

COMPLETION REPORT

Research Summary

Composed by Olivier Messiaen (1908–92) in 1962 after his first visit to Japan, *Sept Haïkai: esquisses Japonaises pour piano solo et petit orchestre* tells of a marvelously rich Japanese influence. The word *Haïkai* (*haiku* in Japanese) in the work title refers to a genre of traditional Japanese poems that is known for their extreme brevity, comprising only three lines of 5, 7 and 5 syllables each. Despite Messiaen's warm liking of *haiku* and his choice of the work title, there is only scant evidence that his *Sept Haïkai* and the poetic genre of *haiku* are related. None of the seven pieces seems to have anything to do with *haiku* except that they are all rather short. Through the subtitle of *esquisses Japonaises*, Messiaen alludes to the seven pieces as sketches of Japan. With the exception of the 'Introduction', 'Coda' and the centerpiece called 'Gagaku', all the other pieces are named after places Messiaen visited during his trip to Japan to suggest a travelog conceived in musical terms. The 'Gagaku' piece, however, brings a remarkable change. Messiaen names it after the musical genre of *gagaku* rather than the literary genre of *haiku*, and discards the tone-painting of scenic locales featured in the flanking pieces. It is obvious that 'Gagaku' is the most intensely Japanese in tone and sensibility among his seven sketches of Japan. Hindu and Greek rhythms disappear from it, and the instrumentation also differs from the other pieces in significant ways.

Volume V (part 2) of Messiaen's posthumously published *Traité de rythme, de couleur et d'ornithologie* contains a detailed analysis of *Sept Haïkai*, in which he openly expressed that he had composed the 'Gagaku' piece with close reference to the Japanese *gagaku*, the venerable imperial court music of Japan. This referential sign is indispensable in the sense that someone who knows nothing about it may come up with a very different hearing of his 'Gagaku' piece. Messiaen's analysis is exemplary of his obsession about explaining his own music in that it supersedes all other published analyses of Messiaen's in scope, ventures beyond a mere analysis of the music to include an informative introduction to the Japanese *gagaku*, and stands out in its signification of cultural studies at work. Messiaen uses Western orchestral instruments to appropriate wind instruments that assume leading roles in the Japanese *gagaku*, namely the *hichiriki* (a double-reed bamboo pipe), the *ryūteki* (a transverse bamboo flute), and the *shō* (a portable mouth organ). Considerable resemblance is achieved by instructing the trumpet, two oboes and the cor anglais to play in unison, the piccolo and the soprano clarinet to double one another at varied intervals, and the eight violins to play non vibrato and sul ponticello.

Not mentioned in Messiaen's analysis of the 'Gagaku' piece is, however, the striking fact that it is also indebted to 'new' approaches tried out in his *Chronochromie* (1959–60), the orchestral work that directly precedes *Sept Haïkai*. Messiaen might have found the Japanese *gagaku* attractive not only because of its sheer beauty, but perhaps also because he hears in it vivid suggestion of his own music. The awe-inspiring stasis evoked in the Japanese *gagaku* by an unbroken series of block chords played by the *shō* in the upper register could have impressed Messiaen as inexplicably similar to his own creation of a layer of block chords played by as many as eight violins without the slightest break in the 'Strophes I and II' of *Chronochromie*. Furthermore, by doing away with the drumming characteristic of

the traditional *gagaku*, Messiaen added a range of metallic percussion to play his favourite permutation scheme. This gamelan-like percussion and the special permutation scheme lie at the root of Messiaen's aesthetics but have little if anything to do with the Japanese *gagaku*. This is evidence that Messiaen did not only study and copy the model, he went further and transformed it by reading into the paradigm elements that are characteristic of his own music. Cultural cross-fertilization rather than cultural preservation or mere apprenticeship is in play. I thus content that Messiaen's decision to appropriate the Japanese *gagaku* was conceived as a game of pseudo-plagiarism that incorporated cultural studies into its work process. Given Messiaen's detailed account of the aesthetics, history, instruments and sub-genres of the Japanese *gagaku*, I question if we should confine the reference system of his *Sept Haïkai* to *gagaku* and Japan, or perhaps we should extend it to his pursuit of cultural studies in an age of globalization, which led Messiaen and others to cherish through music the exotic as never before.

Publication of the Results of Research Project:

Verbal Presentation (Date, Venue, Name of Conference, Title of Presentation, Presenter, etc.)

Cheong Wai Ling, 'Culture as Reference in the 'Gagaku' of Messiaen's *Sept Haïkai*', paper presented at the International Conference on Music Theory and Analysis, organized by Department of Music Theory, Faculty of Music, University of Arts in Belgrade, Serbia, 2011.

Cheong Wai Ling, 'Timbre and Texture as Sound-colour in the 'Gagaku' of Messiaen's *Sept Haïkai* (1962)', paper presented at EuroMAC, Conservatorio di Musica 'S. Cecilia', Rome, 2011.

Thesis (Name of Journal and its Date, Title and Author of Thesis, etc.)

Book (Publisher and Date of the Book, Title and Author of the Book, etc.)

Cheong Wai Ling, 'Culture as Reference in the 'Gagaku' of Messiaen's *Sept Haïkai*', Matjaz Barbo / Thomas Hochradner ed., *Music and its Referential Systems* (Series Specula Spectacula III; Wien: Hollitzer, 2011), ISBN 978-3-99012-004-0 (Pb), ISBN 978-3-99012-005-7 (epub), ISBN 978-3-99012-018-7 (pdf), forthcoming.