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# The Musical Language in Messiaen's *Catalogue d'oiseaux*: “La Chouette hulotte”

Glasbeni jezik v Messiaenovem  
*Katalogu ptičev*  
»Lesna sova«

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## IZVLEČEK

Članek predstavlja analizo skladbe *Lesna Sova* iz *Kataloga ptičev* Oliviera Messiaena. Glavna značilnost tega dela se skriva v reprezentaciji strahu sov in v 'nočni' glasbi. Messiaenov jezik *mode de valeurs*, ki reprezentira 'noč' in harmonični jezik ukajanja lesne sove, je značilen za Messiaenovo glasbo.

## ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of Olivier Messiaen's 'La Chouette hulotte' from *Catalogue d'oiseaux*. The significance of this work lies in the representation of fear by the owls and 'night' music. Messiaen's language of *mode de valeurs* representing the 'night' and the harmonic language of the tawny owl's calls identifies Messiaen's music.

## Introduction

Although short, one of the movements of the large piano cycle of thirteen-movements in the seven books of *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, 'La Chouette hulotte', in which the composer distils his emotion of fear through the owl's call, is perhaps the most dramatic. Together, 'L'Alouette lulu' and this piece comprise the two nocturnal movements in book 3. In the *Catalogue*, in comparison with his earlier birdsong works, such as *Reveil des oiseaux* (1953) and *Oiseaux exotiques* (1955–56), not only has the composition style in Messiaen's birdsong writing changed drastically but the manner in which these avian songs were structured has also been significantly altered. According to Hill and Simeone<sup>1</sup>, 'La Chouette hulotte' was among the first six pieces Messiaen completed of his *Catalogue*, following the order 'Le Chocard des alpes', 'L'Alouette lulu', 'La Chouette hulotte', 'Le Loriot', 'L'Alouette calandrelle' and 'Le Courlis cendré'. 'L'Alouette lulu' and 'La Chouette hulotte' were first arranged to be adjacent, although their order was switched in the final version, when the thirteen works had been completed. With the delicate song of the woodlark, 'L'Alouette lulu' provides a serene nocturne that lies in total contrast to 'La Chouette hulotte'.

*Catalogue* highlights not only Messiaen's expertise in ornithology but also the different structures that the composer constructs from his authentic transcription of birdsong together with his musical language in each movement, which together result in the uniqueness of this piano cycle. The compositional process of the *Catalogue* might be compared to that of a documentary work, in which the composer personally went to different places to transcribe the birdsongs and the 'sound' of the habitats. Unlike other pieces in the *Catalogue*, which are structured around features such as the passing of time, using sunrise or sunset as a frame for the birdsongs, 'La Chouette hulotte' focuses only on the evocation and representation of the night (dark) and the owl's call, as dramatically seen through the medium of human emotion. As in the preface of this work,

*L'appel de la Hulotte est tantôt lugubre et douloireux, tantôt vague et inquiétant (avec un tremblement étrange), tantôt vociféré dans l'épouvanter comme un cri d'enfant assassiné!*

(Sometimes the call of the tawny owl is lugubrious and sorrowful, sometimes it is vague and disquieting (with a strange tremor), and sometimes a terrified shriek, like the cry of a murdered child!)

The observations of the owl were made at two o'clock in the middle of the night in the woods of Saint-Germain-en-Laye and at Petichet near Grenoble. Other indications appended to each subject along with the score clearly describe the specific expression. In other words, the darkness and the 'frightful' owl's call dominate the work; thus, the subjective feelings of the composer are seemingly more substantially important here than in other pieces.

<sup>1</sup> Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 221.

Unlike other movements, the focus of this owl piece is economically drawn entirely to the composer's emotion and the darkness of night. One of the reasons why Messiaen's entire composition has its own significant 'sound' is his faithful use of his musical languages throughout, although this is combined with transformations that often disguise the original version. With the composer claiming the authenticity of his birdsong transcription together with the consideration of his expertise in ornithology, the identity of Messiaen's masterpiece lies in how the composer juxtaposes these nature calls together with his musical languages. Considering the theme of *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, the subject of this piece is undoubtedly the tawny owl's call, but the *mode de valuers* used to represent the night music is nonetheless an important element in Messiaen's musical language. With the simplicity of the owl calls and the focus on the 'night' music, this article analyses both the *mode de valeurs* and Messiaen's transcription of the owl's call to integrate the intended emotion and narrative in this work.

## The structure

As in other movements of the *Catalogue*, birdsongs and non-birdsong subjects specified by the composer are the main sources that can be used to identify each individual structure. Apart from portraying the intended subjects, these subjects, in particular the non-birdsong subjects, function to provide a framework and serve as a backbone to the piece. Despite its short length, the subjects in 'La Chouette hulotte' are used economically since, unlike other movements, the work does not involve other species of birds or broader background subjects, only a tight focus on the owl family and the darkness. Three main subjects frame the construction of this piece: the owl family, comprising the long-eared owl, the little owl and the tawny owl; the 'night' section; and the 'fear' motif. Mapped by these items, the work is structured in two main parts (Group 1 and Group 2), the second being an elaborated repetition of the first (Table 1). In other words, each section or subject in the latter part grows from its fundamental exposition in the first part.

