansnowden.com> (accessed 30/10/2008)

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Pailthorpe was appointed Principal Flute of the English National Opera Orchestra at the age of 24, a position he held for ten years. Currently he holds the Co-Principal Flute position with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and works as a freelance performer appearing as guest principal with such orchestras as the Chamber Orchestra of Europe and the London Symphony Orchestra. He has recorded solo and chamber works by Poulenc, Bach and George Crumb with the chamber group Conchord, of which he is a founder member. Pailthorpe is a professor at the Royal Northern College of Music and is a keen advocate of the modern wooden flute. From Bathspa University "School of Music and Performing Arts-Flute Masterclass by Daniel Pailthorpe" <http://www.bathspampa.com>. (accessed 30/10/2008)

<sup>24</sup> Paula Hutchinson "Performing Messiaen's *Le Merle Noir*" *Flute Talk* 13 (1993): 8-10

<sup>25</sup> Robert Johnson, *Messiaen*. New York, New York: Omnibus Press, (1975): 118

Jonathan Snowden favours a clean and precise tone, in which every note is substantially separated. He avoids blurring the phrases and notes, and performs with a precise, clean sound. This is in direct contrast to Karlheinz Zoller's performance, who presents the bird chatter with an off centre, fluffy timbre which leads to a lack of clarity between notes. Daniel Pailthorpe incorporates a mixture of both approaches, alternating between a clear tone with a fast, full vibrato and a rougher tone with more audible air.

According to Messiaen's philosophy on the performance of bird song, Jonathan Snowden's performance is the most successful. The tone is the clear and precise, with each note placed specifically, lending clarity to the sound. The clean articulation and pure tone make it possible to hear every note, so as to not blur colours and textures.

Throughout the work, in all the sections, Snowden maintains a fairly clear focused tone. His vibrato is generally a shimmer through the sound, created by a fast vibration which minimally interrupts the flow of air.

Zoller's tone is generally slightly off centre through the faster sections, and through the B section<sup>26</sup> he performs with a wide vibrato. This adds to the effect of representing the programmatic quality of the piece, as it evokes visions of sunshine through rain clouds.

Pailthorpe's tonal choices are wide ranging throughout the piece, with each section performed in a different manner. He begins the piece with a clear, vibrato-filled sound, and then adopts a tone with almost no vibrato and a thin quality in the B section. In the transitional section, the tone is slightly off centre with very clipped articulation. Pailthorpe repeats the qualities in the recurring sections, and in the C section he performs at a diminished dynamic, with little variation. The articulation is precise and deliberate, though the tonal choices in Pailthorpe's performance are too contrasting, and result in a segregation of the sections. Zoller's performance has a similar effect, as the differing tones he performs with in conjunction with the generous rubato sometimes result in a stilted and static feel. Snowden's clear, bright

<sup>26</sup> The sections are presented as follows: the first *Un peu vif, avec fantaisie* section is referred to as A and the second as A', *Un peu vif* sections are referred to as transitions. *Presque Lent Tendre* sections are referred to as B and B' respectively and *Vif* referred to as C.

tone gives the A and C sections clarity, and the B sections a sense of life within stillness.

### *Rhythmic fidelity to the score*

The advice of Messiaen to follow the score appears to be of particular pertinence here. Especially during the A sections, based upon the bird chatter, the amount of rhythmic freedom is uncertain. Performers may feel that to create an improvisatory nature it is necessary to pull the tempo around and impose rubato. The author proposes the score is written in such a manner that the improvisatory feel is achieved if the score is followed closely. Snowden and Pailthorpe both adhere to the score in terms of rhythm, whereas Zoller takes great liberties with rubato. For example, the opening phrase of the A, Zoller leaves a space of almost three semiquavers between the first and second groups of notes where no rest or break is indicated. Between the second and third groups, there is a semiquaver break after the quaver again where no rest is indicated. This continues through the opening section and the changes result in the birdsong feeling stilted and jarred, adding to a lack of flow through the section. This issue is evident in the B sections, where Zoller alters the tempo in an extreme manner, with a generous sense of rubato and a tendency to slow down at the end of every phrase. Although this section is supposed to have no sense of pulse and to give the illusion of space, Zoller has a tendency to slow down at the end of every phrase, resulting in a lack of energy.

