Messiaen and His Milieu
An Exploration of Stephen Schloesser's Visions of Amen: The Early Life and Music of Olivier Messiaen

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Contributing a book that provides new insights on the legendary French composer, Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992) is quite a challenge considering the vast amount of literature already published on him. Olivier Messiaen, the direct descendent of the French Impressionists Claude Debussy, Gabriel Fauré, and Maurice Ravel, is considered as a towering musical figure of the twentieth century. He created a new musical language centering on his Catholic faith (most of his works have religious themes), ornithology (he recorded and stylized in a scientific manner countless bird songs from all over the world), different theories on time based on scientific writings, and numerous innovative experiments with non-familiar rhythms and modes. Additionally, he created the libretto to his opera, Saint François d’Assises, verses to his own songs, and many literary texts that attest to his tremendous talent as a writer.

Numerous studies have been published on the composer, his works, and his philosophy, so to write another book would seem a redundancy. Such is not the case with Stephen Schloesser’s Visions of Amen: the early life and music of Olivier Messiaen. This book uncovers neglected truths about the composer’s life and untrodden sources of inspiration and influence. Also, this study offers numerous fascinating insights and unique perspectives not only on his music.
but also on the countless works of literature and art, along with extra-musical topics. In reading this book, professional musicians, amateurs, and even general audiences will find subjects that relate to their respective interests. *Visions of Amen* is a well-structured book and a compelling read, which requires and is able to retain the utmost attention from the reader. The author in his introduction articulates in a succinct manner his objectives and the structure of the book. Topics are presented in chronological order: the study of Messiaen's parents, the first Messiaen works as mourning compositions for his mother's death, synesthesia, World War I, *Visions de l’Amen*, the Tristan Trilogy, the pursuit of ornithology, the post-war works. Some of his objectives are different from other studies on Messiaen as Schloesser has personal perspectives on the composer's style.

Many books have been published on the musician, but this work sheds a new light on the numerous sources that influenced and inspired Messiaen. What makes this book profoundly different from other Messiaen biographies is the riveting portrait of the composer's mother, poet Cécile Sauvage. The author presents her as one of the strongest, and possibly the most meaningful influence on Messiaen. Indeed, Cécile, who died when he was an adolescent, had a life-long impact on him. It is largely thanks to her that he developed his deep love and profound knowledge of literature, which informed most of his music. Schloesser provides complete and well-researched studies on both Messiaen's parents, exploring deeply into their collective upbringings, lives, and works. It is through his thorough research that the reader learns that the composer's mother, Cécile Sauvage was an extraordinary poet in her own right, and not solely a devoted mother and wife. Indeed, Schloesser gives detailed and often insightful analyses of her literary work, tracing in her poetry influences by writers/poets such as François Villon, Paul Éluard, Paul Claudel, Blaise Pascal, and Alphonse de Lamartine to name a few. He also reveals that she was an extremely complex personality. Under his pen, Cécile emerges as an ambitious albeit frustrated writer/poet who took the initiative to publish her writings with the prestigious literary review *Mercure de France*, a passionate woman torn with illicit longings for her lover, and paradoxically an affectionate and understanding mother, whom her son Olivier remembered as his “dame de mes pensées” (lady of my thoughts).

Schloesser also offers a vivid portrayal of Messiaen's father, Pierre Messiaen, an editor, writer, and translator (he translated each of Shakespeare's plays into French as well as many English poems by Coleridge and Keats). Schloesser cites extensive passages from Pierre's memoirs, “Images” which reveal the author's thoughts on many aspects of the Messiaen household, as well as various other topics such as a deeply touching account of his personal experience of the