Taking account of the nature aspects in *Catalogue*, the arrangement of the subjects is to a certain extent systematic, which explains why the distinctive architecture of each movement is so significant. In this owl piece, the ingredients are introduced in Group 1; two sections of the owls' calls occur, always preceded by the 'fear' motif. The fundamental characteristics of all three owls' calls are presented in the first owls' calls group (Ci – bar 33-37), while some development of these motifs is seen in the second group (Cii – bar 43-56), though the soloist of this piece, the tawny owl, is particularly featured.

Silences or pauses in Messiaen's *Catalogue* are nevertheless elements that should not be neglected in terms of both the quality of nature and the structure of the work. The long pauses at bar 61 mark the end of the first group and the beginning of the second group. The recurring 'night' section marks the beginning of Group 2 and is followed by the other subjects, as in Group 1. All subjects in the second group are almost twice as long as those in the first, though the order within the owls' group is altered slightly. As seen in Table 1, the three species from the same family, the long-eared owl (Cx), the little owl (Cy) and the tawny owl (Cz), are always structured together

Group	Subject/ motif	Details & Bar number	Indica- tion	Indication- Summary
<b>Group 1</b>	Night	Mode in chromatic rhythm: bars 1-26		A
	Fear	Single melodic line: bars 26-32		B
	Owl	Long-eared owl: bar 33	Cx	Ci
		Little owl: bar 34-36	Cy	
		Tawny owl (the dominant bird): bar 37	<b>Cz</b>	
	Fear	Single melodic line: bars 38-42		B
	Owl	Long-eared owl: bars 43-47	Cx	Cii
		Little owl: bars 48-50	Cy	
		Tawny owl: bars 51-56	<b>Cz</b>	
		codetta passage of the tawny owl : bars 57-60	Cs	
	Pause	Silence: bars 61		PAUSE

Group	Subject/ motif	Details & Bar number	Indica- tion	Indication- Summary
<b>Group 2</b>	Night	Mode in chromatic duration (longer): bars 62-116		A
	Fear	Varied: bars 117-122		B
	Owl	Long-eared owl: bars 123-126	Cx	Ciii
		Little owl: bars 127-128	Cy	
		Long-eared owl: bars 129-130	Cx	
		Little owl: bars 131-133	Cy	
		Tawny owl (longest): bars 134-137	<b>Cz</b>	
		Codetta: bar 138-143	Cs	
<b>Coda</b>	Owl	Tawny owl: bars 144-152	<b>Cz</b>	D
	Silence: bars 153			
	Resonance	Interval 7 <sup>th</sup> using C-A motif from the tawny owl's call: bar 154		

Table 1: The Structure of 'La Chouette hulotte'.

in a section without the interruption of any background music. Bird songs or calls arranged in the same order for different strophes in the same piece describes many works from the *Catalogue*. This applies similarly in 'La Chouette hulotte'; however, more distinctively, a unity can be seen in that the three birds are from the same family and each presents a similar characteristic – the gliding call.

After the codetta of bars 138-143, the tawny owl's strophe appears again but is magnified so that it signifies human emotion, serving more as the coda of the piece. Followed by the fading call of the tawny owl, the work ends with four resonant chords. Overall, the structure of 'La Chouette hulotte' is clear and straightforward. The climax comes at the coda, the most distinctive section, where the composer summarizes the piece by merging the tawny owl's call with his own emotion (as described by the composer in the score<sup>2</sup>).

### The night music – the use of chromatic duration

Most of the non-birdsong subjects in *Catalogue* are derived and transformed from the composer's musical language, as introduced in his early works. While this provides a strong essence for the identity of Messiaen's repertoire, it is noteworthy how these languages pertain to the designated subjects in portraying the sound that he experienced through the birdsong journey. The 'night' music in 'La Chouette hulotte' bring us back to *Cantéjodjayâ* (1949) and *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités* (1949), in which the mode of a chromatic duration is highlighted. When mentioning *mode de valuers*, much analysis and the influence of Messiaen's serialism to his descendant or pupils have been discussed in depth<sup>3</sup>. Works that involve serially oriented passages have been analysed in detail, such as in *Livre d'orgue*<sup>4</sup> and *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*<sup>5</sup>, although there is less discussion on the use by the composer of *mode de valuers* in a descriptive context, as in 'La Chouette hulotte'. Through most of the *mode de valeurs* passages, it is customary for Messiaen to use a consistent 2/4 time, and this appears similarly in the 'night' music from 'La Chouette hulotte'. From the chromatically arranged pitch, value and dynamic indications, the chromatic duration of the three elements in these two 'night' passages is based on a single mode, which is constructed of one to forty-nine semiquavers, covering a range of four octaves descending chromatically from a' (Example 1). The level of attack, one of the three criteria in the mode of *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*, however, is omitted in the mode of 'La Chouette hulotte'.

Although based on a single mode, each voice in the chromatic duration of the 'night' section uses a wider range of notes. In fact, this is contrary to the principle found in *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*, with each voice only restricted to a twelve-note mode (Example 2). Here, it is essential to mention the precursor to *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*,

2 *Comme un cri d'enfant assassiné*

3 Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1975); Paul Griffiths. *Olivier Messiaen and the music of time* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012); Mark Delaere, "Olivier Messiaen's Analysis Seminar and the Development of Post-War Serial Music," *Music Analysis* 21, no. 1 (2002): 35–51; Allen Forte and Richard Evans, "Olivier Messiaen as Serialist," *Music Analysis* 21, no.1 (2002): 3–34; Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*; Paul McNulty, "Messiaen's Journey towards Asceticism," in *Messiaen Studies*, ed. Robert Sholl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 63–77.