Pailthorpe performs this in a similar manner. Towards the end of each phrase he tends to slow down, but at a tempo of quaver=90 as opposed to Zoller's quaver=70, the overall effect is less stilted.

### *Degree of rhythmic freedom appropriate*

The only place rhythmic freedom can be utilised to any great effect is in the musical material of the A sections, where breaks in the phrasing are marked with commas. Throughout the B section, the permutation of rhythm apparent in the score creates the feeling of timelessness through the phrases, so any rubato becomes redundant or a hindrance in terms of flow: features that are apparent in both Zoller and

Pailthorpe's performances. However, an excess of rubato throughout the A sections result in a lack of flow and can create a laboured feel, as in Zoller's performance. Snowden follows the score the most accurately in section A, and the result is a well connected, seemingly improvised performance. Messiaen's carefully notated rhythms and rests, when performed as written, create the desired effect. It would appear the use of rubato is superfluous.

### *Tempo*

The tempo markings in *Le Merle Noir* are vague, with each section headed with terms such as *Un peu vif*, *avec fantaisie* and *Presque lent, tendre*, which leaves much to the performer's own interpretation. Messiaen said that tempo is "...both a matter of personal temperament and of circumstance".<sup>27</sup> The important factor in the piece is to have contrast between the different sections whilst maintaining a sense of cohesion.

The form of *Le Merle Noir* is as follows:

A *Un peu vif*; Quasi-cadenza (Bird Chatter)

B Flute with piano accompaniment, *Presque lent, tendre* (Bird Song)

Transition

A' Solo flute Quasi-cadenza (Bird Chatter)

B' Flute with piano accompaniment, *Presque lent, tendre* in canon (Bird Song)

Transition

<sup>27</sup> Peter Hill "For the Birds" *The Musical Times* 135, No. 181 (1994): 552-555

### C Flute with piano, *Vif* (Bird Chatter/Flock)<sup>28</sup>

Each player makes different tempo choices, yet within their own performances, connections between the A and A', B and B', and transitional sections are evident.

Allocating a tempo marking to Zoller's performance of this section is difficult as he takes such great artistic liberties with the piece in terms of rubato that the tempo shifts and changes continuously. His A sections are taken at similar tempi, and performed in a similar manner, with less drastic manipulation of rhythm in A'. Compared with the B section taken at a rubato filled quaver = 70, the sections are starkly contrasted which results in a lack of connection.

The *Vif* section is taken at quaver = 200. The tempo is fairly constant throughout until bar 114 where the tempo speeds slightly, and with exception of bars 114-119 which seem to be unstable, this tempo allows the flute and piano timbre to meld without blurring the texture, thereby allowing the intended colours to be heard.

Snowden captures the essence of the black bird most effectively, as combined with his precise articulation and fidelity to the score rhythmically, the tempo is lively without feeling rushed.

There is a lack of contrast between the A and B sections in Snowden's performance as the B sections are played at quaver = 100, compared to the quaver = 142. The tempo of the transitions are taken at approximately quaver = 170, which is faster in the lead to the A' section at quaver = 142, and a nice transition from the B' section to C section at quaver = 240.

Generally, Snowden's choice of tempi combined with tonal choices and rubato, result in well connected sections. The B sections lack the contrast they require as the stillness is lost through fast tempo, coupled with Snowden's rich vibrato. The C section is slightly fast, although the flute's clear tone and crisp articulation result in a less rushed feeling than in Zoller's performance. Still, the colours and combined

<sup>28</sup> This is a combination of the forms presented by Heather Hall Coleman in "Conflicting Analyses of Messiaen's 'Le Merle Noir'". *Flute Talk* 29 (1997): 12-14  
For the original tables, see Appendix 2.

timbre created by the flute and piano are difficult to perceive in such a fast performance

Pailthorpe takes the A sections at approximately quaver=124, the tempo in the B sections is quite fast, approximately quaver=90, yet the rubato employed by Pailthorpe here creates the desired sense of space through these phrases.

The transitions are performed at a similar tempo to the A sections. This makes the change to the A' section less effective, as there should be contrast here. The transition is more effective into the C section, which is performed at quaver=160. This tempo choice in section C allows for clarity and precision in terms of articulation, yet the tonal colour is blurred slightly so the overall quality is not as effective as possible.

