

Professor Alan Ngim
Music Appreciation
Lesson Plan / Project

Composers of classical music have often been inspired by nature in all its forms. Respighi's famous *Pines of Rome*, Debussy's *La Mer*, Hovhaness's *Mysterious Mountain*, Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals*, and George Crumb's *Voice of the Whale* are only a few examples of a very long list. But one composer stands out as particularly obsessed.

20th century French composer Olivier Messiaen was especially fond of nature. After visiting the Canyonlands in Utah, Messiaen wrote *From the Canyons to the Stars*, for example. (I am inspired by his music to make a trip to Utah sometime.) Messiaen was also an amateur ornithologist. He would listen to birds and write their songs down in musical notation, while his wife recorded the birdsong for later reference. These songs appear throughout Messiaen's compositions in astonishing variety. Some works bear titles indicating the inspiration, for example: *Le merle noir* (the blackbird), *Oiseaux Exotiques* (Exotic Birds, a composition in which he intentional juxtaposed birdsong from many different countries – a sound that would, of course, not be heard in nature), and *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, seven volumes of solo piano music that consists solely of birdsong.

Perhaps the most amazing example of Messiaen's skill in combining birdsong appears in his opera *Saint François d'Assise*. Messiaen chose this saint not solely because of his deep Catholicism, but also because of François' ability to communicate with birds. In one scene a tree is filled with scores of birds each singing their individual songs. It took Messiaen nearly ten years of solid work to complete the opera. He expected it to be his last work. And in this scene, he was fearless in writing an outrageously complex musical texture. Conductors at first said that it was impossible to conduct. Luckily, they have somehow managed and the piece has been recorded and performed to acclaim.

To introduce students to this grand work, I have dreamed up a way to encourage them to create their own tree of birds. This would be combined with some information about wildlife habitats and the importance of protecting natural resources, in particular, songbirds. This project then would be followed by my presentation of Messiaen and his remarkable musical interpretation of the language of birds.

PROJECT

Objective: Students will learn about the significance and importance of nature through the study of birds and birdsong. This will lead to a presentation of composer Olivier Messiaen. The intended outcome is an aesthetic appreciation of nature as well as an improved understanding of natural resources.

Assignment: Choose a bird. Bring a recording of the bird's song with a one-page information sheet to class to share. The fact sheet must contain the following:

- 1) The bird name (including scientific name and family)
- 2) Location (where does this bird live?)
- 3) A picture of the bird
- 4) The bird's diet
- 5) How common? Is this bird common, endangered, extinct? What are the environmental pressures on this animal?
- 6) Any other interesting information about the bird

For the recording, you may do any of the following: make a recording from nature, take a recording from the internet, bring a birdcall, or imitate the bird yourself. You must be able to reproduce the birdsong in class. This may mean playing the recording from your cell phone, for example.

I strongly recommend that you find the bird song first, and then find information about the bird. For the bird in Example 1, it is very difficult to find a recording of its song.

See Example 1.

You will be introducing your bird to the class, so be prepared to play your birdsong.

LESSON PLAN

- 1) Students play their individual bird songs as one-page fact sheets are simultaneously taped up on the wall to create a visual "tree." Students give the bird name and location and the birds may be grouped in the tree according to where they are found in the world.
- 2) Students play their bird sounds in groups according to where the birds may be found, giving a profile of sound for particular areas in the world.
- 3) Professor discusses the impact of various environmental stresses, including cats and availability of nesting locations, on bird populations.
- 4) Professor introduces Messiaen, his music, and the use of nature in the composer's output.
- 5) Professor plays recording of real birds grouped in a tree, followed by the students playing their birdsongs simultaneously, and finally Messiaen's interpretation of a tree filled with birds.
- 6) Students are encouraged to give feedback, ask questions, and explore Messiaen's music further.

FOLLOW-UP ASSIGNMENTS

Some possible follow-up assignments could include a class field trip to listen to birds in the wild. This could be especially interesting for music theory students, who could be challenged to notate some of the unique rhythms and melodies of the birds.

Students could also be asked to report on a different work of Messiaen's that also takes nature as the subject matter.

There is also a very interesting (to me, at least) video on Messiaen as a composer. The video includes spectacular shots of snow-capped mountains, and shows Messiaen and his wife recording birdsong in nature. This would be an excellent video to follow the lesson above.

EXAMPLE 1

Scarlet Finch (*Haematospiza sipahi*)



Family: Fringillidae

Location: Temperate forests of the Himalayas, west of central Nepal. Also found in Northeast India and as South Asia as far south as Thailand.

Status: Threatened – least concern

Diet: seeds and bugs (arthropods)

Other information: The name “sipahi” means soldier in Hindi, and refers to the red color on military uniforms worn in India.