4 Forte and Evans, "Olivier Messiaen as Serialist," 3–34.

5 Richard Toop, "Messiaen/Goeyvaerts, Fano/Stockhausen, Boulez," *Perspectives of New Music* 13, no. 1 (1974): 141–169.

*Cantéjodjayâ*, in which Gareth Healy<sup>6</sup> explained the occurrence of *mode de valeurs* passages constructed using a twelve-tone method. However, by looking at another aspect of its chromatic approach, each voice in the short passage of *mode de valeurs* could be set according to an eight-note mode (Example 3). In contrast, one can see that in 'La Chouette hulotte', the top voice itself covers the first to the thirty-fifth durations from the mode; the middle voice covers the first to the forty-fourth durations, and the lowest covers the sixth to the forty-ninth durations. Therefore, while the overlapping between the voices appears to be much greater, the wider range of each voice is clearly apparent.

Example 1: Mode of Chromatic Duration ('Night Music').

6 Gareth Healey, "Messiaen's 'Cantéjodjayâ': A 'Missing' Link," *The Musical Times* 148, no. 1898 (2007): 59–72.



(Division I is used in the upper piano staff.)



(Division II is used in the middle piano staff.)



(Division III is used in the middle piano staff.)

*Example 2: Mode de valeurs et d'intensités (from the preface of the score).*



*Example 3: mode de valeur of Cantéjodjayâ.*

### Chromatic duration in 'La chouette hulotte': the differences with *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*

1. All three voices are based on a mode.
2. No use of a mode of attack.
3. Some notes are shared between the three voices.
4. There is a plan of dynamics (Figure 1). The piece is in a symmetrical form, and the same letter-name notes always use the same dynamic (example: all F# notes are *mf*).

A	G#	G	F#	F	E	D#	D	C#	C	B	Bb	A
<i>fff</i>	<i>ff</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>mf</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>pp</i>	<i>ppp</i>	<i>pp</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>mf</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>ff</i>	<i>fff</i>

[ ]

Figure 1: The symmetrical arrangement of dynamic in the 'night' music.

However, the issue of whether the increase of range in each voice will obscure the distinction between the layering of voices in this passage is worth noting. In the analysis of *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités* in Messiaen's *Traité Tome III*<sup>7</sup>, the composer explained that the three voices are moving as if in three different tempos; the top voice *presto* (based on demisemiquavers), the middle *moderato* (semiquavers) and the lowest *andante* (quavers). This description nevertheless fits in the chromatic duration passage in 'La Chouette hulotte'. Although the arrangement of the three voices follows the same mode with a greatly increased range in each voice, fewer notes (of longer duration) are increasingly used in the lower voices. The lower voice is inclined more to the lower note of the mode and functions as a bass to encapsulate the two voices above, serving to create much resonance. At the end of the second appearance of the 'night' music, the top voice concludes the section with thirty-third and thirty-fifth durations, as if allowing 'time' for the two lower voices to come to an end.

While the level of attack is not a criterion in the mode for 'La Chouette hulotte', the dynamic levels are in a way chromatically organized in the form of symmetry (Figure 1). In this system of organization, one dynamic level is shared among two different notes, except for the two pivotal notes – the softest, D#, is *ppp* and the loudest note, A, is *fff*. These dynamics are used for the notes, regardless of their register. Accordingly, the dynamic with the greatest contrast is achieved for the tritone interval A – D#. This results in a lesser dynamic being obtained when the notes are closer; in semitones, for example. In turn, the dynamic increases according to the size of the interval. Due to the symmetrical arrangement, the dynamic contrast lessens after the pivot of the tritone interval, even though the size of the intervals is greater (after the tritone interval, although the size of the interval increases, the dynamic contrast gradually lessens). For example: for the interval A to Bb (a 9<sup>th</sup>), when this interval is inverted, it becomes a 2<sup>nd</sup>, fulfilling the above statement that the closer intervals have less dynamic contrast.

Here, we can notice that Messiaen has presented his 'night' music in several ways. The use of the mode in 'La Chouette hulotte' is certainly an effective way to evoke a feeling of uneasiness and instability. The chromatic duration provides the rhythmic fluctuations and the inconsistency in the different dynamic levels of the notes. Although the mode is written in strict 2/4 time, similar to *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités* and *Cantéjodjayâ*, the effect of the time signature does not seem to be heard, but the bar lines perhaps serve as a guide to make the complicated rhythm visually more convenient. In *Catalogue*, we see some other 'night' scenes portrayed in various manners. A contrasting example is the 'pond' music in 'La Rousserolle effarvatte', which reflects a serene (though mysterious) atmosphere at night with the use of a consistent 9<sup>th</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie (1949–1992): Tome III* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1999), 126.

interval together with a gradual augmentation in rhythm. Another example of tranquil ‘night’ music is ‘L’Alouette lulu’, which uses a progression involving a four-chord motif in a slow tempo, which at the same time functions to support the woodlark’s delicate song. What makes the chromatic duration of the ‘night’ passage in ‘La Chouette hulotte’ so remarkable is that this section is presented as an independent section that serves as the background music for the entire piece, where it does not correspond directly to the owl’s call. This provides an atmospheric prelude to the work and is followed by the laconic ‘fear’ motif that triggers and anticipates the owl’s call. The replacement of a different level of attack in the mode with the dynamic level might be compatible with what Messiaen intended to portray – the great uneasiness of the ‘night’ music. With the specific dynamic designated to each note, the composer probably has more control in generating a sense of unpredictability, to create a feeling of anxiety in the darkness.