## Conclusion

This research has shown that when approaching *Le Merle Noir*, Messiaen's dictum should clearly be followed; that adhering to the score results in the most successful performance. Vast changes between sections in terms of tempi, and tonal quality, result in a stilted performance, which creates a lack of connection. In addition a performance in which the tempi and tonal quality are too similar produces a lack of contrast and colour.

Every note should be heard, even through extremely fast motifs and cacophonous accompaniment. This means performing at tempi which give life to the A and A' sections yet do not detract from the intended timbre through the blurring of notes and still allow for contrast to the B and B' sections.

Tone colour should vary in each section, yet too vast a difference results in a lack of cohesion. The tone of the A sections should be clear to allow for audibility of each note, the B sections require a stillness to the sound, to create a sense of space and contrast to the A sections. This certainly does not translate to performing with a lifeless, flat tonal quality, but instead there should be energy through the sound which should be achieved by a slight vibrato and subtle modulation through crescendi and diminuendi.

This innate stillness demanded of much of the music is also a matter of tempo, but the inner sense of life and movement of the performance can be lost if these sections are performed at too slow a tempo. The result is a stagnant quality, which creates a very stark contrast from the A sections. Rubato in the B section should be very subtle as the rhythm is composed to evoke a sense of stillness. Any substantial rubato creates the feeling that the music is slowing down rather than standing still.

The C section is composed to create a sense of cacophony, through the use of rhythmic permutation in the piano part combined with the bird chatter in the flute line. The clarity of notes and rhythm is still important here, however, and taking this

at an extremely fast tempo results in a blurred texture and colour. A clear tone quality is necessary as an off centre tone on the flute is easily lost in the timbre of the piano. The instruments should blend without overpowering one another.

In conclusion, it is hoped that this paper will have set *Le Merle Noir* in a historical context, offer insights into the interpretation of the work and offer an exemplar of the research a performer makes when developing a coherent and truthful interpretation of a music work.



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## Appendix One

### Tonal Table

	Karlheinz Zoller	Daniel Pailthorpe	Jonathan Snowden
Un peu vif, avec fantaisie	Begins with an off centre, fluffy sound. The notes are not clearly separated, which makes for stark contrast between legato and non-legato notes/passages. Sound is bright, despite “fluffiness”. Bar 7-the triplet quaver and crotchet performed with a bell like tone, which is emulated again in bar 8, in the semiquaver and quaver F naturals, which links these two phrases together. Zoller has a very wide, pulsating vibrato.	Begins with a clear, rich tone with fast, shimmering vibrato. Becomes slightly rougher in bar 5, an airy quality almost, with less rich “colour”. In bar 7, the opening has the same rough quality as bar 5, but the second group of notes contrast with a rich, singing sound. This is reproduced in the second half of bar 8, with the third group of notes executed with a rough, dry sound. The subsequent semiquaver and quaver have the rich, shimmering tone from bar 3. Flutter tongue- Fluffy, slow flutter, interrupts flow of air.	Tone is clean and precise, every note is substantially separated, nothing blurred. Vibrato is fast and shimmering throughout. The recording quality is interesting. Sounds as though it was recorded in a hall.
Presque lent, tendre	Zoller tends to favour a bright, yet airy tone. Focused sound, with a rich, vibrant vibrato, a wide regular vibration. (with exception of bars 31 through 34). In bar 31, the tone is rich and shimmering, with a faster vibrato. The effect is like that of sunshine through rain, these glorious moments of sheer beauty, which last no more than two bars, where the dynamic drops back to <i>piano</i> and the vibrato is reduced, the tone less bright. Tone is bell like.	Very restrained tone here, clear, with little accent through the phrases. Slight vibrato, but mostly a straight sound	Shimmering, clean, light sound. Each note is separated, yet each phrase maintains a sense of forward direction. The harmonic E natural in bar 30, his vibrato is much wider, and gentler. Chooses a pure harmonic, thin like the sound of a string instrument. <i>Mezzo forte</i> of bar 31 is played at a gentle <i>forte</i> , with a fast, shimmering vibrato and a much “brighter” sound, similar to Zoller’s. <i>Piano</i> in bar 33 performed at <i>mezzo piano</i> level. Snowden accents the notes slightly, emphasising the commas between the notes.
Un peu vif	Fluffy tone, similar to the beginning, slightly unfocused. The dynamic is marked <i>forte</i> . Zoller performs more of a <i>mezzo forte</i> , quieter than the piano’s <i>forte</i> in bar 36, and less intense than the <i>forte</i> in the opening of Un peu vif, avec fantaisie, bar 46	Slightly off centre sound. Clipped staccato, especially in contrast after slur i.e bar 38, between the second and third semiquavers. Pailthorpe swoops off the note. Keys are audible throughout the passage.	<i>Forte</i> throughout this section. Bright, shimmering vibrato with a slight fluffiness to tone in comparison to previous birdsong, less crisp articulation.
Un peu vif, avec fantaisie	Less fluffy than opening, and Un peu vif, more definition between notes generally, with a clearer tone.	Rich, vibrato filled sound. Slight fingering discrepancies which lead to a lack of clarity. Very sweet tone in bar 49, legato sound over the semiquaver to quaver (opening of bar). Fourth group of notes suffer from fingering trouble (especially two demisemiquavers followed by a semiquaver) Singing quality to the sound in bar 52, clear and sweet, legato in the first group of notes and the third group. Both these	Tone has a woody quality, yet Snowden maintains the same deliberate separation of each note, and careful articulation. The longer notes are performed with a brighter tone.

