

Put to Music by Messiaen

MARTIN LODGE

OLIVIER MESSIAEN (1908–92) was one of the most influential composers and teachers of the 20th century, not just within France but internationally. He is noted for inventing new techniques of organising musical materials such as pitch and rhythm, but is also remembered for his lifelong love of birdsong. Many of his greatest works combine visionary Christian mysticism with the songs of birds, whom Messiaen regarded as superlative and divinely created musicians.

Several New Zealand composers studied in Messiaen's class at the Paris Conservatoire during the 1960s, and his teaching has had a lasting and direct influence on New Zealand music through them. These pupils included Robin Maconie (b.1942) and Jenny McLeod (b.1941). McLeod, a leading New Zealand composer with a striking and individual musical voice, has for some years lived at Pukerua Bay, north of Wellington, with a view across the sea to Kapiti Island. Today the island is a bird sanctuary, and as such, for McLeod, it has come to symbolise Messiaen. This symbolism occurred to her immediately when she moved to Pukerua Bay in the 1980s. When she wrote to Messiaen and told him of this, it prompted him to plan one day to visit this 'land of birds' as he called it. His death in 1992 meant the visit never happened, but McLeod has written of what occurred the day she learned of his death:

a veritable choir of little fantails came into the pear tree outside my back door. I heard them from the other side of the house – I'd never heard such a sound. And when I went to look out, there they all were – sitting on every branch and singing what seemed to me to be a 'tiny requiem', the most touching and perfect farewell for someone who loved birds so much that whenever he felt depressed he needed only to hear one to feel happy again.



Aerial view of Kapiti Island (1994), looking north to south.

The conservation potential of the island was seen as early as 1870. It was reserved as a bird sanctuary in 1897 but it was not until 1987 that the New Zealand Department of Conservation took over the island. In the 1980s and 1990s efforts were made to return the island to a natural state.

Messiaen's influence on New Zealand music was reciprocated by the inspiration which New Zealand birdsong gave him. Although he was never able to visit the country in person, he got to know the sounds of New Zealand birds in the 1960s thanks to a recording given to him by Robin Maconie. The bellbird and tui, for example, appear in his large 1964 orchestral work, 'Couleurs de la Cité Celeste'. Messiaen's interest in New Zealand birdsong continued to the end of his life, helped by further recordings sent to him by McLeod. His final composition, 'Concert à Quatre', includes transcriptions of the songs of the kākāpō and the popokatea or bush canary. As it happens, the popokatea is one of the most common birds living on the Kapiti Island bird sanctuary today.