### The ‘Fear’ motif

With only a stark single line of repetitive notes, Messiaen transcribes the frightful feeling by imitating the timpani’s timbre (Example 4). This short motif, which could be described as a bridge between the night music and the owl’s call, uses the repetitive C as the fundamental note, occasionally with an anacrusis of Db and F#. The F# no doubt contributes to a tritone interval, which is one of Messiaen’s idiosyncrasies for melodic contour<sup>8</sup>. The simplicity of this single melodic line, thus supplemented with inconsistent dynamic markings and articulations, contributes to the presentation of ‘fear’. The effect of this is analogous to the fluctuations in the heartbeat felt in the dark and in silence. There are three appearances of this ‘fear’ motif throughout the whole work, and each phrase is slightly extended from the previous occurrence. The anacrusis Db becomes a new pitch the second time, although its importance becomes more apparent in its third appearance in part two. This acts as a disruption to the repetitive note, suggesting a state of worry or ‘fear’, as indicated by the composer. In the third phrase, its occurrence as an anacrusis appears more regular, regardless of the inconsistent rhythm in each bar, perhaps signifying an increasing uneasiness of the ‘night’, as expressed in an emotional state.

This ‘fear’ motif presents a simplicity in contrast to the dark complexity of the night music. One interesting point arises between these two background subjects. The mode for the ‘night’ music uses the A for the highest and lowest pitches, while the ‘fear’ motif focuses on C. Both notes, the main pitches of the tawny owl’s call, are in fact the most important pitches for the entire work and will be discussed later in this article. Performing the role of background music, as opposed to the owls’ calls groups, both the night music and fear motif are inclined to the lower register, while the owls’ calls are in a higher range. Another short non-birdsong motif perhaps needs to be mentioned. Without Messiaen’s indication for the release of the pedal, the last interval at the end of the piece (*laissez résonner*) is sustained, allowing the resonance to vibrate and slowly

<sup>8</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language: Text. Volume 1, Volume 2/Musical Examples* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1956).

vanish into the 'night'. Interestingly, the composer does not neglect the C-A motif (Example 10), written in the inner voice, in which the thumb should mark the two notes (as indicated by Messiaen at the end of the score<sup>9</sup>).

Example 4: 'Fear' Music.

### Owls' calls

This is the only work in the *Catalogue* where Messiaen focuses solely on the owl family, and no other species (these are commonly portrayed in other movements) are observed. Although the identity of each owl's call is clearly exhibited, the piano writing of the gliding effect is a distinctive feature of the piece, considering how this can be executed effectively using the percussive nature of this instrument. Another aspect that should not be overlooked is that the gliding call is one of the most common features in the palette of birdsong characteristics, and understanding how Messiaen transcribes these owls' calls for the piano is certainly crucial. The detailed description in the composer's cahier<sup>10</sup> undoubtedly accentuates Messiaen's emphasis on the importance of performing this transcription with full awareness of the owl that he observed.

*Eagle owl: two large plumes of feathers, incorrectly called 'ears', give it the physiognomy of a great cat. Its great wingspan deployed in flight. Breeches of beige feathers. Magnificent breast, light russet and beige-grey, flecked with maroon. [...] Its eyes are marvellous: very black, shining, surrounded by an immense orange circle, they appear widened as if in terror before some vision of the beyond, like those of the Delphic Sybil (Michelangelo's ceiling of the Sistine Chapel), [...] A magnificent long-eared owl suffering horribly, almost crucified, nailed by its wing to a post.*

9 Marquer le do et le la du pouce de main droite.

10 Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 219.

## The Tawny Owl: the harmonic modification of the C-A motif gliding call

Although the tawny owl is the soloist of this piece, due to its short two-chord motif, its strophe does not appear completely independently but is always positioned after the calls of the long-eared owl and the little owl. The strong dynamic and dense chords representing the tawny owl may be the reason why this call is positioned at the end of the sections - this may create a sense of momentum from the more delicate calls of its two companions. Despite the simplicity of the two-chord glides, the consistency of the quaver rest before the tawny owl's call also marks the independent, idiosyncratic call. In *The Messiaen Companion*<sup>11</sup>, Hill explains how Messiaen transcribes the tawny owl's glissando into music:

*[...] Messiaen managed to create an illusion by a careful judgment of pedaling allied to fading dynamics. [...] The music begins to acquire a sense of movement, first in a series of tiny variations in which the C-A is the common factor, varied in harmonization, then in a primitive development, which is simply a diminuendo. (the owl fading into the distance).*