		instances are followed by an appoggiatura Bb followed by a G natural which are disconnected and forte in comparison.	
Presque lent, tendre	Similar tone to the first Presque lent, tendre. Performed at <i>Mezzo forte</i> with no significant difference until we reach bar 72, where the dynamic, although still marked <i>mezzo forte</i> is played as a <i>forte</i> . Bar 77 marked as <i>mezzo forte</i> is performed almost <i>fortissimo</i> , and in a very similar manner to the first time the material appears in bar 31, as a kind of sunshine through grey rain clouds.	Clean tone with slight vibrato. Low notes are accented with vibrato.	Bright tone, with a fast, shimmering vibrato. During the gradual diminuendo through bars 77- 79, the tone begins very bright, but quickly loses vibrato, and becomes more pure, until the <i>piano</i> in bar 80, which is performed with a wider vibrato and an open, "hooty" quality to the sound. The dynamic is <i>mezzo forte</i> throughout. No dynamic change even in bar 72 where the phrase is repeated over and over until we reach the <i>piano</i> harmonic in bar 76. The piano is at <i>forte</i> in bar 76 rather than <i>mezzo forte</i> , but the flute is a definite <i>piano</i> . Bars 77 begins at <i>forte</i> , with a slight diminuendo when the note changes from G natural to F natural. Bar 78 follows this change, but begins as a <i>mezzo forte</i> and bar 79 is quieter still, around <i>mezzo piano</i> . This leads to the <i>piano</i> in bar 80.
Un peu vif	More focused, clear tone than first Un peu vif. Dynamic marked <i>forte</i> is performed with a <i>mezzo forte</i> quality.	More focused than first Un peu vif section, yet the keys are still audible. Quite an abrasive quality through this passage.	Very similar quality to opening, deliberate notes and clear tone with crisp articulation. The piano is quite loud here and overpowers the flute. The flute's <i>forte</i> seems almost <i>mezzo forte</i> in comparison. This continues through the section with both lines maintaining this dynamic throughout.
Vif	Slightly sharp sound, not quite focused.	Quite quiet at the beginning of the section with no real sense of <i>forte</i> , until bar 125, in which the <i>fff</i> marked is performed with a <i>forte</i> quality.	Very flighty sound from the flute, light, bright with an airy quality. The sound is overpowered by the piano to some extent, which has a heavy, almost muddy quality. The flute appears to be retreating, allowing the piano take control.

