Analysis of *Abîme des Oiseaux* by Messiaen

*Abîme des Oiseaux* means *Abyss of the Birds*. Messiaen wrote about it, ‘The abyss is Time with its sadness, its weariness. The birds are the opposite to Time; they are our desire for light, for stars, for rainbows, and for jubilant songs.’

There is a marked contrast between the slow, sad, weary sections and the fast, lively birdsong. I have organised my comments according to where expression marks are given for each new section.

1. **Lent, expressif et triste**
   - Marked *désolé*, clearly expressing the weariness of time. It has slow, spacy, cosmic character.
   - The whole section is based on the octatonic (Middle-Eastern eight-note) scale $C\#$, $D\#$, $E$, $F\#$, $G$, $A$, $B_b$, $C$, $D_b$, $E_b$, $E$, $F\#$, $G$, $A$, $B_b$.
   - Semi-tones, minor thirds and tritones contribute to the character of this section.
   - Phrases are clearly marked.
   - The two-bar theme is repeated almost exactly, except the final three notes are one scale note higher, ending where it starts on $F\#$. The tritone $F\#-C$ and minor thirds give its desolate character. The rhythmic pattern (in semi-quavers) is 7, 1, 2, 1, 2, 2, 1, 2, 2, 1.
   - Next phrase is the tritone
   - Next phrase also on octatonic scale leading in Bar 11 to a major seventh followed by three descending tritones.
   - Fades away at the end ready for ---

2. **Lent, sans presser, progressif et puissant**
   - This is a transition from the slow first section to the gay birdsong, consisting of a single note $F\#$ with crescendo from *ppp* to *fff*.

3. **Presque vif, gal, capricieux**
   - Marked *ensoleillé, comme un oiseau, tres libre de mouv* (sunny, like a bird, very free movement).
   - It includes repetition and some tritones ($A - E_b$, $C\# - G$), but with very different character to the first section. Pitch and rhythm appear to be
determined by imitating birdsong. I have not been able to discern any particular scale that the notes are drawn from.

- Very wide range of pitch, from $b$ to $e_b\flat_3$.

4. **Lent, sans presser, progressif et puissant**
   - Repeat of Section 2.
   - This interlude perhaps reminds one of the spacy backdrop of time to the delicate birdsong.

5. **Presque vif**
   - Another birdsong section, similar to 3.
   - Starts similarly to section 3, but with variations of pitch.
   - Other upward and downward runs develop those heard in section 3.

6. **Modéré**
   - Starts with a widely spaced arpeggio on $E, C\#$, $D$, $F$, $C\#$, $E$, $G$. This is an octatonic scale, but starting with $C\#$, $D$ rather than $C\#$, $D\#$ as at the start.

7. **Lent, expressif et triste**
   - The first five bars repeat section 1 an octave lower. The clarinet in low register has a very spacious tone.
   - The next part is a variation on the equivalent part of section 1, similar rhythmically and phrasing but variation in pitch.
   - The scale for much of this section is the same octatonic scale as in section 1, $F\#, G$, $A$, $B\flat$, $C$, $D\flat$, $E\flat$, $E$, $F\#$, $G$, $A$, $B\flat$, $C$, $C\#$.
   - After a major seventh followed by four descending tritones (a minor third lower than in section 1) it rises from $C\#$ though scale intervals $4^{th}$, $4^{th}$, $5^{th}$, $4^{th}$, culminating in a high D, which is not in the scale and has not sounded in this section before (though it did in the free birdsong).
   - The rest of this section is on the scale $G$, $G\#$, $A$, $B$, $C$, $D$, $E\flat$, $E$, $F$, $A\flat$, $A$, $B$, $C$, $D$, $E$, $G\#$, $C$, $D$. This seems fairly chromatic.

8. **Lent, sans presser, progressif et puissant**
   - As sections 2 and 4, but even greater *fortissimo*.

9. **Modéré**
• This is broadly an inversion of the arpeggios in section 6, taking in the notes F♯, C, G, A, B♭ from the original octatonic scale.

10. Presque vif
• Rapid birdsong–like run taking in notes A, B♭, B, D♯, F♯, G♯, C♯, F, G, B♭, C. The intervals in semi–tones are 1, 1, 4, 3, 2, 5, 4, 2, 3, 2, which seems chromatic.

11. Lent
• Brief four–note coda from the original scale and theme, with intervals – minor second, minor third, tritone – all emphasising the desolate mood of the abyss of time. Each note is fortissimo and emphasised.

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