With reference to Messiaen's *Traité*<sup>12</sup>, a notation of the tawny owl's call was made in Aube at one o'clock in the morning on 5 April 1977. According to this notation, each phrase is constructed of two slightly different calls or 'cri' (Example 5). The first (a) is a more direct glide, preceded by an anacrusis and perhaps in a faster tempo. The second type of call (b) is preceded by a few repetitive notes that gradually become louder before the glides. It is possible that glide (b) is slower, given that Messiaen was able to identify the more elaborate chromatic descending notes of the call, thus emphasizing the inner pitches between C-F# (Example 5 x)<sup>13</sup>. The description in *Traité* serves as a source of reference to show how the composer intended the gliding sound using the chromatic notes. According to his description of these two types of gliding calls<sup>14</sup>:

Gliding (a): *anacrouse, accent très fort et très clair, muette. (comme un cri terrorisé de femme ou d'enfant qu'on assasine - hurlement terrifiant!)*

Gliding (b): *l'anacrouse est sèche, piquée, comme un pizzi Bartók, les 3 notes qui précèdent l'accent sont nettement scandées et percutées - l'accent est bref - il est suivi d'une désinence tremblée, étrange, comme une gamme chromatique d'Onde, au timbre mystérieux et trémolé - comme un hoquet d'angoisse.*

11 Peter Hill, "Piano Music II" in *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), 327

12 Messiaen, *Traité de Rythme*, Vol. 1 Tome V, 229.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.



Example 5: Tawny owl's call taken in 5 April 1977, Notation from Messiaen's *Traité* Vol. 5, p. 22.

Although the notation in *Traité* was made after he composed 'La Chouette hulotte', there is an extremely close resemblance between the two. Only two minor dissimilarities are found: firstly, the second glide (b) does not resolve to A but to F#, presenting instead a tritone interval; secondly, with reference to the score, the gliding call that appears as a couplet without any anacrusis (c1, c2 and so forth) is slightly different from the notation. For the following analysis, since this is not a lengthy piece, each gliding call is numbered in order; for example (a1), (b2) or (c1). For the following discussion, the harmonic relationship between the owl's calls has been described in Table 2.

Other than the two patterns of the gliding call, there is no significance in the melodic contour of the tawny owl's call. What is significant in this call is how the glides are developed in various harmonies using the C-A motif as a skeleton. In other words, the tawny owl's calls are based entirely on changes of density and harmony, particularly in developing the various 'frightful' sounds. By referring to all three owls' sections, Ci, Cii, and Ciii, it is noticed that intervals are transferred and exchanged among the sections. Similar pitches are used repeatedly to a certain extent, but they are arranged in a combination of different orders and registers.

Strophe	Types of gliding calls	Related pitches	New pitches	Description
Ci	c1: bar 37		<b>C-A</b> <b>C#-Bb</b> D-B Eb-C#	Open interval C-A, C#-Bb
Cii	a1: bar 51	<b>C-A</b> <b>C# - Bb</b>	F#-Eb Db-Bb	Closed interval C-A, C#-Bb
	b1: bar 53 b2 (octave): bar 55	<b>C-A</b> <b>C# - Bb</b> <b>F#-Eb</b> <b>Db-Bb</b>		Using the same harmony but a different gliding call pattern
	c2: bar 54	<b>C-A</b> <b>F#-Eb</b> <b>Db-Bb</b>	G-E F-D Eb-C	The above harmony is accumulated on the right hand, left hand added with new pitches.
	c3: bar 56	<b>C-A</b> <b>Eb-C</b> <b>G-E</b> <b>F#-D#</b>		Using the same pitches from the previous harmony
Ciii	b3: bar 134	<b>C-A</b>	A-F# Ab-F E-C# Bb-G	Second group - new pitches for the first gliding call in this section
	c2: bar 135 b2: bar 136			
	c4: 137	<b>C-A</b> <b>Db-Bb</b> <b>Eb-C#</b>	G#-F# A-G	Similar as previous chords.

Strophe	Types of gliding calls	Related pitches	New pitches	Description
Coda	a2:bar 144	<b>C-A</b> <b>D#-C#</b> <b>G-F#</b>	C#-B B-G	A mixture with new and previous harmony.
	b4: bar 145	<b>C-A</b> <b>Db-Bb</b> <b>G-F#</b> <b>E-C#</b>	A-G B-E	First gliding call after the second codetta (Cs), extended to more new pitches
	c5: bar 146	<b>C-A</b> <b>Db-Bb</b> <b>A-G</b> <b>C-A</b>	Ab-F F-Db	The C-A of c5-c6-c3 is written in the same register but harmonized differently.
	c6: bar 147	<b>C#-Bb</b> <b>Eb-C#</b>	D-B	
	c3: bar 148			Similar to the previous chord in Cii.

Table 2: Harmonic Development of the Tawny owl's Gliding Call.

Notes:

1. The harmony for this table is organized according to the pitches of each pair of chord.
2. The bold letters indicate that the pitch derived from the previous chords.
3. The dotted line indicate the important secondary harmony, the first is F#-Eb in group 1 -Ci and Cii; and E-C# or Eb-C# in group 2 - Ciii. Notice that the Eb-C# derived as early as the first chord (c1) at the beginning.

Example 6: Tawny Owl's call, p.2 bar 37 (open interval).

The fundamental harmony of the tawny owl's call is first introduced in Ci with the C-A motif written in the inner voice (bar 37: c1) (Example 6). The wide distance of this interval in both hands contributes to the call having a thin texture. This thin texture with a wide interval can be termed as 'open' interval, as opposed to the 'closed' interval in later gliding calls. The following examination shows how the composer rearranged the same harmony in different voices to produce different timbres.