## Rhythmic Table

	Karlheinz Zoller	Daniel Pailthorpe	Jonathan Snowden
Un peu vif. avec fantaisie	<p>Tempo general around quaver=160</p> <p>Opening statement Zoller leaves a space of almost three semiquavers between the first and second groups of notes. Between the second and third groups, there is a semiquaver break after the quaver.</p> <p>In the second statement, Zoller leaves little space between groups of notes, and plays through, until the semiquaver followed by quaver in the third group of notes in bar 4, in which the quaver is extended by a semiquaver. The fourth group of notes in bar 4 is played evenly at the new, faster tempo. The rest and demisemiquavers in the beginning of bar 5 are played in time, and the triplet is stretched slightly. The crotchet tied to the triplet is almost a quaver longer through the quaver rest. The flutter tongued C# is extended by a quaver also. The remainder of this bar and until the triplet over quaver and crotchet in bar 7, there is no deviation from the marked rhythm. The triplet is performed with a generous rubato. The quaver rest after the triplets is ignored and in bar 8 Zoller rushes through the two groups of demisemiquavers until the semiquaver followed by a quaver, which is played in a similar manner to the triplet, more like a quaver followed by a crotchet. The group of seven demisemiquavers in bar 8 is then rushed through, faster then the tempo reached in bar 4. The semiquavers which follow leading to the flutter tongued dotted minim, are performed with a slight rall, the dotted minim is held for around a semibreve, with a quaver rest before the final pianissimo demisemiquavers, which are played in time as a final flourish which rushes up to nothing.</p>	<p>Tempo is approximately quaver=124</p> <p>Pailthorpe follows the score quite closely, with minimal rubato used.</p> <p>There is almost an entire extra quaver rest at the end of bar 3. In the third group of notes in bar 4, the semiquaver to quaver, the rhythm is swapped around to a quaver followed by a semiquaver, which jumps to the fourth group of notes. The fourth group has slight rallentando.</p> <p>In bar 7, an accelerando is present through the third group of notes (semiquavers to a quaver)</p> <p>Slight breaks between the first three groups of notes, separate the phrases in bar 8.</p>	<p>Tempo is approximately quaver =142</p> <p>Follows score quite closely. few minor alterations follow. In bar 4, the third group of notes (four semiquavers followed by a quaver) there is a slight rall., starting on the third semiquaver. At the end of bar 7, after the triplet F natural quaver tied to crotchet, tied to a quaver, the subsequent quaver rest is cut a whole semiquaver shorter.</p> <p>The flutter tongued dotted minim at the end of bar 8 is cut approximately a semiquaver short. The run at the end of bar 8 begins slower, sitting on the E natural for around a semiquaver instead of a demisemiquaver. The run becomes faster.</p>
Presque lent. tendre	<p>Tempo is approximately ♩=70, with a generous rubato. Bar 13, (quaver, semi-quaver, quaver, quaver, dotted quaver) Zoller holds the fourth quaver barely longer than semiquaver,</p>	<p>The tempo here is quite fast, approximately quaver=90. The performers have a tendency to slow down towards the ends of phrases, yet manage to keep a sense of momentum.</p>	<p>Tempo is quaver=100. The performers do not deviate much from what is written throughout this section. There is no significant use of rubato throughout, the written</p>