The same pitches are used to change the timbre of the original dyads. Pitches of the 'open' interval from the right hand appear again in the second owl's call group (Cii), but it can be noticed that this interval has been altered to become 'closed' in the left hand (a1 - Example 7). The closer distance between the intervals thus provides a denser texture. Apart from the 'closed' interval in the left hand, the added notes in the right hand similarly contribute greater density to the dyad. This glide, which is repeated twice, has a close resemblance to Messiaen's notation (a) in *Traité*, where it is preceded by an anacrusis. For this glide, the C-A motif is given greater emphasis, where it is doubled in both outer voices, thus making the pitch more prominent. The B-G# in the right hand functions similarly to the Db-Bb since both serve to produce a 'clashing' sound against the C-A motif. However, the F#-Eb is a pair of new pitches and should be given close attention. The reason is that, apart from the two pairs of notes (B-G# and Db-Bb) surrounding C-A, the F#-Eb provides a tritone interval (to C-A) that may even exaggerate the dissonances of the chords. From this gliding (a1), the same harmony is continued in gliding (b2) and (c2) (Example 7). Gliding (b2) is the second glide from Messiaen's notation (b), where the repeated notes precede the gliding call; the second appearance of (b2) after (c2) is written in a higher octave (Example 7 x).

Interestingly, gliding (c2) is again added with new pitches, which clearly emphasizes the increment of density along each gliding pattern. For this dyad, all the previous harmony from (b1) is gathered into the right hand, while the left hand presents a new harmony, including very much of the C and A minor chord but with added F and D (Example 7 *y*). Here, the composer has utilized all five fingers in both hands to obtain

a dense harmony. Although new harmonies develop in each gliding call along the different sections, the tawny owl's call remains identifiable throughout since the C-A motif is constant. Gliding (c3) marks the original idea from Ci in the same tempo *Lent* (semiquaver = 66), which is slightly slower than (a1) and (b2) - *Un peu lent* (semiquaver = 76).

**Chouette Hulotte**

**a1** *Un peu lent* ( $\text{♩} = 76$ )

*lugubre et douloureux*

*Red. Red.*

**b1**

*sans sourd.*

*Red.*

**b2**

**c2** *Lent* ( $\text{♩} = 66$ )

**c3**

*X*

*Example 7: Cii: Owl's strophes p. 3.*

The added value, one of Messiaen's rhythmic hallmarks, thus appears to provide an effect in terms of the nature of the call while at the same time creating intensity along (a1) to (b2): bars 51–53 apart from the added harmony. The downbeat of the first glide in (a1) is in three semiquavers; this is extended to four semiquavers in the second occurrence and to five in (b1 and b2); these glides culminate by gliding (c2) with a much slower tempo. Another interesting point is the tempo of gliding (b2) in the higher octave, in which it remained at *Lent* (semiquaver = 66) but not *Un peu lent* (semiquaver = 76). A probable reason for this is that the slower tempo may be used to provide focus to anticipate the intensity of the gliding call. Despite the glides becoming slower, the higher range and louder dynamic may represent the owl's call getting nearer to the

listener, although the gliding call (c3: bar 56) returns to the plain double notes dyad at the end of the strophe, recalling the original form. Again, the fundamental harmony has not changed, although it is arranged differently: the top three voices use the left hand pitches from the previous (c2) dyads, forming a C minor and an A minor triad superimposed on the F#-Eb (D#) in the bass (see Example 7).

Further material includes the two short passages placed after the longer strophes, the codetta of the owl's call, one of which occurs before the conclusion of the first group and the second of which occurs before the coda, denoting a type of atmospheric summary (Example 8). Here, this material is indicated as Cs (Table 1). Hill<sup>15</sup> explains that this is an afterthought, by way of suggesting the shuddering and trembling that sometimes curdles the owl's call. This short section is more suggestive, as if to epitomize the owl's character as *vague et terrifiant*; however, more importantly, the C-A motif is maintained. Unlike the other section, B and Bb are inserted between the C to A motif to form a short chromatic line.

In Ciii, a repetition of harmony occurs in most of the dyads, where gliding calls (b2) and (c2) at bars 135 and 136 are an exact repetition of the previous strophe (Cii) (Example 9). However, as its first appearance in this section, glide (b3) introduces a slightly different harmonization (Example 9). The original C-A is placed in the bass and is accompanied by all other resonances; new pitches of Bb-G and A-G# appear where they can be used to flatten the sound of B-G# and A-F within the same chord (a very common feature of Messiaen's birdsong characteristic of either blurring the pitch or emphasizing the bird's double or triple pitches).

Example 8: Cs: p. 8 bar 138.

To begin the strophe, the interval between the notes is increased; together with a higher register in the right hand, this again contributes to a thinner texture. The intensity recurs with the previous glide (c2) and (b2). However, the occurrence of (c4) suggests a slightly new harmony (Example 9). To a certain extent, the Eb, which is sharpened to E in gliding call (b4), should be considered important for the flow of the harmony towards the ending (example 10). In drawing our attention to the final glide (b4) in the coda, there is a harmonic relationship along (b3) - (c4) - (a2) - (b4); the E from (b3) is

15 Hill, "Piano Music II," 327.

flattened in (c4) and (a2) but is raised again in (b4) (Examples 9 and 10). At this point in (b4), the combination of E, G $\sharp$  and B may constitute a close E major tonality. It must not be forgotten that glide (b4) is preceded by (a2) as it is a glide with an anacrusis but is slightly different from the previous strophe. Here, the anacrusis is formed by three-demisemiquaver dyads.

*Example 9: Tawny Owl's strophes in Ciii p. 8 bar 134-137.*

Although the density of chords in this coda is incompatible with the couplets, such as those in glide (c2), it should be noted that on the basis of Messiaen's extreme indication of *comme un cri d'enfant assassiné*, together with the sharp resonance in (b4) at the highest range among the previous calls, that this is the climax of the piece. With a short silence, the climax resolves with the gliding pattern (c) three times (c5, c6, c3). All harmonies of these three gliding calls come from the previous strophes (Example 10), and interestingly, the third is gliding (c3), which is also used to conclude both strophes – Cii and Ciii. Though each call is constructed using a different harmony, the C-A motif remains in the same register for all three gliding calls, and the added value rhythm is used to extend the intensity of the call. The effect is almost similar to a written-out *ritardando*, getting softer at each appearance and slowly fading away.

Example 10: Coda p. 9 bar 144–150 (c7 is the same as c3).

### The long-eared owl and the little owl

Though in the same family, both the long-eared owl and the little owl are secondary bird-calls in this piece. Structured in the same strophe with the soloist, the obvious contrasts between the secondary owls and the soloist – the tawny owl – lie in the tempo and the more agitated glides. These two secondary owl species thus contribute another expression of the frightfulness of the ‘night’; rather than the serious slow gliding call, these two calls portray a much more ‘positive’, awakening character to enliven the darkness of the night. The long-eared owl begins its entry almost immediately after the ‘fear’ motif, thus capturing the more agitated character from the strike of the ‘timpani’. Similarly, the

long-eared owl presents its three call patterns (*li lii liii*) right at the beginning of Ci, to form the fundamental material for later strophes (Example 11). The focal pitches of the long-eared owl are Bb E and B and are used throughout the three strophes. In its second appearance at Cii, while the call is extended, a retrograde pattern of the motif can be identified; the strophe begins with two bars of *liii*, followed by two bars of *lii* and one bar of *li* (Example 12). The first two bars can also be identified as a combination of *lii* and *liii* since both features are included. With the faster tempo in this strophe, the gliding call of the long-eared owl marks its significance by the bouncing effect from the lower anacrusis.



*Example 11: Motif of the long-eared owl's call.*

As mentioned, in group 2, the long-eared owl's call alternates with that of the little owl. Here, more elaborated glides can be seen where the glide springs from the B to E at bars 125 and 126 (Example 13a); the greater stretch thus depicts a type of development motif (over an octave). After the little owl's call, a similar pattern recurs; however, this time it is focused on the descending slurs dyad derived from the call pattern (*li*) (Example 13b). The number of calls is gradually lessened by the added rest. The last dyad ends with Bb-Eb instead of the original E, perhaps suggesting a more fulfilling ending, a perfect fourth, for the long-eared owl's call (at least in the pianist's perception). In addition, the function of the added rest may again suggest a written-out *ritardando*.

*Example 12: Long-eared owl's call p. 3.*

Among the calls of the three species, the little owl's is the simplest, without any development in later strophes. An example of the little owl's call notation from *Traité*<sup>16</sup> is provided in example 16a. The two gliding patterns (gi and gii) are always repeated albeit in a different order throughout all three strophes. The first pattern (gi: example 14) is a 'gliss' in two appearances; the first starts with C-E and is transposed to the dominant G-B, though the second 'gliss' is omitted in Cii. It seems that this ascending 'gliss' gives an effect that is contrary to that of the tawny owl's descending call. This pattern has a strong resemblance to the bittern's call in 'La Rousserolle effarvatte', where the black keys are superimposed on the white keys.

**Hibou moyen-Duc**  
**Un peu vif** ( $\text{♩} = 120$ )

**B**

**E**

over an octave

Example 13(a): Long-eared owl's call p. 7 bar 123–126.

Example 13(b): Long-eared Owl's call p. 7 bar 130.

16 Messiaen, *Traité de Rythme*, Vol. V, 233.

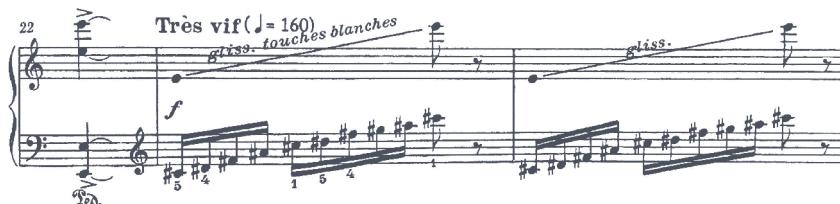
Example 14: Ci: owls' strophes (p. 2).