	<p>which creates a rushed feel in this bar.</p> <p>In bar 27, the piano begins the “repeated” section (twice the piano plays the same phrase, which is then passed to the flute in bar 29, but displaced by one quaver) the tempo is significantly faster.</p>	<p>Rubato may be more effective with an upbeat tempo.</p> <p>The sense of stillness and the idea that the phrase could go on forever is not as apparent here though</p>	<p>rhythm is followed quite precisely.</p>
Un peu vif	<p>Quite a fast tempo.</p> <p>approximately quaver=145.</p> <p>faster than both <i>Un peu vif</i>, <i>avec fantaisie</i> sections.</p>	<p>This is performed at a similar tempo to the bird song.</p> <p>The rhythm is followed very closely, there is, no deviation from what is written.</p>	<p>In this section <math>\text{♩} = 170</math>, approximately, slightly faster than the birdsong quasi cadenzas. Tempo remains constant throughout.</p> <p>The rhythm is very even, stays at <math>\text{♩} = 170</math></p>
Un peu vif, avec fantaisie	<p>The minim in bar 46 is held almost an entire crotchet longer than indicated in the score.</p> <p>There is a slight accelerando until the quaver, semi quaver, quaver rhythm in bar 48, which is performed as equal quavers at a slightly slower tempo. In bar 49, the semiquaver followed by the quaver, the quaver is extended to a crotchet, and the tempo is slower even than the previous bar.</p> <p>In bar 50, appoggiaturas to semiquavers are very separate and slow! Almost as slow as the quavers in bars 48 and 49.</p> <p>In bar 52, the semiquaver to quaver followed by appoggiatura to semiquaver, repeated. He performs these notes very legato, the semiquaver is almost twice as long, and the notes which are marked with tenutos are almost imperceptibly separated. The appoggiatura to semiquaver however is fast, crisp and fortissimo.</p> <p>Bar 53, the final bar of the bird “cadenza” follows the score quite precisely, with the only deviations a slight break after the fluttered semibreve leading to the downwards demisemiquaver run which is not marked as a comma or rest in the score.</p> <p>Also, the pianissimo quavers which mark the end of the “cadenza” have a generous sense of rubato and are closer to crotchets in length.</p>	<p>Similar tempo to opening bird song.</p> <p>The rhythm is followed quite closely until bar 48, in the second set of demisemiquavers followed by quaver.-the quaver is played as a semi quaver, leading straight into the next group of notes.</p> <p>In bar 49, the first semiquaver followed by quaver are played evenly, as quavers.</p>	<p>The tempo here is slightly faster than opening bird song “cadenza”. The tempo seems to speed slightly, especially through demisemiquavers of bar 48.</p> <p>There was a slight accelerando through bar 48, until we reach the semiquaver followed by a quaver followed by a semiquaver. Although we hear very distinct quaver, semiquaver, quaver rhythm, the tempo slows slightly, and the accel. stops.</p> <p>49, the semiquaver to quaver are back in the fast tempo, and we speed through the groups of demisemiquavers until we reach the appoggiatura to semiquaver group on bar 50, through which there is a slight rall.</p> <p>The semiquaver to quaver at the end of bar 50 is played as even quavers.</p> <p>The final statement of the birdsong, two quavers at the end of bar 52, are played closer to dotted quavers/crotchets.</p>
Presque lent, tendre	<p>Begins at a fairly similar tempo to the first Presque lent tendre section, except more strictly in tempo. The phrases until bar 60 tend to rall. In bar 68, there is a considerable ritenuto from the piano.</p> <p>In bar 71, Zoller ignores a</p>	<p>Tempo is again <math>\text{♩} = 90</math>, and less rubato than the first Presque lent, tendre section.</p> <p>The section is performed fairly strictly in time.</p> <p>The end of bar 95 is</p>	<p>Tempo is around <math>\text{♩} = 100</math>, same as the first time it appears in the score.</p> <p>There is no real deviation from the tempo.</p>



	comma marked between first and second groups of notes. and shortens the quaver to almost a semiquaver at the end of the first group to jump straight into the second group of notes. the tempo picks up considerably in bar 72, subito accelerando. The following bars 76-82 are played similarly to the first Presque lent tendre section, which follows the score quite closely.	extended by an entire quaver.	
Un peu vif	Piano enters at almost exactly the same tempo as in first Un peu vif. crotchet=70. as does the flute. There is a slight accelerando in bar 88.	Same tempo as first occurrence.	The tempo is approximately quaver = 170, fairly close to the same tempo as the first occurrence. There is no deviation from the written rhythm. Snowden follows Messiaen's text carefully, other than extending the rest at the end of the section by almost a crotchet.
Vif	The tempo is approximately crotchet = 100. The tempo is fairly constant throughout until bar 114 where the tempo speeds slightly, and there seems to be instability, especially from bars 114-119.	This is taken at quite a slow tempo, at around crotchet=80. The rhythm is very strict and there is no sense of rubato through this section.	The tempo is approximately crotchet = 120. The rhythm is quite strict. there is no significant deviation from the pulse.

**Appendix Two**

Paula Hutchinson Outline

Section	Content Description
A	Flute Cadenza Incorporating Blackbird Calls
B	Blackbird Song (with Piano Accompaniment)
(transition)	
A	Section A Returns (Flute Cadenza)
B	Section B Returns (Blackbird Song)
(transition)	
C	Blackbird Call Accompanied by Rhythmic Pedals

Roger Nichols Outline

	Bars		
Subsection	A	A'	Content Description
1	1-3	44-46	Piano Atmosphere
2	3-8	46-53	Bird Cadenza
3	9-26	54-71	Combined Song
4	27-29	72-75	Expanded Octaves
5	29-35	75-82	Chords + Silent Bar
6	36-43	83-90	Un peu vif, Trills

Carla Huston Bell Outline

Measures	Section	Content Description
1-8	A	(Introduction) Flute Solo (Blackbird)
	B	
9-26	a	Theme
27-35	b	Commentary
36-43	transition	
44-53	A'	Flute Solo
	B'	
57-71	a'	Theme in Canonic Form
72-82	b'	Commentary
83-90	transition	
91-125	Coda	Permutations