The fingering in this glissando (gi) in 'La Chouette hulotte', the '*miaulé*', no doubt contributes to an interesting issue. Naturally, as all the notes in the right hand use black keys and those in the left hand use white keys, there are fewer notes in the left hand than in the right hand, even though both are indicated to start and end the glissando simultaneously. Although fingerings are indicated, it is quite possible to use the finger to 'gliss' from the C up to the E in the right hand, which could provide a more balanced rhythm together with the unequal number of notes from the left hand, as the 'gliss' technique will eliminate the gap between the change of fingers within the glissando. This might not have been Messiaen's original intention, as he would have specified in the score if he had wanted the 'gliss' technique to be used. However, when Peter Hill suggested this to the composer, Messiaen apparently liked the effect<sup>17</sup>. Another consideration on fingering based on the dynamic follows: note that both glissandos are notated in a soft dynamic, but the second 'gliss' is softer, from pianissimo to *ppp*. Using different fingers for these notes may provide more control over the soft dynamic level than using the conventional 'gliss' technique.

This glissando in 'La Chouette hulotte' is similar to that in *Ile de feu 1* (Example 15), in that the right hand uses all white keys while the left hand employs all black keys; another similarity is that there are more notes in the right hand than the left. However, the most important difference between these two examples is that the number of notes and ranges in the right hand in *Ile de feu 1* are much greater than those in 'La Chouette hulotte'; the glissando in *Ile de feu 1* covers two octaves while 'La Chouette hulotte' uses only slightly more than one. This may be another reason why Messiaen chose to use a dash symbol for the

17 Peter Hill, 'Interview with Yvonne Loriod' in *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), 293.

glissando rather than writing out the notes. There would not be sufficient time to complete the glissando in *Ile de feu 1* if fingerings were used. Another point is that the example from *Ile de feu 1* is marked *forte*, which contrasts with the softer glissando from 'La Chouette hulotte'; therefore, the use of the 'gliss' technique is a better choice.



Example 15: *Ile de feu 1*.

Example 16 (a): Little owl's call, notation from Messiaen's *Traité* Vol. 5, p. 233.

Example 16(b): gii: little owl's call p.8 bar 131-133.

The second gliding pattern (gii) is very similar to the bouncing glide exemplified by the long-eared owl. However, the little owl's glide has a more strident timbre due to its higher range and the emphasis on the dissonance between the F and F# (Example 16b). Again, through the device of an added rest, Messiaen has created a scene where the three calls of the little owl (gii) in Cii become increasingly distant; this may represent the idea that the owl has either ended its call or has flown to a greater distance. As explained earlier, this device occurs at the end of the tawny owl's call, where the dynamics within the three calls gradually become softer. Another description comes from Peter Hill<sup>18</sup>, who commented that the owls approach and recede through the darkness.

## Conclusion

From the above analysis, we can see that the mode of chromatic duration appears to be the most significant feature, but the harmonic development from the simple interval of a third in the owl's transcribed call is equally interesting. Based on the summary in Table 2, we note that the C-A motif is maintained in every glide regardless of the changes in harmonization. While this fundamental interval of a third is recycled in the following calls, new intervals are gradually introduced, varying the texture and tone of the call. This results in the identity of the call never being disturbed. Although *Catalogue* definitely features birdsongs and subjects taken from nature, Messiaen did not neglect his musical languages but employed them ingeniously together with his birdsong transcription. The composer might have found many similarities between many of his principles and musical language and the natural elements that he observed in the birdsongs and their habitat. The economic use of simple material highlighting the dramatic sense between the owl's call and the night music undoubtedly distinguishes 'La Chouette hulotte' from other movements, but at the same time, one of the most important aspects of Messiaen's language – the *mode de valeurs* – is inherent in this piece. In other words, the use of such a 'serially oriented' method in this nature work has attracted much attention. The integration between the 'night' music and the description of the owl calls by the composer also distinguishes this piece from other movements in the *Catalogue*, with their much more complex portrayal of the many subjects. However, although both subjects are intended to depict the same emotion, both ostensibly display a total contrast in terms of the piano writing and certainly in performance technique.

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18 Ibid., 327.

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#### POVZETEK

Od trinajstih stavkov različnih dolžin, ki so v *Katalogu ptičev*, je skladba *Lesna sova* (*La Chouette hulotte*) ena najkrajših. Skupaj s skladbo *L'Alouette lulu* tvori tri knjige v katalogu in zaobsegata tudi reprezentacijo »noči«. Ta stavek se od drugih razlikuje po tem, kako je skladatelj pretopil lastna občutja strahu sove in »noči« v glasbo. Čeprav je v skladbi tudi solistično ptičje petje, se zdi, da ukjanje lesne sove, eden od Messiaenovih najpomembnejših glasbenih jezikov – *mode de valeurs* – reprezentira noč. Študija se pri analizi naslanja na reference skladateljeve poprejšnje uporabe te serialno naravnane metode. Druga pomembna značilnost tega dela je harmonični jezik ukjanja lesne sove, ki ohranja samosvoj značaj tako, da je vseskozi uporabljen enak interval. Tako identiteta Messiaenove glasbe ostaja značilno jasna, čeprav se skladba naslanja na ptičje petje in živali v naravnem okolju – kakor jih je opazoval skladatelj. Vseeno velja dodati, da se splošen vtis te stvaritve o naravi brez dvoma razlikuje od skladateljevega preteklega dela; zaradi tega je dotedna kongenialna transformacija teh glasbenih jezikov – skupaj s transkripcijo ptičjega petja – vredna temeljitejše raziskave.